

Consuming Alone: Broadening Putnam's "Bowling Alone" Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Despite the popularity of Wi-Fi technologies and social networks, many residents in developed nations are more socially isolated now than a few decades ago. Applying fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis, using a nationally representative sample in one developed nation this study investigates the relationship between social isolation and advice-giving and advice-seeking behaviors with regard to brands or products. This study raises the proposition that people who are socially isolated lack the opportunity to give and seek advice, and, thus, abstain from doing so. Additionally, the study proposes that lacking ability or motivation also represent causal conditions for isolation. The study also investigates consumer behavior outcomes of low advice-giving and advice-seeking behaviors; that is, pampering and status buying. The findings from an analysis of an omnibus annual survey of residents in one nation support the propositions that the study proposes from theory and are likely relevant for residents of most developed nations. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

"Loneliness [or felt social isolation] is a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships. This includes situations, in which the number of existing relationships is smaller than is considered desirable or admissible, as well as situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realized" (de Jong Gierveld, 1987). Felt social isolation is a subjective and negative emotional state that can have long-term psychological and physical consequences; research findings in several developed nations support these conclusions (de Jong Gierveld, Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2006). The present study focuses on research on the associations of social isolation and consumer psychology in one of the developed nations—the United States. However, while additional research is necessary, the advances in theory and findings in present study will likely receive confirmation in other developed nations such as Finland, Germany, Korea, and several others.

The desire for social relationships is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to Putnam's (1995a, 2001) *Bowling Alone* thesis, striking evidence supports the conclusion that the vibrancy of the American civil society has notably declined over recent decades. Decreasing voter turnout, newspaper readership, and membership in choral societies and football clubs are evidence of America's declining social capital. As a consequence, despite the popularity

of Wi-Fi technologies and social networks, Americans are more socially isolated now than two decades ago (Jing, Rui [Juliet], & Baba, 2012) and similar findings appear in studies of several developed European nations (de Jong Gierveld, Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2006). Except for one narrow segment, more recent evidence in the United States that Sander and Putnam (2010, p. 13) examine does not falsify Putnam's (1995b, 2001) original thesis, "The emergence of the 9/11 Generation since 2001 is undoubtedly to be cheered. But it is only part of an ominous larger and longer-term picture whose main feature is a growing civic and social gap in the United States between upper-middle-class young white people and their less affluent counterparts. (A similar gap has not appeared within the ranks of black youth, though an overall black-white gap in engagement remains wide and troubling.)"

Ten percent of respondents in a survey had nobody to discuss important matters with in 1985. This number increased to 24.6% in 2004 (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Despite the size of this segment of lonely individuals, research has only recently begun to shed light on social isolates. For example, survey findings by Wang et al. (2012) show that social isolates prefer minority-endorsed products. Furthermore, socially isolated individuals have been found to be more aggressive, less prosocial, and less cooperative with others (Twenge, Baumeister, Dewart, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007).

The goal of this research is to investigate the relationship between social isolation and advice-giving and advice-seeking behaviors with regard to brands or products as well as respondent reports of consumption behavior. Consumer discussions with family members, friends, and acquaintances about what to buy, what not to buy, and where to buy influence consumers' purchasing behavior (Chelminski & Coulter, 2006; Feick & Price, 1987). Thus, understanding who diffuses and who does not diffuse market information is important for testing theories in consumer psychology. In addition to that, if being low in giving and seeking advice about brands and products is common among consumers, investigating actual consumer behavior outcomes of abstaining from advice giving and seeking is important.

In doing so, this study complements the work of Putnam (1995a, 2001). By drawing on national survey data, Putnam (1995a, 2001) traces the decline of a wide range of associational activities (e.g., bowling, voting, volunteering, etc.); arrays a range of possible causal explanations—that is, social, civic, and political problems; and sketches an agenda that society could take to reverse this decline. This study complements what Putnam did in several ways: First, this study applies the Bowling Alone thesis to a consumer behavior context. Second, this study develops testable propositions with regard to associational and consumer behaviors of social isolates. Third, this study uses a novel approach of data analysis to data used by Putnam; that is, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA; Ragin, 2000).

Word-of-mouth research on consumer behavior focuses on identifying market information diffusers; that is, the market maven and the market guru. Market mavens are individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers for market information (Feick & Price, 1987). Market gurus are people who dispel the darkness about product-market through disseminating their insights, knowledge, and information regarding the technical features, use, and benefits of products and services. Market gurus have the authority to diffuse market information but differ from market mavens in that they do not seek advice from other consumers and do not initiate discussions with other consumers (Chung & Woodside, 2012).

Prior research neglects another important segment of consumers; that is, people who do not give or seek advice about brands or products to or from other consumers. The "isolates" are this segment of consumers. By showing that isolates represent a major part of consumers, as well as developing a theory about the antecedents and outcomes associating with being an isolate that links social isolation to (market) isolation, and compensatory consumption behavior, this study contributes new theory in the domain of word-of-mouth consumer behavior research. In fact, this is the first study that analyzes configurations of antecedent and outcome conditions of isolates.

Among the characteristics of market mavens are possession of high amounts of market information, performing extensive search activities, and being female (Abratt, Nel, & Nezer, 1995; Cal, 2004). In addition to that, market gurus' characteristics include being influential, normative susceptibility, and possession of superior taste (Chung & Woodside, 2012). However, assuming symmetric relationships among antecedents and outcomes—that is, expecting that isolates display contrary characteristics than market mavens and market gurus—would be misguided. Symmetric relationships are the exception rather than the rule (Woodside, 2010). In particular, social isolation leads to a lack of opportunity to give and seek advice.

Building on the ability–motivation–opportunity (AMO) framework (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982), this study develops a theory proposing that social isolation is a key antecedent condition of being an isolate. Furthermore, this study proposes that lacking ability or motivation represents causal conditions for being an isolate. In doing so, this study tests and confirms theory regarding the behavior of isolates.

This study tests propositions using a configurational method, fs/QCA (Ragin, 2000). The study uses fsQCA because the method permits analyses of complex configurations of causal conditions as explanations of an outcome condition. FsQCA relies on Boolean algebra, rather than matrix algebra. Thus, fsQCA methods explicitly consider alternative complex antecedent statements that are likely to associate with the outcome. In doing so, fsQCA points out the frequent reality that more than one path or route is sufficient in explaining the outcome, and no one path is necessary to cause the outcome (Ragin, 1997).

The remainder of this paper has the following structure. Following this introduction, the second section describes theoretical underpinning; that is, the AMO framework (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). The third section provides propositions for testing complex antecedents and outcome conditions. The fourth section describes the method, data set, and variables of the study. The fifth section presents the analysis and findings. Finally, the last section provides conclusion, limitations, and future directions for research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study builds from a theoretical framework based on the AMO framework of behavior (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). This study specifically develops the argument that social isolation limits consumers' opportunities to give and seek advice about products and brands. Consumers who lack ability or motivation can be characterized as isolates. An important implication of that is that being socially isolated or not being motivated or able does hinder consumers in seeking and giving advice. In turn, social isolation is expected to influence actual consumer behavior. According to the framework all three elements—opportunity, motivation,

and ability—must be present in some degree for behavioral performance to occur. If values along all three dimensions can vary, then behavior is unlikely to occur in the presence of a zero or very low score for any one of the dimensions. Low values of any one of the dimensions would be expected to result in markedly decreased levels of behavioral performance (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982).

Since this study aims at explaining the absence of behavior, this study proposes that the absence of any one condition should be sufficient in order to prevent consumers' from giving or seeking advice about brands and products. This study hypothesizes that three types of social isolates exist. First, some consumers are isolates because they are socially isolated (i.e., because they do not have the opportunity to give and seek advice). The second group of isolates lacks motivation to give and seek advice. Third, consumers may be isolated because they lack the ability to give and seek advice about brands and products. Finally, consumers are isolates because they lack any combination of no or marginal ability, motivation, and opportunity.

CAUSAL CONDITIONS AND FUZZY-SET PROPOSITIONS

Ability to Give and Seek Advice

The first type of isolates represents a group of consumers that do not seek advice about brands and products because they lack the ability to do so. According to the AMO framework, ability refers to the physiological and cognitive capabilities that enable an individual to perform a behavior effectively. In addition to that, ability represents the effects of the individual's knowledge, skills, intelligence, age, state of health, level of education, endurance, stamina, energy level, motor skills, and similar variables (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). The ability to give and seek advice about products and brands follows from extensive prior knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). On the other hand, knowledge narrowness weakens associative power and thus ability to absorb new knowledge as well as to communicate knowledge to others in a meaningful way (Reinholt, Pedersen, & Foss, 2008). Therefore, knowledge narrowness entails lower ability to engage in knowledge sharing, and in turn giving and seeking advice about brands or products.

- P1: People low on both giving and seeking advice associate with high membership on social isolation. To examine the relationship between ability to give and seek advice and isolate, this study uses the items, "I have a much better taste than most people" (reverse coded) and "The latest fashion trends have no bearing on what I wear" (reverse coded). People with low scores on these items do

not possess or think that they do not possess important knowledge about brands and products. In turn, consumers with a low stock of knowledge about brands and products are seriously limited in their ability to give and seek advice about products and brands.

Motivation to Give and Seek Advice

The second type of isolates represents a group of consumers that do not seek advice about brands and products because they lack the motivation to do so. According to the AMO framework, the psychological and emotional characteristics that influence the degree to which an individual inclines to perform a behavior is the motivation dimension. Motivation represents the effect on behavior of job satisfaction, personality, attitudes, norms, values, status, anxiety, task characteristics, job involvement, perceived role expectations, self-image, need states, and closely related concepts (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). Consumers vary in their motivation to use their social network for the purpose of giving or seeking advice with regard to brands or products.

- P2: Persons low on motivation in giving and seeking advice have full membership as social isolation. Therefore, this study investigates the causal condition of motivation to give and seek advice and isolate by using the following items: "The clothes I wear reflect who I am as a person" (reverse coded) and "I want to look a little different from others" (reverse coded). Looking different than others and wearing clothes that reflect one's self-image are typical ends, which are achieved by advice giving and seeking. As some consumers may not value those ends highly, this study expects them to be less motivated, and consequently exert less effort on giving and seeking advice about brands or products.

Opportunity to Give and Seek Advice

The third type of isolates represents a group of consumers that do not seek or give advice about brands or products because they lack the opportunity to do so. According to the AMO framework, opportunity consists of the particular configuration of the field of forces surrounding a person and that are beyond the person's direct control (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). Social isolation seriously constrains people in their ability to give and seek advice about brands or products. Social networks affect an individuals' opportunity to engage in knowledge sharing and gathering (Tsai, 2001). Giving and seeking advice is a form of knowledge sharing and gathering. Consumers with a weak social network find themselves isolated from and are cut off

from the ongoing communication (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

P3: Persons low on opportunity to give and seek advice indicate full membership in social isolation. To test the association of no opportunity with isolates, this study uses items from Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) data set: “I spend a lot of time visiting friends” (reverse coded), “I guess I’m what you would call a ‘couch potato,’” and “I am a homebody.” People with high (low for reverse coded) scores in each of these do lack social contacts, because they visit friends infrequently and stay home most of the time.

Outcome of Social Isolate Identification

This study also identifies an important outcome of being an isolate in terms of their consumer behavior; that is, compensatory consumption. “Compensatory consumer behavior” means that consumption receives heavy emphasis as a reaction to and as an attempt to make up for a general lack of esteem and low self-actualization (Gronmo, 1988). In particular, the study examines two forms of compensatory consumption; that is, pampering and status buying (or conspicuous consumption). Pampering is an important yet not frequently researched variable in consumer behavior. Pampering refers to a preference for buying, which can do things that you should be doing yourself (Gelb, 1999). “Status buying” refers to the act of purchasing and using certain goods and services, not in order to survive but rather to identify oneself to others as having superior wealth and social standing.

P4: Isolates who lack opportunity, motivation, and ability to seek or give advice about brands or products are prone to engage in pampering and status buying more so than nonisolates. The rationale is that being an isolate and lacking opportunity, motivation, and ability to seek or give advice about brands or products leads to feelings of low self-esteem. As a consequence, isolates attempt to make up for their lack of self-esteem by buying products that have a soothing effect (i.e., they engage in pampering), and buying products that aid them to identify themselves to others as having superior wealth and social standing (i.e., they engage in status buying). Therefore, this study investigates the causal condition of being an isolate for pampering by using the following item: “I like to pamper myself.” For investigating the causal condition of being an isolate for status buying the following item is used: “The car I drive is a reflection of who I am.”

Table 1. Property Space Configuration for Isolates: Share of Americans in DDB Omnibus National Samples (1997, n = 3412).

	Seek						
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	
Come	1	9.4	2.8	2.4	3.2	1.2	1.6
	2	3.9	5.5	4.0	4.8	2.1	0.6
	3	2.2	3.5	5.8	6.2	2.5	0.8
	4	2.4	4.0	5.4	9.0	2.9	0.8
	5	1.1	1.5	1.7	3.3	1.7	0.6
	6	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.7

Notes: Originally measured by 6-point Likert scales, anchored by strongly disagree/strongly agree.

“Seek”: I often seek out the advice of my friends regarding brands and products.

“Come”: My friends and neighbors often come to me for advice about products and brands.

Table 2. Sample Composition: Age of American Isolates in DDB Omnibus National Samples (1997, n = 322).

Age group (years)	Percentage (%)
≤20	0.9
21–29	9.6
30–39	20.2
40–49	19.6
50–59	18.0
60–69	18.0
70–79	10.9
≥80	2.8

Table 3. Sample Composition: Sex of American Isolates in DDB Omnibus National Samples (1997, n = 322).

Sex	Percentage (%)
Female	46.3
Male	53.7

METHOD

Data

The study uses the annual DBB long-term data set provided by DDB Needham’s Life Style Survey. The data set contains about 300 questions about various consumption behaviors, lifestyle attitudes, interests, opinions, and demographics of the time period from 1975 to 1998. The annual gross sample of the survey is about 3000 participants. The study at hand analyzes a subset of 3412 cases of the year 1997 for the variables of interest. The items used in the analysis for outcome and antecedent conditions appear in DDB Needham’s Life Style Survey (see Tables 1 and 2).

Property Space Analysis

Table 3 shows a “property-space” (Lazarsfeld, 1937) cross-table that identifies isolates by two dimensions

Table 4. Items for Each Antecedent Condition.

Condition		Symbol	Items
Outcome	Isolate	Isolates	I often seek out the advice of my friends regarding brands and products. My friends and neighbors often come to me for advice about products and brands.
Opportunity	No opportunity	Couch Home	I guess I'm what you would call a "couch potato." I am a homebody.
Ability	No ability	No_visit* No_bear* No_bettaste*	I spend a lot of time visiting friends (R). The latest fashion trends have no bearing on what I wear. I have much better taste than most people (R).
Motivation	No motivation	No_clothes* No_lookdiff*	The clothes I wear reflect who I am as a person (R). I want to look a little different from others (R).
Outcomes	Pampering Status buying	Pamper Carself	I like to pamper myself. The car I drive is a reflection of who I am.

Note: *(R) reverse coding.

relating to the seeking and giving of advice and information. Property space analysis is based on the idea that individuals theoretically can be described by the conjunctive statement of two or more conditions. Thus, isolates have unique characteristics with regard to sharing and giving of market information. They are extreme in both dimensions by neither seeking information and advice from others nor giving information and advice to others regarding brands and products. Therefore, they are isolated.

By coupling property space analysis with QCA analysis, this study aims to investigate the antecedents and outcomes of the specific consumer group of isolates. The percentages in the cells of Table 1 represent the distribution of different consumers concerning their market information-sharing behavior. Among the total number of consumers, isolates represent the largest group in the DBB data set compared to the other extreme positions in the cross-table. With a total number of 322 cases, 9.4% refer to isolates. The property space analysis in Table 3 underlines the need to focus on specific and extreme customer groups (McClelland, 1996).

Variables

This section describes the relevant variables (see also Table 4). This study examines causal conditions of isolates and hence isolates are the outcome variable of interest. Therefore, the study combines the market information variables "seek" and "come" as two dimensions to construct the outcome of isolates. On the one hand, the variable "seek" refers to the behavior of actively searching information and advice regarding products and brands from other people.

Thus, people with a high value in that dimension connect to other people and incorporate external information in their decision making. On the other hand, the variable "come" refers to the active giving of advice and information regarding brands and products to other people. Thus, people with a high value in that dimension share information with other people and are influential in the exchange of market information. Isolates have low values in both dimensions since they

neither seek for advice or information nor give advice or information. They are isolated in terms of market information.

Measures of all antecedent and outcome causal conditions appear in Table 4. Single-item measures are used for all constructs. In doing so, this study draws on Bergkvist and Rossiter's (2007) perspective that using single items is valid in research, as long as variables can be easily and uniformly imagined. Respondents' perception of the variables in this study should be readily direct and unambiguous, since they reflect regular day-to-day behavior. As a consequence, all items can be expected to be valid and reliable measures.

Analyses

To analyze the data, the study applies fsQCA (Ragin, 2000, 2008), using the free available fs/QCA 2.0 software. FsQCA bridges quantitative and qualitative approaches (Ragin, 2009) and analyzes distinct combinations of causally relevant ingredients for the respective outcomes. This analysis offers considerable advantages compared to conventional quantitative statistical methods, mainly based on correlational reasoning (Woodside, 2013). The set-theoretic approach of QCA allows examination of configurations that contribute to the outcome of interest. Thereby, various possible conditions can explain as "recipes" (Woodside, 2010) the same outcome. Through fsQCA, this study expects to test the presented propositions and to find pathways that are sufficient for identifying opportunities, abilities, and motivation of isolates. Since most studies about isolates apply regression analysis or examine other facets of isolates, this is the first study that analyzes configurations of antecedent and outcome conditions of isolates.

Calibration of Variables

In order to analyze data with fsQCA, transforming the original values into calibrated fuzzy sets in terms of membership was necessary. These sets are characterized by three reasonable thresholds based on

Table 5. Coding Scheme Fuzzy-set: Isolate.

Come	Seek					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	0.99	0.80	0.60	0.40	0.20	0.01
2	0.80	0.60	0.40	0.20	0.01	0.01
3	0.60	0.40	0.20	0.01	0.01	0.01
4	0.40	0.20	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
5	0.20	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
6	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01

Notes: Originally measured by 6-point Likert scales, anchored by strongly disagree/strongly agree. “Seek”: I often seek out the advice of my friends regarding brands and products. “Come”: My friends and neighbors often come to me for advice about products and brands.

qualitative anchors using Boolean set theory (Ragin, 2008). In general, the calibrations assign the different original measures of cases to the two possible sets of nonmembership and full membership so that membership scores fall between 0 and 1. By permitting fuzzy-set memberships scaling, partial membership of cases in sets is possible and hence a finer graduation of scores is achieved. That minimizes the loss of information and maximizes the accuracy of solutions at the same time. “Full membership” or “fully in” represents conditions of cases with scores of 1 and “partial membership” scores are close to 1—that is, 0.9 to 0.8. “Nonmembership” or “fully out” represents conditions of cases with scores of 0. The membership score of 0.5 indicates the cross-over point where the membership is ambiguous. These cases are both not “in” and not “out.”

Table 6. Coding Scheme Fuzzy-set: Outcome and Causal Conditions.

Condition	Symbol	Original Score	Fuzzy-set Score	Verbal Label for Fuzzy-set Score			
Outcome	Isolate	Seek Come	1	0.01	Fully out		
			2	0.20	Mostly but not fully out		
			3	0.40	More or less out		
			4	0.60	More or less in		
			5	0.80	Mostly but not fully in		
			6	0.99	Fully in		
	Pampering	Pamper	1	0.01	Fully out		
			2	0.20	Mostly but not fully out		
			Status buying	Carself	3	0.40	More or less out
					4	0.60	More or less in
					5	0.80	Mostly but not fully in
					6	0.99	Fully in
	Causal condition	No opportunity	Couch	1	0.01	Fully out	
				2	0.20	Mostly but not fully out	
				No ability	No_bear No_bettaste	3	0.40
		4	0.60			More or less in	
		5	0.80			Mostly but not fully in	
		No motivation	No_lookdiff	6	0.99	Fully in	
No motivation				No_clothes	1	0.01	Fully out
					2	0.17	Mostly but not fully out
					3	0.33	More or less out
					4	0.50	Cross-over point
					5	0.67	More or less in
		6	0.83		Mostly but not fully in		
	7	0.99	Fully in				

Table 7. Results: Truth Table.

No_ opportun	No_ motiv	No_ ability	Number	Isolates	Raw Consistency
0	0	0	2061	0	0.66
1	0	0	439	1	0.83
0	1	0	396	1	0.86
0	0	1	254	1	0.85
1	1	0	128	1	0.91
0	1	1	89	1	0.92
1	0	1	50	1	0.92
1	1	1	16	1	0.95

The calibration of this study follows the approach of Rihoux and Ragin (2008). To avoid loss of information, this study adds a constant of 0.01 to cases with membership scores of 0 in the process of calibration. Similarly, the study also uses only maximum scores of 0.99 for full-membership scores. To calibrate the outcome fuzzy-sets for isolates, the study uses a cross-table (see Table 5) and assigns the anchor points of 0.99 for full membership in the set of isolates. The scores of 0.8 and 0.6 represent only a partial membership in the set of isolates. The antecedent conditions are measured by 6-point and 7-point Likert scales and are calibrated into fuzzy sets with six and seven values between 0 and 1 as the outcome (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008; see Table 6).

Analysis

After the calibration of variables into fuzzy set, the fsQCA software builds a truth table incorporating the

selected outcome and antecedent conditions. The truth table depicts all possible combinations of conditions with the distribution of the respective cases. This study sets the frequency threshold to 16 and the consistency threshold to the default value 0.8. This is a reasonable threshold since consistency values below 0.7 are considered as insufficient and inconsistent to explain the outcome (Ragin, 2008). Then, the solutions were computed based on the final truth table (see Table 7) with eight rows according to the Quine–McCluskey algorithm.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the analysis of necessary and sufficient conditions for the isolates. The necessary-cause analysis examines if one of the proposed causal conditions is necessary for the outcome. A necessary condition must be present for an outcome to occur, whereas a sufficient condition can be present or absent in configurations for certain outcomes (Ragin et al., 2008). The presence of necessary conditions is only the case if the consistency score for the causal antecedent is very high (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010). Table 8 shows the consistency scores for individually tested antecedents. As the consistency scores are modestly high (i.e., <0.90), no singular antecedent appears to absolutely necessary for the outcome, the presence of isolates.

The analysis of the intermediate solution is important since such solutions maintain a balance between

Table 8. Results: Analysis of Necessary Conditions.

Conditions Tested	Consistency	Coverage
No_opportune	0.46	0.80
No_motiv	0.57	0.83
No_ability	0.43	0.82

Table 9. Results: Intermediate Solution (Model 1).

	Coverage		Consistency
	Raw	Unique	
No_opportune	0.43	0.06	0.83
No_motiv	0.57	0.12	0.83
No_ability	0.46	0.08	0.80
Solution coverage: 0.74			
Solution consistency: 0.76			

the most parsimonious and most complex solution. By incorporating only “easy” remainders in the truth table, it is the most preferred analysis. Intermediate solutions indicate the necessity of different configurations that lead to the outcome. Table 9 shows the causal recipe for isolate. The overall consistency score of 0.76 indicates that the solutions sufficiently explain the outcome and represents an acceptable consistency level (Ragin, 2005).

The coverage of the solution is very high. Coverage indicates the empirical importance of a configural

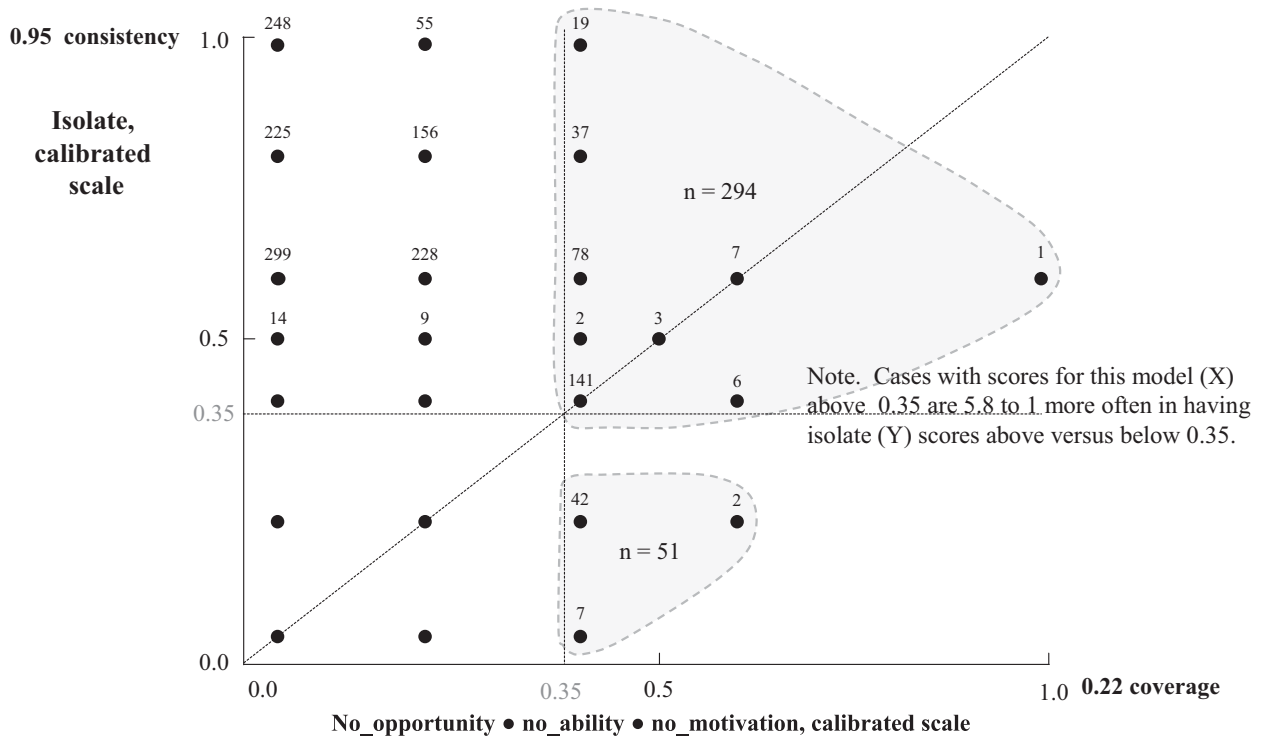


Figure 1. XY plot for the causal recipe: No_opportunity • no_ability • no_motivation ≤ isolate. Note: Numbers indicate the number of cases a dot represents.

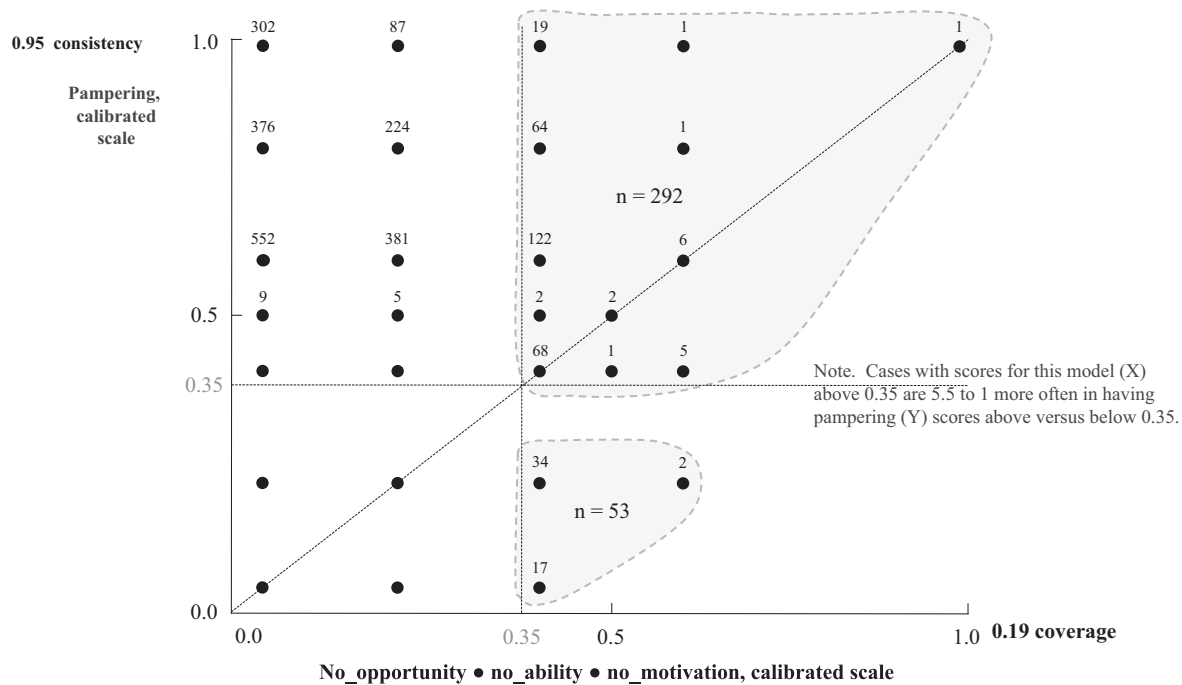


Figure 2. XY plot for the causal recipe: No_opportunity * no_ability * no motivation ≤ pampering. Note: Numbers indicate the number of cases a dot represents.

solution. Coverage estimates the proportion of cases that are incorporated in the path that leads to high outcome scores. Therefore, the high coverage indicates that a big proportion of isolates can be identified by the causal combination of the absence of opportunity, or motivation, or ability as proposed. Overall the analysis detects three solutions that lead to high membership in the set of isolates: either the absence of opportunity, the absence of motivation, or the absence of ability. Both the consistency and coverage of the three solutions are high.

Next, a second model was tested, with the causal conditions of no opportunity, no ability, and no motivation combinations. The results appear in Figure 1, which depicts the XY plot, where scores for the combination of no opportunity, no ability, and no motivation are on the X-axis and scores for isolate on the Y-axis. For this model, consistency (0.95) and coverage (0.22) turned out the highest.

In terms of outcomes, this study tests how the combination of the causal conditions of no opportunity, no ability, and no motivation related to pampering and status buying. Results for this can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. Both models worked very well: model 1, with pampering being the outcome variable, displayed consistency of 0.95 and coverage of 0.19, whereas model 2, where status buying is the outcome variable, revealed consistency of 0.83 and coverage of 0.21. In sum, all four propositions receive support by this study's analysis. First, low scores on opportunity, motivation, or ability to give and seek advice indicate full membership as isolate. Second, in addition to that, any

combination of low scores on two or three of these also indicates full membership. Third, isolates who lack opportunity, motivation, and ability to seek or give advice about brands or products engage different forms of compensatory consumption—that is, pampering and status buying—more so than nonisolates.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The concept of isolates is important because they represent a major part of the American population and their behavior is unique. Isolates are neither interested in seeking advice nor in giving advice about brand and products. Thus, they have an interesting position in the diffusion of market information by not participating actively and passively. This study examines a causal recipe that is sufficient for identifying isolates. It is the goal to develop an understanding under which conditions social isolation leads to being an isolate. First, the findings show that isolates do not seek or give advice about brands or products if they lack one of the tested causal conditions: ability, motivation, and opportunity. Based on the AMO framework (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; Argote, McEvily, & Reagans, 2003), the proposition that low values on one of the mentioned dimensions will lead to no behavior and hence decreased levels of knowledge sharing (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982) holds true. From a theoretical point of view, this study is the first study that shows and confirms that low scores in one dimension of the AMO framework can explain

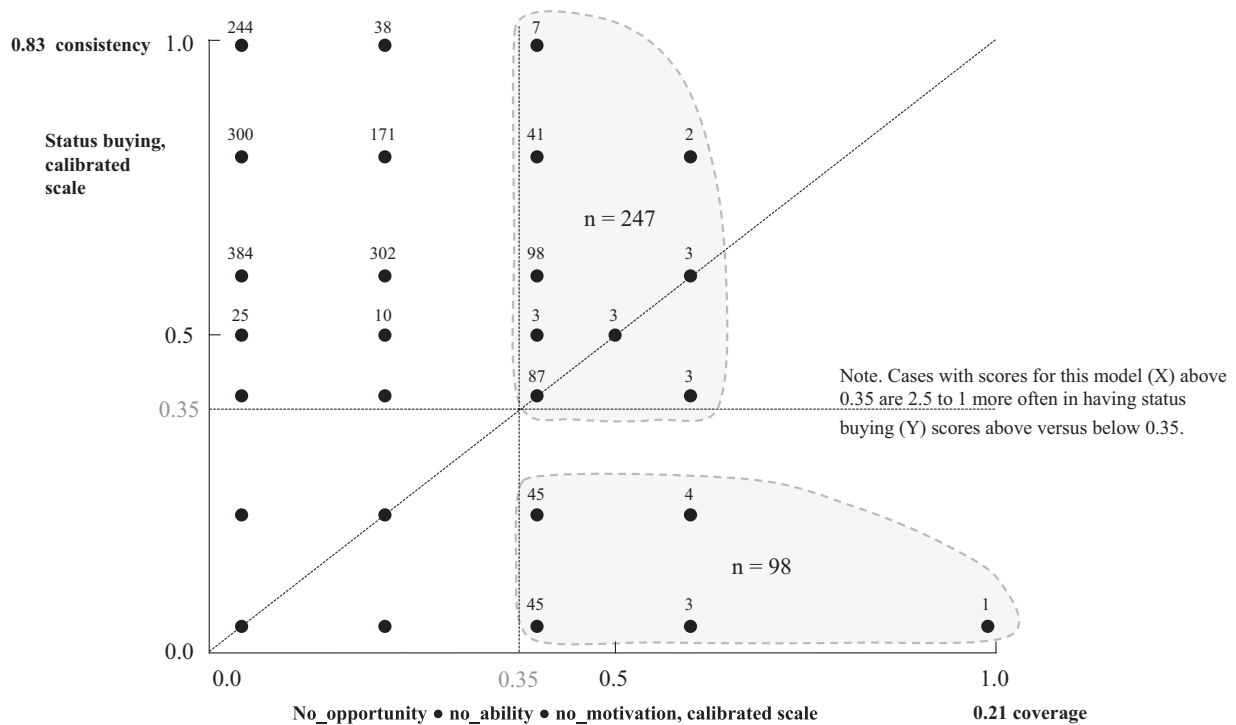


Figure 3. XY plot for the causal recipe: $No_opportunity * no_ability * no_motivation \leq status\ buying$. Note: Numbers indicate the number of cases a dot represents.

isolation. Thus, the study tests and confirms theory regarding the behavior of isolates.

Second, in terms of their consumption behavior, isolates frequently engage in compensatory consumption. In particular, isolates are more prone than other consumers to pamper themselves, as well as buying products that identify oneself to others as having superior wealth and social standing. This conclusion offers important implications for managers. In an age where consumers are more socially and market isolated, managers may profit by designing products and communications that emphasize their products' benefits in soothing feeling of low self-esteem and in improving self-image.

Limitations and Future Research

This study also has limitations. First, the study works with data from a survey conducted in 1997. Replicating the analysis with a similar analytic set approach and with current data to validate the findings of the paper and to examine a possible development would be beneficial.

Second, the DDB Needham's Life Style Survey considers only Americans; it is therefore questionable if the results hold true for isolates in other countries and cultures worldwide. The Bowling Alone phenomenon may be limited to sociodemographic development in the United States and hence unique in nature. Future research could address this issue by investigating how

social isolation, advice-giving and advice-seeking behaviors, and consumer behavior are related, in other cultural contexts. For example, the Bowling Alone thesis may not apply to more-collectivistic countries such as China. Although this study includes some empirical findings about actual consumer behavior of isolates, future studies could expand this, by looking at other forms of compensatory consumption, such as self-gift giving and addictive consumption. Since isolates represent quite a big population group, certainly studies on their actual consumer behavior in the market place are worth doing to deepen the understanding of isolates.

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