

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE STATUS CONSUMPTION OF COFFEE

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ABSTRACT

Gender differences in consumer behavior are a neglected topic. Following mate selection theory, we expected males to portray higher levels of status consumption. In an observational study of 1,053 students, we found that among students who brought coffee to the classroom, 85% of the men brought branded coffee, in comparison to only 64% of the women. We propose that this effect originates from males' stronger need to signal their status through their choice of brand products. Our observational results are discordant with those using self-report measures, possibly since men are reluctant to report status consumption.

Key words: *status consumption, conspicuous consumption, coffee, sex differences*

INTRODUCTION

Status consumption occurs when a person purchases products or services in the attempt to signal his or her high status. Status consumption is prevalent in both industrialized and non-industrialized countries. In Bolivia, for instance, the poor are willing to pay more for goods with a symbolic designer label, even at the expense of basic goods (van Kempen, 2004). Similarly, in many cultures across the world exceptional products (e.g., large yams, impressive turtles, and exquisite ceramics) serve as status symbols (Bird & Smith, 2005).

In mainstream marketing literature, it is common to suggest that gender differences in consumer behavior are minimal (see review in Gentry, Commuri, & Jun, 2003). More specifically, in the field of status consumption, most self-report studies do not find any gender difference (Eastman & Liu, 2012; Goldsmith, Flynn, & Clark, 2012; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). Sexual selection theory, however, predicts that gender differences do exist due to an asymmetry in mate preferences (Buss, 1989, 1995; Trivers, 1972). For instance, spouse resources are more likely to be important to females than they are to males (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss, 1989; Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2012). Hence, sexual selection may have selected a stronger male tendency to advertize their resources in comparison to females. We therefore hypothesized that in comparison to

females, male students who bring coffee to class will show a stronger preference for branded coffee over non-branded coffee.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A pilot study assessed the three coffee brands available on an Israeli public college campus. Of the 25 respondents, 80% rated 'Arthur' as the most prestigious and expensive of the three brands. A price test confirmed these results ('Arthur' \$2.50, 'Brunch' \$2.00, Machine coffee \$0.50). Photos of the coffee cups revealed that 'Arthur' had a distinctive color and logo design; 'Brunch', on the other hand, had a number of different designs on their cups—apparently random and with no logo (Figure 1); coffee from a machine was sold in brown plastic cups with no logo. Since brands are considered to entail distinctive characteristics (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2006), 'Arthur' coffee was regarded as branded coffee, while the two other coffee brands were regarded as non-branded. No other beverages (such as water, soft drinks or homemade coffee) were included in the observation.



Figure 1 - Coffee cups on display at 'Brunch' and 'Arthur'

Next, 1,053 students (55% female) were observed in 30 classrooms. In 13 of these classrooms, observations were conducted by naïve observers who were not aware of the study's hypotheses. Observation measurements included date, hour, course, professor, department and weather. Observers counted the number of males and females in the class, noted how many of them had coffee with them, and the brand of coffee they had.

RESULTS

Of the 1053 students observed, 149 entered the classroom with a coffee cup. 'Arthur' coffee was brought in by 112 students (68 males, 44 females); 'Brunch' coffee was brought in by 24 students (7 males, 17 females), and Machine coffee was brought in by 13 students (5 males, 8 females.) First, it appeared that more men entered the class with

coffee (17%) than women (12%; Fisher's exact test [FET], $p = 0.016$, $N = 1053$). Second, as hypothesized, when observing students who came with coffee to the classroom, 85% of the men brought the branded coffee, in comparison to 64% of the women (FET, $p = 0.002$, $N = 149$; Figure 2). This effect was evident in both the classes that were observed by the researchers (FET, $p = 0.014$, $N = 83$), and those observed by naïve observers (FET, $p = 0.019$, $N = 66$). The results were similar in the full sample when we eliminated the machine coffee from the analyses and compared 'Arthur' branded coffee with 'Brunch' non-branded coffee (FET, $p = 0.005$, $N = 136$).

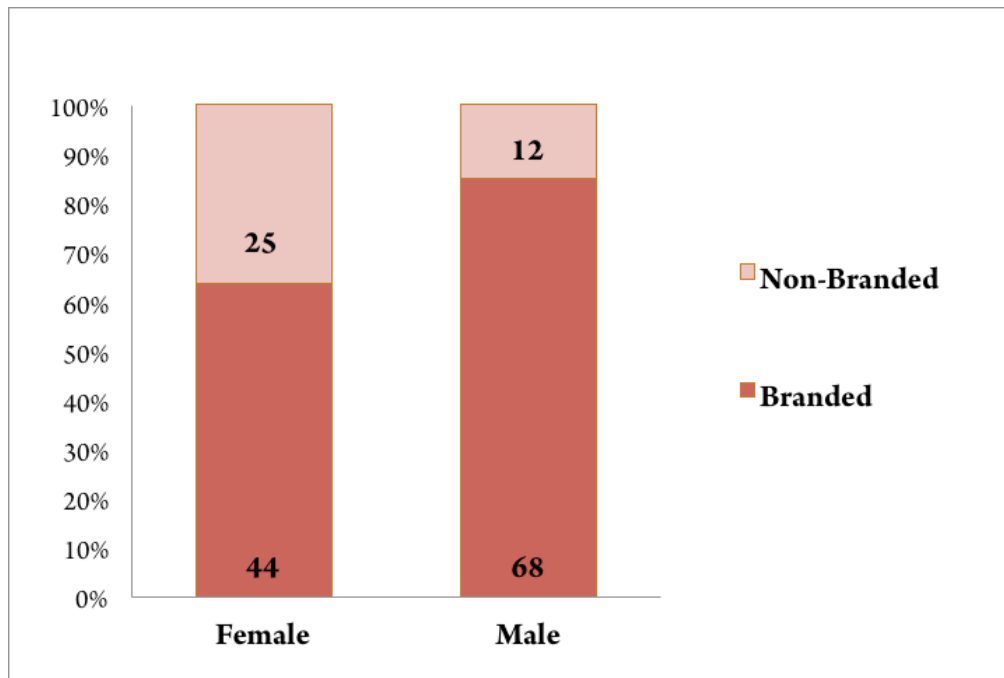


Figure 2 - Gender differences in the number and percentage of branded and non-branded coffee cups brought to class

DISCUSSION

We propose that the higher prevalence of branded coffee presented by men originates from their stronger need to signal their status through their choice of brand products. Our observational results are discordant with those using self-report measures. It is possible that while men do purchase more status brands, they do not report it—possibly due to a limited awareness, or reluctance to appear irrational.

Of course, there are other possible explanations to that of mate selection theory. First, since branded coffee was more expensive, perhaps fewer women were able to afford it. In Israel, women have lower earnings (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012a) and young males are more likely to work than young females are (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012b). If the branded coffee was of superior quality in comparison to the non-branded coffee, other speculations may arise. Since males are less morning-oriented than females,

especially in student samples (Randler, 2007), males may purchase what they consider as high quality coffee in an attempt to increase their alertness (Heckman, Weil, Mejia, & Gonzalez, 2010). Perhaps sensory gender differences motivate men to prefer the higher quality brand to the non-branded coffee. A second possible speculation is that males may prefer higher quality coffee since they are more responsive to the caffeine stimulant effect (Adan, Prat, Fabbri, & Sánchez-Turet, 2008; Botella & Parra, 2003).

At present, the findings are limited to Israel. Coffee consumption per capita in Israel is similar to that in the United States ("Current Worldwide Annual Coffee Consumption per capita," 2011). However, as opposed to the American "coffee to go" culture, Israeli coffee consumers prefer to drink their coffee at the café (Bar-Zuri, 2009). The results are also limited to the college population—mostly middle-class Jewish students who are more likely to order from a café than other sectors in Israel (Bar-Zuri, 2009).

The study results show that gender differences do occur in at least some forms of status consumption, and suggest that people can signal their status even through daily inexpensive products such as coffee.

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