

When is sociality congruent with self-care?

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Abstract

Kumar and Epley (2023) argue that people underinvest in spending time, effort, and money on other people, and that consumers' own well-being would improve from increased "sociality." We pose two questions to enhance understanding of the relationship between sociality and efforts to benefit one's own well-being: (1) when will other-oriented consumption promote versus hinder consumers' own well-being, and (2) what leads consumers to embrace versus forego efforts to improve their well-being (i.e., self-care) that does not involve sociality? We propose that the degree to which the consumer is concerned about incorporating others' preferences, the magnitude of resources involved, and the temporal dynamics of consumption will be relevant factors in addressing these two questions. Future research to explore the proposed three factors and other factors will be important for consumers who seek to improve their well-being as well as marketers who seek to promote it.

KEYWORDS

happiness and well-being, impression management, social influence and norms

INTRODUCTION

Feelings of burnout and social isolation are prevalent in modern life (Cox, 2021; Somasundaram et al., 2022). The emotional exhaustion from burnout poses a critical threat to happiness, especially in the absence of close social connections to help cope. Social isolation is on the rise; from 1990 to 2021, the percentage of Americans with no close friendships increased four-fold, and the percentage with ten or more close friendships declined from 33% to 13% (Cox, 2021). What intentional behaviors to enhance one's own well-being—acts of self-care (Somasundaram et al., 2022)—can consumers take in light of these challenges?

A compelling program of research, summarized by Kumar and Epley (2023), suggests that consumers

underinvest in "sociality," including spending time with others and providing gifts or help to others. Kumar and Epley (2023) argue that consumers underinvest in being social because they underestimate how good they (and their recipients) will feel when they engage in other-oriented actions. For example, contrary to consumers' expectations, people feel happier when spending money on another person than on themselves, and when having versus foregoing a conversation with a stranger during a commute. Kumar and Epley (2023) suggest that other-oriented consumption can, therefore, be considered a form of self-care, and it is in consumers' interest to engage in more of it.

We argue that the relationship between sociality and self-care is both important and complex. The benefits of sociality for consumers' own well-being are profound

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and adding social moments to one's day can have surprisingly positive impacts on consumers' own happiness (Kumar & Epley, 2023). However, there can be costs from other-oriented consumption and benefits from self-oriented consumption, such as when sociality itself leads to burnout (Scheffer et al., 2022). Further, the structural changes to consumers' social networks (Cox, 2021) indicate that a consumer will often lack an activity partner for a consumption activity that would benefit their own well-being. We, therefore, pose two key questions: (1) when will sociality promote versus hinder consumers' well-being, and (2) what leads consumers to embrace versus forego self-care that does not involve being social? In the next sections, we discuss three factors that will be relevant to answering both of these questions: the degree to which the consumer is concerned about incorporating others' preferences, the magnitude of resources involved, and the temporal dynamics of consumption. We call for future research to explore the role of these factors, as well as others, that address the relationship between sociality and consumer's actions to promote their own well-being.

WHEN WILL SOCIALITY PROMOTE VERSUS HINDER CONSUMER WELL-BEING?

In light of the research summarized by Kumar and Epley (2023), a consumer who seeks to improve her well-being might wonder: What is the appropriate mix of other-oriented versus self-oriented consumption? On a given weekend, should she go to a museum with friends or read a book alone, purchase a massage for a family member or for herself, and stay up late to lull her infant to sleep or get extra sleep herself while using a power-operated bassinet to rock the baby? Kumar and Epley (2023) argument that consumers are insufficiently social leaves open questions about when consumers might be overly social. That is, when will sociality have a positive impact and when will it have a negative impact on consumer well-being?

We next discuss three factors that can determine whether investing in other-oriented consumption on a given occasion will benefit consumer well-being. We argue that one such factor is the degree to which the individual is concerned about incorporating others' preferences. If the consumer cares about making choices that conform to their consumption partners' desires, this can lead them to forego their own preferred options, particularly if they think their partners' preferences diverge from their own (Kim et al., 2022). Even merely wondering about what a partner wants can be distracting; trying to determine another person's preferences, such as how much a companion wants to socialize versus attend to art in a museum, can be difficult and have a negative impact on one's own enjoyment (Wu et al., 2021), while

also producing negative feelings about the activity partner (Kim et al., 2022).

Another factor that might impact whether sociality will benefit the consumer's own well-being is the magnitude of resources to be expended. For example, consumers believe that they should put in effort when caring for close relationship partners (e.g., rocking a baby by hand rather than turning on a power-operated bassinet; Garcia-Rada et al., 2022), because expending effort signals to the recipient and to themselves that they are good caregivers. We suggest that the impact of other-oriented actions on one's own well-being will depend in part on how much time or energy one needs to spend. Other-oriented behaviors, such as helping, caring, and socializing, can become a source of burnout (Scheffer et al., 2022), particularly when these other-oriented behaviors consume considerable resources. Likewise, the magnitude of financial resources involved might impact whether spending money on another person versus on oneself benefits well-being. Whereas the literature shows that spending a small amount (e.g., \$5) on another person can increase happiness more than spending the same amount on oneself (Aknin et al., 2020), we suspect that spending a large amount of money on another person rather than on oneself will sometimes decrease one's own happiness, particularly if one's own financial resources are constrained.

How consumers' experiences unfold over time can also impact whether sociality on a given occasion will benefit well-being. The research reviewed by Kumar and Epley (2023) primarily involves one-shot examples of sociality, and it will be worthwhile to understand what factors impact the optimal level of sociality across repeated consumption opportunities. For example, how much of a daily commuter's time on the subway each week should be spent in conversation with fellow commuters versus engaging in non-social consumption activities, such as reading a book or drafting a report? Likewise, how much socializing with family members versus solo time should a consumer engage in during a week-long shared vacation? This relates to the preceding discussion of resources required, as other-oriented consumption that requires considerable time or energy might be depleting and preclude the individual from having the necessary time to recharge or engage in activities that meet the individual's other goals. Further, it would be valuable to understand how much time and with what frequency consumers should engage with close or distant social contacts across various communication channels, including digital ones such as text messaging or social media, in order to foster well-being.

There are likely additional factors, such as individual differences and situational characteristics, that impact consumers' optimal level of sociality at any given point in time, and we encourage future research into these factors. Research is needed to more fully document the nature of the benefits and costs that can result

from engaging in other-oriented versus self-oriented consumption. Further, research is needed to understand what factors will lead consumers to engage in self-care even when this does not involve sociality, as we discuss next.

WHEN DO CONSUMERS EMBRACE VERSUS FOREGO SELF-CARE WITHOUT AN ACTIVITY PARTNER?

A consumer who equates boosts in well-being only with a social context will miss out on opportunities to invest in their own well-being, as some activities to boost well-being do not require a companion (e.g., reading a book), and other activities that could be engaged in with a companion (e.g., going to a movie theater) might not be pursued when consumers lack an activity partner (Ratner & Hamilton, 2015). An important question, therefore, is whether and when a consumer will engage in acts of self-care that do not involve being social (i.e., solo self-care). We will consider here the same three factors that we focused on in the last section: the degree to which consumers are concerned about incorporating others' preferences or expectations, the magnitude of the resources to be expended, and the temporal context of consumption.

We argue that consumers' concerns about the preferences and expectations of others can impact the extent to which they engage in solo self-care. For example, people are often reluctant to engage in public hedonic activities, such as going to a concert or a museum exhibit, when they lack an activity partner, because they do not want strangers who happen to be in those consumption venues to infer that they are not socially connected (Ratner & Hamilton, 2015). The concern about how observers will view their behaviors can be ill-founded, as consumers who actually go through the experience are less concerned about what others think of them than they anticipated (Ratner & Hamilton, 2015). In addition, we propose that engaging in desired solo self-care activities, such as reading a book for fun, will sometimes require a consumer to break away from a relationship partner (e.g., a friend or spouse), or might give the impression of anti-sociality to acquaintances with whom the consumer would like to cultivate a friendship. Therefore, we expect that in various ways, consumers' beliefs about how positively others would respond to solo self-care activities will impact their willingness to engage in such activities alone.

The magnitude of resources to be expended can also be important in determining whether the consumer will engage in self-oriented actions to benefit well-being. Consumers perceive that they need to be in a resource-abundant state (i.e., having time and money) in order to enjoy the emotional benefits of self-oriented self-care;

this leads them to underestimate the extent to which they will benefit from these self-care activities when they feel constrained, which in fact is when they need a boost to well-being the most (Rifkin et al., 2022). To the extent that more (vs. fewer) resources are required to engage in a solo self-care activity, people might be more reluctant to engage in the activity, contrary to how they treat expending effort for a shared activity that involves fostering a relationship with another person (Garcia-Rada et al., 2022). For example, consider the choices of a single parent who told one of us that she would hire a babysitter to go out on a date but not to go to the gym. She feels that she can justify the high expense of childcare services for behaviors that might allow her to cultivate a new relationship, but not for behaviors that reflect self-care in the absence of relationship cultivation.

Finally, the temporal context in which the decisions are made can impact whether the consumer invests in self-care that does not involve being social. Consumers perceive self-oriented self-care activities such as meditation and yoga as experiences that they would benefit from but as indulgences that they feel are hard to justify; however, when consumers are prompted to consider that they have recently been productive, they feel more deserving and, therefore, more likely "indulge" in self-oriented self-care (Somasundaram et al., 2022). Likewise, a consumer who has just engaged in a sustained period of social activity might feel justified in engaging in self-care that is non-social. For instance, a consumer who feels that she needs to be available continuously via technology (e.g., text messaging, Instagram) to her social contacts might feel both entitled to and in need of some time alone.

Given the societal changes that leave consumers experiencing both burnout and social isolation (Cox, 2021), it is important for future research to explore these as well as additional factors that impact whether consumers embrace versus forego solo self-care. Such research can examine what marketers in self-care industries (e.g., spas, fitness, meditation, wellness) can do to encourage consumption; we note that if marketers focus on encouraging sociality, this can encourage social consumption but further discourage solo consumption, which can require additional interventions on behalf of marketers to encourage solo self-care.

CONCLUSION

Whereas increased sociality will often benefit well-being (Kumar & Epley, 2023), we have argued that future research is needed to investigate two key questions: First, when will sociality promote well-being (i.e., what is the optimal level of sociality on a given occasion)? Second, when will consumers engage in self-care activities even when the consumption activity does not involve an activity partner? We suggested several factors that likely play a role in answering both questions and encourage

future research to explore these and other factors that are relevant to answering these two questions. Given the prevalence of burnout, social isolation, and other threats to consumers' well-being, it will be important to understand more about when other-oriented (vs. self-oriented) consumption promotes well-being, and when a consumer will engage in self-care even when it does not involve directly the nurturing of one's social relationships.

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