

Chameleons and copycats: How mimicry affects interpersonal persuasion

12 February 2008

Social scientists have long been intrigued by the human tendency to mimic the behavior of others. Now, a new study from the April issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* expands the field, exploring the potential for mimicry to influence product consumption. The researchers find that watching someone else eat a certain food—in this case, either goldfish crackers or animal crackers – will cause the viewer to be inclined to eat the same thing. Additionally, in another experiment, participants who had their posture and speech mimicked by a salesperson rated the product higher and consumed more of it.

In the first study, participants were seated in front of a computer in a private lab room and asked to watch a video of a fellow participant (actually someone who was a part of the study) describing a series of ads while occasionally taking goldfish or animal crackers from a bowl. Bowls of both goldfish and animal crackers were present, but the subject in the video only took from one of the two bowls the entire time.

Some participants also had two bowls of food in front of them, one filled with goldfish crackers and the other with animal crackers. Those who watched a person eat goldfish crackers took from the goldfish bowl 71 percent of the time. Those who watched a person eat animal crackers only took from the goldfish bowl 44 percent of the time. Importantly, a pre-rating among participants found that goldfish crackers were preferred over animal crackers, on average.

“A person who views someone else’s snacking behavior will come to exhibit a similar snack selection pattern,” explain Robin J. Tanner (Duke University), Rosellina Ferraro (University of Maryland), Tanya L. Chartrand (Duke University), James R. Bettman (Duke University), and Rick Van Baaren (University of Amsterdam).

“This suggests that preferences may shift as a

result of unintentionally mimicking another person’s consumption behavior.”

In another experiment, the researchers examined whether a person who is mimicked would come to like that person more than they would otherwise, and whether that would lead to a more positive response towards a product endorsed by the mimicker. Participants who had their posture, body angle, foot movements, and verbal patterns mimicked rated a new sports drink more positively and drank more of the sports drink than participants who were not mimicked. A separate experiment showed that the positive ratings and the amount consumed was even higher when the mimicker expressly stated that he or she was invested in the success of the product.

“This suggests that mimicry has the potential to be a valuable tool in interpersonal persuasion, particularly in cases where the motivations and persuasive intent of the mimicker are transparent,” the researchers write. “So, even though consumers might try to resist a salesperson’s pitch, being mimicked by that salesperson makes that pitch more impacting.”

Citation: Robin J. Tanner, Rosellina Ferraro, Tanya L. Chartrand, James R. Bettman, and Rick Van Baaren, “Of Chameleons and Consumption: The Impact of Mimicry on Choice and Preferences.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2008.

Source: University of Chicago

APA citation: Chameleons and copycats: How mimicry affects interpersonal persuasion (2008, February 12) retrieved 22 June 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-02-chameleons-copycats-mimicry-affects-interpersonal.html>

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