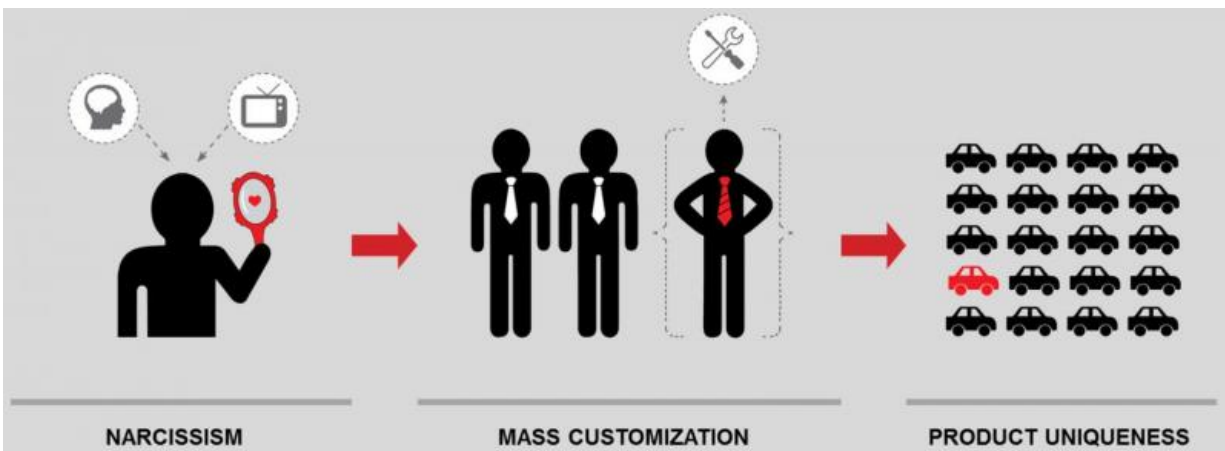


It is about 'me': Narcissism and mass-customized products

December 9 2015, by Sue McMurray



Researchers say a rising trend in narcissism is cause for retailing and manufacturing firms offering customizable products to rethink their marketing strategies.

Writing in the *Journal of Retailing*, marketing and psychology researchers from the University St. Gallen, Washington State University and Ruhr University Bochum offer insights into how [firms](#) can increase the uniqueness of self-designed products by examining consumers' narcissistic behavior.

"An increasing number of retailers and manufacturers provide their customers with the opportunity to create individualized, unique products," said David Sprott, WSU marketing professor and co-author of the study. "Our research suggests that firms should consider customers' narcissistic tendencies as well as the ability to influence their current states of mind to exploit the largely untapped potential of mass customization systems."

Driving consumers toward self-design options

The researchers focused on the automobile industry to demonstrate how narcissism can be used to enhance [marketing strategies](#). In this industry, firms offer a wide range of options that allow customers to self-design truly unique products.

Yet field evidence indicates that few shoppers fully use these systems. For example, most consumers select standard colors (black or white) rather than customize a car with a unique paint treatment (like volcano red).

The researchers conducted four studies showing how narcissism can lead consumers to desire and purchase uniquely designed products. One study established that actual car buyers self-designed more unique cars if they scored higher on narcissism.

Another study demonstrated that firms can put consumers into a temporary narcissistic state of mind with marketing techniques. For example, customers were shown an automobile advertisement with the slogan, 'You impress. Like the new Audi A6,' that capitalized on their desire for admiration.

Overall, the results showed car buyers with higher levels of narcissism selected significantly more unique and expensive cars, as did consumers

in a state of narcissism.

Implications for retailers and manufacturers

The researchers demonstrate the importance of offering a variety of customizable attributes for markets where narcissists are likely to exist. They suggest firms need to consider the nature of key market segments when designing mass customization systems.

They say attributes should contain both mainstream options, as well as more unusual, unique options. Firms may also benefit by indicating product uniqueness, such as percentage shares indicating how frequently an option is selected by other consumers. The research also implies that firms need not increase customer share of true narcissists in order to enhance product uniqueness. Rather, a firm can realize similar benefits by creating narcissistic states.

"A Nike tagline 'my mass-customized Nike shoes look amazing,' could be changed to 'my mass-customized Nike shoes impress,' to induce a narcissistic state that encourages a consumer to self-design a unique product," said Sprott.

Narcissism on the upswing

The study coincides with what researchers refer to as a narcissism epidemic. Studies show [narcissism](#) has increased 30 percent between 1979 and 2006 and is likely to continue with the rise of social media and self-promoting trends.

Additionally, data shows narcissists rate customizable and personalizable products more favorably and are willing to pay more for them. Thus, the implications of this research could be relevant for a large number of

firms.

More information: The article is available online at
www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S0022435915000834

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