

**iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Danny Zane Explains Motivation Contagion on Social Media**

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- JACK CROFT: 00:14 Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the iLLUminate podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is November 3rd, 2022, and we're talking with Danny Zane about his research on the phenomenon known as motivation contagion and how it spreads on social media. Dr. Zane is an assistant professor of marketing who studies consumer behavior. His research interests include inference-making, self-perceptions, and ethical decision-making. Thanks for joining us on iLLUminate again today, Danny.
- DANNY ZANE: 00:48 Hey, Jack. Thanks for having me back. It's a pleasure to be here as always.
- CROFT: 00:53 Now, the working title for one of your latest research projects is When Others' Experiential Consumption Motives Become My Own: Exploring Motivation Contagion on Social Media. I think for a lot of us, anything with contagion in its name sounds kind of scary. So let's start with that. What is motivation contagion?
- ZANE: 01:18 I'd definitely say motivation contagion isn't nearly as scary as the contagion related to diseases. Although I will talk about, actually, how motivation contagion can have unwanted or at least unknown impacts for both marketers and consumers. So maybe there's a small parallel there. But when we say motivation contagion, we're simply referring to this notion that consumers' motivations for engaging in experiences like going to a concert or going out to eat can actually spill over and lead other consumers to have the same underlying motivation when they engage in the same types of experiences. So Jack, if you believe you went to a concert, let's say, for reasons of pure enjoyment, my belief about your underlying motivation for going for that pure enjoyment will then become the same force that drives my own concert-going experience. But on the other hand, let's say I believe you went to a concert mainly to show off your front row seats and your VIP passes. Then I might actually approach my own next concert experience with more of a flavor of the showing off and less for pure enjoyment. Again, because your motivation or at least my perception of your motivation became my own.
- CROFT: 02:42 Well, sadly, the front row seats and VIP passes have never been a temptation for me, so. So let's talk. You've been looking at specifically within the context of social media. So how does motivation contagion spread on social media?
- ZANE: 03:04 Yeah. We think this is a really cool context. And just as a very quick backstory, historically, motivation contagion has been shown in a physical world context where people are literally face to face. It's been shown in the context of education a bunch—teachers and students and how a teacher's motivation can spill over and contaminate a student's motivation. It's been shown in context of exercise. We think that it could spread in the virtual world as well, which we're very excited and fascinated by. And the reason we think so-- we actually draw on some somewhat intricate psychological theories to really motivate our explanation of it. But I'll highlight the main one for now and maybe you can let me know if it resonates with you as it does with me. But one of the core features of social media is that it really gives us as consumers an

unprecedented ability to both easily and really vividly share about our experiences that we have with other people. And so on the flip side, that means that we also see lots of other people's experiences in this very vivid fashion because they are sharing about them. And this matters because there's research showing that consumers believe experiences are very telling of our true selves.

ZANE: 04:36

In other words, the things we do, they really define us at a deep level, more so than, say, material goods, for example. So we think this means that when we engage in the same experiences as other people, we know it creates the psychological sense of connection between us at a deep and meaningful level. There's other research showing that. So these experiences, they're telling of our true selves. Therefore, when we engage in the same experience as other people, it creates this psychological sense of connection between us, again, at this pretty deep level. And we think that that gets to the point where we don't only perceive alignment with people for who we engage in the same experiences, but we actually also come to believe that we engage in them for similar reasons. So in essence, we think that social media is this vehicle that really can foster this deep sense of alignment among people, at least in terms of their experiential consumption, given some of these underlying psychological qualities that we know sort of pervade experiential consumption.

CROFT: 05:47

Now, was there anything in particular that piqued your interest in motivation contagion in the first place?

ZANE: 05:55

This is where my job's fun. And so because I study consumer psychology, this was actually one of those fun research questions where, based on both my and my coauthor's own real-life experiences, we began dissecting something that we realized might actually just be affecting ourselves. And then as the psychologists we are, we started wondering if this might be happening on a broader scale. So through casual conversations with each other, we actually just sort of found ourselves questioning whether our own experiences, like the vacations we were taking, were being fundamentally altered by all of the social media content that we were first viewing about other people's experiences and similar types of vacation destinations. And then we basically decided to unpack this, and that's how we arrived at this motivation contagion phenomenon on social media.

CROFT: 06:47

Before we get into kind of the details on the research, there are a couple of terms that will be coming up frequently, I have a feeling. And that's the differences between intrinsic motives and extrinsic motives. And if you could, define those for us and tell us what's going on there.

ZANE: 07:08

I'll lead by saying although intrinsic and extrinsic motives aren't truly opposite ends of the spectrum, I think it can be helpful to interpret them that way in the context of this type of research, if for no other reason but sort of ease. So when someone has primarily intrinsic motives for engaging in an experience, it means that they're doing so out of inherent interest and enjoyment that that experience brings to them. So if you want an example, I encourage you maybe to visualize someone traveling to Paris really just to immerse themselves in the French culture because they find it beautiful and idyllic. Now, on the other hand, when someone has primarily extrinsic motives for engaging in an experience, it means they do so to achieve an external reward. And this could be something as simple as money or success or attention. And so now, if you want, visualize someone instead traveling to Paris mainly to visit all the big tourist attractions and really to get the perfect picture at each one of those so that they can

post that on social media in hopes of gaining lots of likes and comments from the people that follow them. And then I also think it's worth noting here that as a rule of thumb, as a person's intrinsic motivation behind an experience increases and therefore their extrinsic motivation behind that experience decreases, the experience generally becomes more personally enjoyable or desirable to do. And I just want to mention that because it's an important thing to keep in mind as we continue to talk about this work here.

CROFT: 08:46

As part of this research, you've done a few different studies with your colleague Matthew Hall of Oregon State University where you've looked at whether the inferences people draw from social media posts they've seen actually do affect their behavior. For example, their willingness to go to a holiday market or a pumpkin patch or a museum. So if you could tell us a bit about how you decided which settings you would test in your studies, I think that'd be a good place to start.

ZANE: 09:18

We actually began this project with a study where we had participants pull up their own social media feeds and choose any experience they saw someone else share about. So we basically gave them no boundaries in terms of what defined an experience. We said, "You know what? Go onto your feed and view somebody else's experience." And then we asked them what they believed that sharer's motives were for originally engaging in that experience. And this is sort of where we found that initial evidence that when participants inferred the sharer to have more extrinsic motives for engaging in an experience, they reported being less likely to engage in a similar experience themselves. Because, again, they anticipated having similarly extrinsic motives if they were to do so. They experienced that motivation contagion. And again, extrinsic motives would equate to a less enjoyable experience for themselves. So looking at the types of experiences participants viewed other people posting about - again, we let them openly sort of choose anything they wanted - we saw a huge range from everyday things like grabbing a coffee to really much more extraordinary events like going to professional sports games or even going on exotic vacations. So with that knowledge in mind, we basically set out to then test a variety of these types of experiences in our other studies that differed on spectrums like this as well.

CROFT: 10:46

The holiday market study is probably a good place to start only because of the time of year. Over this month and throughout December, holiday markets and bazaars will be popping up as frequently as Hallmark Channel holiday movies. So if you could start by describing the differences between the two holiday market posts that you showed participants in the online study and how their reactions differed.

ZANE: 11:17

Yeah. So part of this work was also documenting the elements of social media posts that could lead viewers to infer that a sharer either had intrinsic or extrinsic motives for originally engaging in the experience they posted about, which of course is sort of the piece of the puzzle that sets off the whole motivation contagion process. So with that, in this holiday market study, we focused on the caption of a post while holding the picture constant. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to view one of two versions of a social media post, and each of those had the same picture. This picture was basically a first-person view of a hand holding out a mug of hot chocolate in front of a holiday market stand. But what we manipulated, again, was the caption. So half of participants saw a caption accompanying this picture that suggested the person was engaged in the experience out of pure enjoyment, saying it was one of

their favorite things to do during this magical time of year. And then, if I'm remembering correctly, in the other condition, participants saw a caption something along the lines of, "It wouldn't be a true holiday market experience if I didn't take a cliché pic." And so we thought a caption like this would sort of lead viewers to infer that the sharer was more in that experience for social acceptance or to appear cool, to show off a bit. That was sort of our approach to manipulating captions to get people to start making different inferences about the sharer's original motives.

CROFT: 12:54

One of the things I found fascinating about the study you did, in this one and another, was setting up a virtual holiday market. And depending on which of those social media posts you just described the participants had seen, they went to the virtual holiday market, and their experience in that virtual market did, in fact, differ rather significantly. So if you could talk about what you learned from their visits to the virtual holiday market and why that's the key in kind of getting insight into what's going on here.

ZANE: 13:38

Yeah. After they viewed one of the two posts, they visited what I think is a quite immersive virtual holiday market where they could actually virtually walk around in the snow to different shops and actually check out products on the shelves in each of these shops. So it seemed very realistic. We were actually proud of our decision to use a virtual market for a few reasons. And this gives you a sense of how long it takes to sort of get a whole research project underway and continue with it. We conducted this study last December. So it's always helpful to make things relevant to participants and it was the time of year where holiday markets, I think, did that. But it also gave us a way for participants from all around the country to have the same experience instead of worrying about how their geographic location or anything else would affect that. It also let us have everyone engage in a real consumption experience so we could test whether their social media posts that they originally viewed changed their motives when actually engaging, again, in real behavior of their own. And then finally, we also thought it was sort of a cool nod to the metaverse where we see virtual reality in the physical world becoming more intertwined every day. And that's especially true for marketers.

ZANE: 14:57

We were most interested in how much time participants spent experiencing this holiday market, and that's because intrinsic motivation is linked to spending more time doing something, whereas extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is linked to spending less time doing something. And so if people spent more time in this virtual market, it would signal that they had more intrinsic motivation behind that experience. And likewise, if they spent less time, it would signal that they had more extrinsic motivation of their own. And indeed, what we found was that when participants had first viewed the sharer's post that made them infer that sharer was extrinsically motivated when at a holiday market, viewers then spent significantly less time in the virtual market of their own compared to participants who had first seen that post suggesting the sharer had more intrinsic motives. So in fact, we actually saw a 25% decrease in how much time they spent in the museum when, again, they first viewed that post that suggested the sharer had extrinsic motives, which we thought was pretty big and quite fascinating.

CROFT: 16:06

Now, speaking of holidays, we've just gotten past Halloween. And in the lead-up to that, pumpkin patches where families could go to pick their own pumpkins were

extremely popular destinations. So if you could talk a bit about how your study regarding a pumpkin patch was set up.

ZANE: 16:24

Yeah, I couldn't get out of my own head when my family and I went to visit pumpkin patches for ourselves just a few weeks back. I had this research in my mind. And I guess that's one of the detriments of being a consumer psychologist. It's sort of always with you. But in this study, there were two main differences compared to that holiday market study we just talked about. So first, instead of manipulating the caption of the sharer's social media post, we now instead manipulated the picture, again, to show that different elements of posts can sort of spark this motivation contagion process. So in this study, in one condition, participants saw a post where the person was caught in a very candid way picking pumpkins in a pumpkin patch. That picture sort of seemed very authentic with them in this very candid sort of moment. And then in the other condition, participants instead saw a very staged picture of someone who was intentionally posing with a pumpkin for the camera. And based on previous research, we believed that the staged post would lead viewers to infer that the sharer had more extrinsic motives for going to that pumpkin patch relative to that candid post. And that's indeed what we found when we look at the inferences that viewers drew about why the sharer originally engaged in that experience. But again, what we are most interested in is whether those inferences about the sharer's original consumption motives then became viewers' own motives when they engaged in a similar experience of their own.

ZANE: 18:05

And in this study, we actually capitalized on the power of our minds as humans, and we had our participants mentally visualize themselves having a pumpkin patch experience of their own. So literally, we said, "For about two minutes or so, close your eyes and really imagine yourself in a pumpkin patch. Pay attention to the things that you're doing, the things that you're seeing, the things that you're feeling." And we as humans are surprisingly good at visualizing things like this. So then afterwards, we found that participants who had first seen that social media post where the sharer was caught in a very staged photo actually reported being more extrinsically motivated themselves as they had this mentally simulated pumpkin patch experience of their own, again, showing some additional evidence that they experienced motivation contagion.

CROFT: 19:01

So it seems Linus might have been on to something all along in the Peanuts comic strip, that the Great Pumpkin may or may not visit the most sincere or authentic pumpkin patch, but people on social media probably will.

ZANE: 19:17

That's an awesome reference. And actually, as a total side note, it definitely created some uproar this year. I don't know if you saw that. But the Great Pumpkin wasn't aired on public TV for the first time--

CROFT: 19:29

Right.

ZANE: 19:30

--and I know some fans were definitely upset about that. I know my dad is included in that group there.

CROFT: 19:36

Well, that was one that years ago I bought on DVD so I would never have to worry about the vagaries of the television marketplace, so.

ZANE: 19:45

There you go. That's what we call future-proofing. I like it, Jack.

- CROFT: 19:49 Yes. Now, the first study you did on social contagion of motivation involved a Nashville auto museum that also had a virtual tour that people could visit online. Would you briefly describe the different social media posts that participants were shown and what those differences were intended to signal to people who saw them?
- ZANE: 20:14 Yeah, this study was very similar in nature to the holiday market study we initially talked about. So I'll keep it quick here. But participants, again, were randomly assigned to view one of two versions of a post. And the post, they either viewed one that had a caption suggesting that the person was at the museum out of pure interest and enjoyment, or they viewed a post in which the sharer seemed to be bragging about hanging out with all types of exotic cars at this museum. And again, we found that this bragging post led viewers to believe that the sharer originally engaged in that car museum experience for more extrinsic reasons or had more extrinsic motives compared to the interest signaling post.
- CROFT: 21:01 And why was the online tour important to understanding how people reacted to the social media post they saw? I think this probably goes along with what you had discussed with the virtual holiday market, but it's interesting that two rather different experiences kind of found the same conclusion.
- ZANE: 21:22 Much like the holiday market study, we were interested again in how much time people spent in this virtual museum, again, since time spent is linked to motivation. And we found that participants who had first viewed the post in which the sharer bragged about their own museum experience, these participants actually spent, again, over 20% less time in this virtual museum, which signals that they adopted more extrinsic and less intrinsic motives themselves. So I think we're talking about some sizable differences here. And in general, the use of these virtual tours really let us speak directly to marketers about how other social media content can affect their customers' time spent engaging in experiences, which is definitely something that marketers care about, often try to predict, and often try to maximize. So I think there are some big implications there.
- CROFT: 22:17 Right. And it's interesting because I think if your findings had been that the people who view these, whether the extrinsic or inauthentic posts, have a negative reaction toward the people who post those, I don't think that would come as a great surprise to a lot of people. It would be, "Yeah, that guy is just a poser." But this goes well beyond that. There's a sense where when you see that, you actually become contaminated in a sense by the poster's motives for taking part in that experience. So if you could explain a little bit about what's going on there and what's happening and the way that it affects each of us, perhaps unknowingly.
- ZANE: 23:13 So to start at the beginning of your comment, you're not wrong that people generally view extrinsically motivated others more negatively relative to intrinsically motivated others. So based on how I perceive your motivation, yes, I'm likely to sort of feel more or less favorably to you. However, in our research, we do rule out the possibility that consumers engage in their own similar experience for less time simply because they want to be less associated with an extrinsically motivated person. So I won't get caught in the weeds of the details in terms of how we do this. But we do indeed show that motivation contagion is a more powerful force in determining consumers' own behavior compared to their simple social evaluations of the sharer. And as I mentioned earlier, this motivation contagion we really think occurs because these



experiences lead consumers to believe they're aligned psychologically with those who have had the same experiences as them. And the psychological force is actually so strong that when consumers engage in the same experience as others, the alignment occurs even on this underlying dimension of motivation. So it's a pretty deep connection that we think these experiences are fostering.

CROFT: 24:40

Now as you just mentioned, it seems that the implications of what you're finding, both for people who view posts on social media and for the businesses and brands that are looking to attract visitors, are significant. So let's start with consumers, the broader group. And how does understanding what's going on with motivation contagion on social media potentially help consumers?

ZANE: 25:12

Yeah. Social media users, we all view tons of content about other people's experiences. And I'd venture to guess that many of us are not aware of the impact that doing so could have on our own consumption of similar experiences. So our work suggests that the type of post someone else shares about an experience can actually fundamentally alter your own experience. That's the crux of what we're showing. And so specifically, if you infer someone to have extrinsic motives for going to, let's say, a theme park, our findings would suggest that A, you become less likely to go to that same theme park from the beginning, and B, if you do go, you spend less time there. So if a person's true motivation would be intrinsic and they really would love that theme park, they could actually be getting shortchanged based on viewing other people's content related to theme parks on social media. So at the least, we uncover another potentially hidden force, especially on social media, that impacts our consumption. And so bringing awareness to this I don't think is a bad thing.

CROFT: 26:23

Because, I mean, essentially what you're saying is that our enjoyment of experiences is actually negatively affected here, and we may be missing out on some things for reasons that we don't even understand. Seems like something that would be good for people to have in mind as they're looking at social media.

ZANE: 26:45

Right. A common theme in marketing research right now is that everything's becoming more social. The entire consumer decision-making journey from what you decide to do, the information that you try to seek out to make a decision of what to buy or what experience to go engage in, it's all being more and more influenced by these social forces, other people around us, how connected we are on social media. And so our work is folding right into this framework that consumer behavior is basically by definition a social thing at this point.

CROFT: 27:22

So what are some of the key takeaways for people who manage social media accounts for businesses and brands and especially those who are looking to enhance the experience for people and attract people who will spend more time there?

ZANE: 27:38

In a perfect world, we could go and say, "Hey, tell your customers only to take pictures that would signal intrinsic motivation." But of course, marketers behind experiential products can't dictate the types of social media content their customers are going to post. But what they can do is choose which type of content to engage with and to try to spread throughout their social media channels. So our findings would suggest that marketers, the social media account managers, can proactively look to spread content that other consumers will infer to demonstrate the sharer's intrinsic consumption motivation. So when these social media specialists, again, are trying to choose which content to engage with, they should focus on sharing, liking,

commenting on posts that signal the sharer's intrinsic consumption motivation, which then should in turn have a positive effect on other consumers' consumption intentions. Of course, this is relative to posts that signal more extrinsic motivation. So we can only really speak to the comparative nature between posts that would signal intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. But at least within that dichotomy, our paper would suggest definitely try to perpetuate content that others are likely going to infer intrinsic motivation behind.

CROFT: 29:10

Now, we've talked about quite a broad range of things within this topic. But I want to close by just asking if there's anything about motivation contagion within the context of social media that we haven't talked about that you think our listeners should know.

ZANE: 29:30

In general, I'd say my colleague Matt Hall and I, we agree that it's real and that it's powerful. But at this stage in our research, we also acknowledge that there are still many open questions. So to what extent does motivation contagion potentially differ across social media platforms? We use social media posts from Facebook and Instagram, but what about a platform like TikTok, which is growing like crazy every single day? We also don't fully address something like how the title of being an influencer plays into this motivation contagion phenomenon fully. So there's more work to be done there as well, given things like the popularity of influencer marketing. So hopefully, future work, whether by myself or others, will start building a richer picture for us so we can really understand this thing to the fullest extent.

CROFT: 30:24

Well, we look forward to checking back with you sometime in the future and see how that all progresses.

ZANE: 30:30

Yeah, thanks Jack. I will let you know how it pans out here. But thanks for having me to chat about what we know so far. It's been a blast as always.

CROFT: 30:40

Great. And thank you, Danny. As you said, it's been a blast as always. I'd like to again thank my guest Danny Zane. His research has appeared in top marketing journals, including the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research, the Journal of Consumer Research, and the Journal of Consumer Psychology. This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business thought leaders, please visit us at [business.lehigh.edu/news](https://business.lehigh.edu/news). And don't forget to follow us on Twitter @LehighBusiness. This is Jack Croft, host of the iLLUminate podcast. Thanks for listening.