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To Be Or Not Be? the Influence of Dissociative Reference Groups on Consumer Preferences

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The effects of dissociative reference groups (i.e., groups we wish to avoid) on consumer preferences were examined. Males had more negative evaluations of and were less inclined to choose a product associated with a dissociative group than a neutral product (study 1). This finding was moderated by whether the product was to be consumed in public or private (study 2). In a different domain, Canadian undergraduates had more negative evaluations of a dissociative product than a neutral product, particularly when their national identity was primed (Study 3). The role of dissociative reference groups in marketing communications is discussed.

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TO BE OR NOT BE? THE INFLUENCE OF DISSOCIATIVE REFERENCE GROUPS ON CONSUMER PREFERENCES

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Reference groups refer to those groups or group members who are “psychologically significant for one’s attitudes and behavior” (Turner 1991, p. 5). The current paper focuses on an underrepresented topic in the marketing and psychology literatures - the role of dissociative reference groups (i.e., those groups we wish to avoid being associated with) in influencing consumer preferences. There are many examples of consumers avoiding products associated with particular groups: the teenager who doesn’t want to wear his dad’s aftershave, the baby boomer who won’t use products associated with being “elderly,” the college student who avoids dressing “geeky,” etc. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that people are often motivated to avoid being associated with particular groups, we empirically examine the hypothesis that dissociative reference groups can influence consumer judgment and behavior and identify key boundary conditions of these effects. The majority of extant research on reference groups has focused on the role of membership reference groups (i.e., those groups we are currently members of [e.g., a family, one’s gender group, etc.]) and aspirational reference groups (i.e., those groups we aspire to be members of [e.g., celebrities, athletes, etc.]) in influencing consumer preferences. The current research suggests that not only are people often motivated to attain positive outcomes (as might be attained by aligning the self with membership and aspirational reference groups), but they often are motivated to avoid negative outcomes (as might be accomplished by avoiding dissociative reference groups). Thus, it is predicted that dissociative reference groups can exert social influence over consumer judgment and choice.

In study 1, we used gender to manipulate reference group and predicted that males would be *less inclined to choose* and would have more *negative evaluations of* a product that is associated with a dissociative (i.e., female) reference group than a product that is not associated with a dissociative reference group. We tested these predictions by having participants imagine they would be attending a banquet for work. They were asked to choose from among various menu options. In the chef’s cut condition participants’ choices of the key item—steak—included the chef’s cut (10 oz) or the house cut (12 oz). In the ladies’ cut condition participants’ choices of steak included the ladies’ cut (10 oz) or the house cut (12 oz). Thus, this study used a 2(participant gender: male vs. female) x 2(reference group label: ladies’ cut vs. chef’s cut) x 2(steak size: 10 oz vs. 12 oz) mixed model design (with steak size as the within subjects measure). Specifically, we predicted that, in the ladies cut condition, males would be less likely to choose and would have less positive evaluations of the ladies’ cut (10 oz) than the house cut (12 oz) steak. We did not predict a similar difference in choice or evaluations in the chef’s cut condition (i.e., between the chef’s cut (10 oz) and the house cut (12 oz) steaks). Finally, we predicted that females would not be influenced by the alternative reference group labels because being a “lady” is not a dissociative reference group for them. The first dependent variable was the proportion of males and females who indicated they would choose the 10 oz versus the 12 oz steak for their entrée. The second dependent variable was participants’ evaluations of

the different steaks. The results revealed that, as predicted, males were significantly less likely to select and had more negative evaluations of the ladies’ cut than the house cut steak. There was no difference in choice or evaluations when the 10 oz steak was called chef’s cut. In addition, females were not differentially influenced by the reference group label.

In study 2, we used a similar methodology as study 1, but also manipulated whether male participants were consuming the steak in public or private. The findings of this study demonstrated that males were less likely to choose and had more negative evaluations of the ladies’ cut steak when consumption was to occur in public rather than private.

Finally, in study 3, we operationalised dissociative reference groups in a different way—by examining national identity. In this study, Canadian students were primed (versus not primed) with their own national identity and were asked to evaluate a variety of stationery items, including the key item—a pen. In the American condition the pen was called “American” (which represents a dissociative reference group for Canadians) and in the neutral condition the pen was called “Vintage.” Once again, participants were motivated to avoid a product associated with a dissociative reference group. In particular, Canadian students rated a pen that was associated with American identity (“American Pen”) more negatively than a pen that was neutral (“Vintage Pen”), particularly when participants own identity was primed.

Taken together, these three studies provide evidence that consumers can indeed be influenced by the desire to avoid particular group memberships. The current studies extend the classic literature on reference group influence on consumer preferences by examining the influence of dissociative associations on consumer evaluations and choice. In addition, we demonstrated that dissociative effects can be stronger and more reliable than associative effects. In study 1, although males were motivated to avoid the product associated with a dissociative group, females did not favor an alternative that was associated with a membership group. Important moderators of these dissociative reference group effects were also identified. In particular, the impact of reference groups on consumer preferences was heightened when consumption was to occur in public rather than private and when group membership was primed rather than not primed. It is suggested that the role of dissociative influence is an important consideration for both consumers and marketing managers.

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