Going Along Versus Going Alone: When Fear and Romance Alter the Influence of Reference Groups

Vladas Griskevicius, Arizona State University
Noah Goldstein, Arizona State University
Chad Mortensen, Arizona State University
Robert Cialdini, Arizona State University
Douglas Kenrick, Arizona State University

Two experiments examined how being in fearful or romantic states influenced how consumer preferences were affected by reference group information. Fear increased people’s tendency to conform. In contrast, although romantic states led women to conform more, it produced nonconformity in men. Specifically, romantic motives led men to go against the group when nonconformity made them unique (but not part of the minority), and when the topic was subjective versus objective, meaning nonconformists couldn’t be incorrect. Findings are consistent with evolutionary theories of motivation and emotion, and have practical and theoretical implications for research on emotion, word-of-mouth, reference groups, and innovation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that consumers are strongly influenced by reference groups and word-of-mouth (e.g., Cialdini 2001; Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1994). Although consumer research is currently experiencing a resurgence in work on emotion (e.g., Bosmans and Baumgartner 2005; Garg, Inman, and Mittal 2005), almost no research has examined how consumers’ emotional or motivational states influence their susceptibility to reference group information.

The current studies were aimed at redressing this imbalance by investigating how the emotional states of fear and romance influence consumer preferences when people are aware of the preferences of their peers. Study 1 used a chat room design and examined how being in a fearful, romantic, or neutral state influenced preferences for artwork. Study 2 extended the research by examining several boundary conditions: First, it investigated whether the effects of emotion will be different depending on whether the consumer decision concerns products that are subjective vs. objective in quality; and second, it examined how the effects of emotion might change depending on the degree of consensus within the reference group (e.g., whether peers are unanimous versus split on a preference).

Both going along and going against the group can confer powerful benefits, such as making more accurate decisions and facilitating affiliation on the one hand (Cialdini and Trost 1998; Chartand and Bargh 1999), and by establishing uniqueness on the other (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). Given the power of emotional states to motivate specific cognitions (e.g., Maner et al. 2005), one useful way to ascertain whether a consumer will go along or go against the preferences of a reference group may be to examine the consumer’s current emotional state.

Consistent with research on stress and affiliation, as well as Terror Management Theory, a state of fear is likely to motivate people to want to fit in with their group and not draw attention to themselves (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 1997; Taylor et al 2000). In contrast, a romantic state, which motivates a person to attract a member of the opposite sex, is likely to lead that person to want to stand out from the crowd. However, men and women tend to value somewhat different traits in a romantic partner (Buss 2003; Baumeister and Sommer 1997; Campbell 2001), suggesting a possible gender difference in conformity when in a romantic state.

Given these theoretically derived predictions, in Study 1 participants were put into either a fearful, romantic, or neutral emotional state by reading a pre-tested short story. Then, they went into a chat room and indicated their preferences on art (while being able to see the unanimous preferences of their peers). When participants were in a fearful state, both men and women were more susceptible to group influence than in the neutral condition. In contrast, a romantic state led men to nonconform (i.e., men went against the preferences of the group), while a romantic state led women to conform more than in the neutral state.

Study 2 extended the findings by examining two theoretically derived boundary conditions for the effects of a romantic state: (1) whether the consumer choice is subjective (e.g., there are multiple products of relatively equal quality in a category) versus objective (i.e., there is a verifiably superior product in a category); and (2) whether the opinions of the reference group are unanimous toward preferring a product versus split into a majority and a minority preference.

After inducing a romantic or a neutral state, participants indicated their preferences in a survey in which they could see the responses of the previous four individuals. Half of the survey questions were subjective consumer preferences (e.g., do you prefer a Mercedes-Benz or a BMW), and half of the questions were objective in nature (e.g., do you think it’s more expensive to live in New York or San Francisco). Furthermore, for half of the questions the previous responders were unanimous in their selections (e.g., 4 preferred the BMW and 0 preferred the Mercedes), while for the other half, the previous responses were split (e.g., 3 preferred the BMW and 1 preferred the Mercedes).

Results again indicated that when choices were subjective (like that for artwork in Study 1), a romantic state led men to go against the group and led women to conform significantly more. However, consistent with predictions, when choices were objective, a romantic state led both men and women to increase their reliance on group information. That is, when conformity could produce higher accuracy in decision-making, a romantic state increased both men’s and women’s tendency to follow the reference group. However, also in line with predictions, the effects of the romantic state persisted only when group judgment was unanimous. When the responses of the 4 people were split 3/1, the effects of the romantic state were muted. That is, when nonconformity could not lead men to appear independent to the group, and when conformity could not lead women to appear more agreeable to the entire group, a romantic state did not influence susceptibility to reference group information.

In summary, both the emotional states of fear and romance influenced people’s tendency to follow a reference group in a strategic manner. Interestingly, as evidenced by Study 2, the effects of emotion persisted even when people’s responses were completely private. The current studies expand on previous consumer research regarding reference groups and word-of-mouth, and provide a significant contribution by showing that specific emotions can influence consumer susceptibility to reference groups. The findings also have multiple practical implications. For example, a romantic desire will lead men to make purchases that make them seem unique, while being in a fear state will lead people to purchase the same products as the majority. Moreover, when attempting to market a product that is unique, marketers are advised to activate romantic desires. We hope these findings serve as a springboard in furthering consumer theories of emotional influence.