“What Do You Like?”

A Study on Consumers’ Predicting Other People’s Preferences

Course: Marketing 301 – Consumer Analysis

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Introduction

The marketing sector relies heavily on word-of-mouth, consumers telling family and friends that they would love X product. Yet research shows that people will project their own preferences and tastes onto those around them, a phenomenon called the “false-consensus” effect (Ross, L. et al. (1977)).

To understand the accuracy, and the inaccuracy, of these predictions from consumers may lead to implications for improving the means for recommending a product. For instance, segmenting product types tailored for specific groups, using an effective influencer (Instagram, YouTube, etc.) to relevant consumers, and peer-to-peer platforms to directly recommend products.

The goal is to measure accuracy and find systematic bases. This is an extremely small sample size with simple statistics, the results cannot be generalized nationally. However, they are sufficient for showcasing class concepts (Solomon, 2019, Chs.6-7)

Each participant recorded:

1. Own Preference for each category
2. Best guess of the percentage of participants who would choose the targeted option
3. All identifying information was kept anonymous

Hypotheses & Literature

Based on the citations and studies read:

H1: Respondents will underestimate how many of the participants agree with majority preference and overestimate minority choices; regression towards 50%

H2: Projection (Ames 2004) will show higher predicted % for a category when a participant personally chooses that category (false consensus)

H3: Prediction error will be the largest in the snack domain (Pretzels vs. Doritos) because the brands can give people stronger identity cues than music or drinks

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The literature used to conduct this research spans from 1977 to the current textbook in 2019. Ideas include Projection (Ames 2004), Egocentric anchoring (Epley, et al. (2004), false consensus (Ross et al 1977), and accuracy limits (Marks & Miller 1987); what all these studies and texts have in common is people taking their own preferences and skewing, one way or another, what others would say about their own preference. Just as a quick example, if Person A says they like pretzels and pop music we are trying to find what Person A think Person B's preferences are. Will Person A show any indication of projecting their own preferences onto another person or will they over-estimate what the population would think of that preference.

Methodology

Sample

32 Participants (family, friends, and acquaintances) the participation is voluntary, no compensation

Instrument

Google Form asking for consent and 6 additional questions

1. Consent (Yes / No)
2. Snack preference (Pretzels vs. Doritos)
3. *% of classmates* who prefer Pretzels
4. Beverage preference (Coke vs. Sprite)
5. *% of classmates* who prefer Coke
6. Music preference (Pop vs. Country)
7. *% of classmates* who prefer Pop

Questions 3, 5, and 7 strictly used integers 0-100. The participants entered numbers after stating their own preferences to strengthen anchoring (Epley et al., 2004).

Procedure

A Google Forms link was sent to participants starting on June 8th the final form was completed on June 12th. (See Appendix for CSV file screenshot.)

Metrics

1. Actual % = (count / 32) × 100
2. Mean predicted share = average of columns F, G, H
3. Average bias = Predicted – Actual (ppt)
4. False-consensus delta = mean prediction by supporters – mean prediction by non-supporters

Results

Domain	Focal Option	Actual % (N = 32)	Mean Predicted %	Bias (pp)
Snack	Pretzels	53.1%	50.5%	- 2.6
Beverage	Coke	56.3%	53.7%	- 2.6
Music	Pop	40.6%	50.0%	+ 9.4

Pretzels earned 53 % support, Coke 56 %, and Pop only 41 %. Participants slightly under-guessed the two majorities (–3 pp each) and over-guessed Pop by +9 pp.

False-Consensus	Supporters' Mean Prediction	Non-Supporters' Mean Prediction	Delta (ppt)
Pretzels	55.9	44.1	+ 11.8
Coke	58.7	47.6	+ 11.1
Pop	54.5	46.4	+ 8.1

Pretzel fans predicted 54.0 %, Doritos fans 47.7 % (~ 6 pp). Coke vs. Sprite gap narrowed to 2 pp. Pop fans predicted 54.5 % vs. Country fans 45.7 % (~ 9 pp).

Results (cont.) & Discussion

Across each of the three categories, the mean absolute prediction error was ~4-6 percentage points. Bias signs fit H1: respondents regress toward the midpoint, underestimating a clear majority yet inflating a near minority to ~50%. This is parallel to what Ames (2004) report, stating “social-projection rationality” whereby people hedge away from extremes when unsure.

Projection patterns support H2 and the false consensus literature (Ross et al., 1977) even in a small sample size with like-minded people and have similar experiences (all residing in Shreveport, Louisiana) egocentric anchoring persists.

H3 seems to be the furthest from the results, snack predictions were not the worst; the bias magnitudes were roughly equal for Coke and Pretzels. The music category had the deepest error (9 pp over-estimation) despite Pop being a “neutral” term. An explanation could be semantic ambiguity—participants may have lumped Top-40 charted songs alongside, K-Pop, and dance music into the category inflating the perceived base rate.

No demographic or confidence ratings were captures, because of this we cannot parse whether certain individuals were systematically better “mind-readers”. The exercise still aligns with Solomon’s (2019) claim that consumers are surprisingly poor intuitive market researchers.

Implications For Marketers & Limitations

1. Focus-group caution: When a moderator asks, “How popular do you think product X will be?” participants anchor on their own attitude, nudging predictions toward self-favoring shares. Managers should correct by at least ±10 ppt.
2. Survey design: Asking *own preference* after a population estimate may attenuate egocentric anchoring (Epley et al., 2004). Market-research vendors should randomize order.
3. Social-proof messaging: Because consumers under-estimate majorities, revealing *true* 60 %+ preference can shift undecided shoppers. Conversely, if your brand is minority-liked (< 45 %), avoid raw statistics; emphasize niche identity instead.
4. Advertising tone: False consensus is weaker when categories are ambiguous (Pop). Hence, campaigns can seed ambiguity in competitors’ positioning to blur perceived majorities.

Limitations for this study obviously come from the small sample size of participants. 32 respondents (friends, family, and acquaintances) will not generalize to culturally diverse populations. Maintaining a small N allows single digit frequency can change percentage points give or take 3.1 ppt. Conducting the same research with an N over 200 would stabilize the estimates. There was also no confidence-accuracy calibration (Ames, 2004). The framing of questions was binary by force; maintaining a multi-brand environment could yield stronger biases.

Conclusion

This micro-study confirms a robust but under-appreciated lesson for marketers; consumers are decent but imperfect mind-readers, who tend to anchor on themselves and drift toward 50-50 guesses. Across snacks, beverages, and music, prediction error hovered at ~3-9 ppt, and false-consensus deltas hovered ~8-12 ppt. While not catastrophic, such bias can misguide promotion budgets, stocking decisions, or creative briefs.

Embedding safeguards—objective panels, iterative forecasting, and data dashboards—helps firms counteract the “mirror-bias” of their own employees and customers. By grounding strategic bets in measured rather than imagined preferences, managers reduce waste and improve demand forecasts.

References

Ames, D. R. (2004). Inside the mind reader's toolkit: Projection and stereotyping in mental-state inference. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(3), 340-353.

Epley, N., Keysar, B., Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2004). Perspective taking as egocentric anchoring and adjustment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(3), 327–339.

Marks, G., & Miller, N. (1987). Ten years of research on the false consensus effect: An empirical and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 102*(1), 72-90.

Ross, L., Greene, D., & House, P. (1977). The false consensus effect: An egocentric bias in social perception and attribution processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 13(3), 279–301.

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Appendix A – Raw Data

Timestamp	Do you consent to participate?	Which snack do you prefer?	Which beverage do you prefer?	Which music do you prefer?	What percent of participants prefer Pretzels?	What precent of participants prefer Coke?	What percent of participants will prefer Pop?
2025/06/08 1:1	Yes	Pretzels	Sprite	Pop	39	62	53
2025/06/08 1:2	Yes	Doritos	Coke	Country	47	48	53
2025/06/08 1:4	Yes	Doritos	Coke	Pop	41	45	57
2025/06/08 1:5	Yes	Pretzels	Coke	Country	64	58	38
2025/06/08 2:1	Yes	Pretzels	Coke	Country	59	41	50
2025/06/09 8:1	Yes	Pretzels	Sprite	Country	47	52	43
2025/06/09 8:4	Yes	Pretzels	Sprite	Pop	57	41	55
2025/06/09 8:4	Yes	Doritos	Coke	Country	47	46	42
2025/06/09 9:0	Yes	Doritos	Sprite	Pop	44	67	50
2025/06/09 10:	Yes	Doritos	Sprite	Country	55	47	46
2025/06/09 10:	Yes	Pretzels	Coke	Pop	60	55	70
2025/06/09 12:	Yes	Pretzels	Coke	Country	50	55	47
2025/06/10 8:3	Yes	Doritos	Coke	Country	40	63	33
2025/06/10 9:0	Yes	Pretzels	Sprite	Pop	60	53	57
2025/06/10 10:	Yes	Doritos	Coke	Country	43	63	47
2025/06/10 11:	Yes	Pretzels	Sprite	Pop	65	75	55
2025/06/10 11:	Yes	Doritos	Coke	Country	37	65	50
2025/06/10 11:	Yes	Pretzels	Sprite	Country	55	60	70
2025/06/10 12:	Yes	Doritos	Coke	Country	50	50	50
2025/06/10 12:	Yes	Pretzels	Sprite	Pop	66	52	66

Appendix B – Google Form

Predicting Preferences Study – MKT 310

This anonymous survey is for a Consumer Analysis class project at Louisiana State University Shreveport.

You'll pick your own preferences on three simple questions and then estimate what percentage of other students will choose each option.

It takes 1 minute. No personal data is collected. Click "Next" to continue.

* Indicates required question

1. Do you consent to participate? *

   Mark only one oval.

   - ◯ Yes
   - ◯ No

Your Preferences

2. Which snack do you prefer? *

   Mark only one oval.

   - ◯ Pretzels
   - ◯ Doritos

3. Which beverage do you prefer? *

   Mark only one oval.

   - ◯ Coke
   - ◯ Sprite

Appendix B (cont.) – Google Form

4. Which music do you prefer? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Pop
- ◯ Country

Your Predictions

5. What percent of participants prefer Pretzels? *

_____

6. What precent of participants prefer Coke? *

_____

7. What percent of participants will prefer Pop? *

_____

Thank you for participating!

your responses are recorded you can close this tab.

Appendix C – Calculations Sheet

Variable	Response Options	Raw Count	Actual %[1]	Mean of "Group-%" Predictions	Mean Absolute Error
Snack Preference	Pretzels	17	53.1%	50.5%	2.6 pp
	Doritos	15	46.9%		
Beverage Preference	Coke	18	56.3%	53.7%	2.5 pp
	Sprite	14	43.7%		
Music Preference	Pop	13	40.6%	50.0%	9.4 pp
	Country	19	59.4%		

Actual % = (count / 32) x 100[1]