Understanding Conformity in Consumption Contexts: Individual Differences in Need For Approval and the Propensity to Conform

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Extended Abstract

The propensity of consumers to conform to social pressure is of great consequence to the marketing community. This is due in part to the wide-ranging implications of social conformity, from its influence on rates of adoption to the attractiveness of market segments. To date the marketing literature has focused mainly on personality traits that predispose individuals to conform to or resist social pressure. Research on traits that lead to acquiescence has revolved around constructs such as consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989) and attention to social comparison information (Bearden & Rose, 1990). Studies of factors that encourage resistance to social pressure are less common, but constructs such as consumers’ need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001) have been identified.

This paper hypothesizes that a hitherto overlooked individual trait, consumers’ need for approval, underlies social conformity in consumption contexts. A review of prior attempts to measure need for approval sheds light on the construct, but reveals significant flaws in the extant measures. Currently, the primary measures of need for approval are the Demand for Approval dimension of the General Attitude and Belief Scale, the Approval by Others dimension of the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale, and the Crowne & Marlowe Social Desirability Scale. All three have roots in research conducted in the 1960’s, the first two drawing on work in clinical psychology by Ellis (1962) and Beck (1967), respectively, and the third resulting from Crowne & Marlowe’s (1960) research on accurate measurement of personality traits.

Based on our review of the literature, we define need for approval as the extent to which an individual behaves in ways that he thinks others will approve of in order to get them to like him. This conceptual definition proposes three features common to individuals who are high on need for approval: (1) they believe that they can get others to like them by behaving in ways that others approve of, (2) they are motivated to act on this belief, even if it requires subjugating their own desires and preferences, and (3) although they try to behave in ways that others approve of, they may or may not be successful at anticipating the behaviors that will garner the approval of others.

Consistent with the domain sampling model of measurement (Churchill, 1979), a pool of items was generated to capture the construct of need for approval. This was accomplished in three stages: (1) items were developed based on personal experience and understanding of the construct; (2) items from extant personality inventories were screened for appropriateness given the construct definition; and (3) undergraduate students were provided with the construct definition and asked to generate lists of items. Overlapping items from the pool were deleted and the remaining items were edited for clarity. The pool of items was then evaluated for content validity, and those that met the criteria were retained for further evaluation. In total, 64 items were obtained.

The pool of items was administered to a sample of undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university. Specifically, students enrolled in an introductory course in marketing were invited to participate in the study for extra credit. The questionnaire was administered in a computer lab, and responses were coded on 5-point Likert scales. Of the 425 students enrolled, 397 completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 93%. After purification of the items using item-total correlations, Cronbach’s alpha, and factor analysis, six items remained.

The purified measure was administered to a second sample of undergraduate students to assess construct validity. In addition to the need for approval items, items from related measures, such as need to belong (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2007), need for uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980), and self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), were included. The 181-item questionnaire was administered in a computer lab, and responses were coded on 5-point Likert scales. Of the 264 students enrolled, 226 completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 86%. Analysis of the responses support the convergent validity, discriminant validity, and nomological validity of the six-item measure of consumers’ need for approval. In addition, support was found for the hypothesis that consumers’ need for approval predicts consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence when moderated by attention to social comparison information.

Similar to Bearden & Rose (1990), a conformity study in the guise of a soda pop taste test was conducted to ascertain the predictive validity of the measure. Undergraduate students who had previously completed the need for approval questionnaire were invited to participate. A 2 (social pressure vs. no social pressure) × 2 (need for approval: high vs. low [determined by a median split]) design was employed, with the first factor manipulated between subjects and the second factor measured between subjects. In the no social pressure condition, subjects were asked to taste two sodas, Soda A and Soda B, and privately indicate their preferences on ballots. In the social pressure condition, subjects participated in the taste test one at a time with three student confederates; after tasting the two sodas, each student was asked to state their preference. The confederates were instructed to say that they preferred Soda B, and the subject was always asked last. A pre-test had revealed a strong preference for Soda A among students in general. A total of 238 subjects participated in the study, with 107 in the social pressure condition and 131 in the no social pressure condition. As hypothesized, subjects high in need for approval were more likely to choose Soda B than subjects low in need for approval when social pressure was exerted.

Social conformity lies at the heart of a wide range of marketing phenomena. As a driver of social conformity, need for approval offers promise for enhancing our understanding of social conformity. This paper proposes a measure of consumers’ need for approval and demonstrates its utility in ascertaining the propensity of individuals to conform to social pressure in consumption contexts.

References


Trust or Not: The Role of Self-construal in Interacting with Salespeople

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Extended Abstract

Today’s marketplace is one that is internationally diverse. Individuals from different cultures have distinct self-construals (Resnick 1991), which suggest that marketing messages need to be tailored to their individual backgrounds. Individualist (Western) cultures tend to hold independence in high regard which makes the independent self chronically accessible, while collectivist (Eastern) cultures focus on interdependence which makes the interdependent self chronically accessible (Cousins, 1994). Cultural research on persuasion reveals that North American consumers have more favourable attitudes toward persuasion appeals that focus on the independent self, whereas persuasion appeals that focus on interdependent self have more positive effects on Asian consumers (Han & Shavitt, 1994). However, these persuasion appeals that are effective in advertisements may not operate the same way in retailing contexts in which salespeople interact directly with consumers. The current paper attempts to investigate the potential ways for salespeople to communicate with consumers from different cultures in which people may form distinct self-construals (independence vs. interdependence).

In a dynamic interaction between salespeople and consumers, trust is crucial to facilitate the purchase experience. As a result, it is important to understand how culture and trust interact and how to develop trust based on cultural differences in an interpersonal marketplace. Over time, consumers develop knowledge about the behaviours of salespeople they encounter and persuasion attempts used by advertisements. Persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) is a resource that influences how, when, and why consumers respond to marketer’s persuasion attempts. The situation in which persuasion messages match with consumers’ self-construals has been applied in advertisements, so the same situation that occurs in retailing contexts may make consumers easily activate persuasion knowledge and lead to low trustworthiness. However, the situation in which persuasion messages from salespeople mismatch their self-construals is less used in advertisements, so the situation used by salespeople may be less likely to activate persuasion knowledge and result in higher trustworthiness. But, this effect may be moderated by situational salient self-construal.

Self-construal is a way in which people think about themselves. An independent self-construal emphasizes uniqueness or distinctiveness from others, while an interdependent self tends to focus on harmony and connectedness with others (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Further research has provided evidence that the two selves can coexist within an individual (e.g., Zhang & Shrum, 2009). Accordingly, people’s perceptions and cognition styles are influenced by a salient self-construal activated at a given time (Trafimow, et. al., 1991). The coexistence of two types of self-construals makes it possible for markers to link their marketing communications with consumers’ activated self-construals by making it salient through the use of external cues (Reed II, 2004). An independent self-construal is oriented toward people instead of social contexts (Morris & Peng 1994) and is likely to apply a context-independent cognitive style (Nisbett et al. 2001), so a consumer with a salient independent self-view may form impressions toward a salesperson based on dispositional attributions, leading to higher persuasion knowledge and lower trustworthiness toward salespeople who are perceived as making a sale regardless of whether persuasion messages from salespeople do or do not match the salient independent identity. In contrast, an interdependent self tends to apply a context-dependent cognitive style (Nisbett et al. 2001) and is oriented toward social contexts rather than people (Miller 1984), so a consumer with a salient interdependent identity may rely more on situational attributions as opposed to dispositional ones.

H1: When an independent self is salient, persuasion attempts either matching or mismatching with salient independent self will make no difference in terms of consumers’ perceptions of trustworthiness toward salespeople. However, when interdependent self is primed, persuasion attempts mismatching with a salient interdependent self will lead to higher trustworthiness than matching persuasion attempts.

Study 1

This was a 2 (Persuasion attempt: focus on independent self-construal vs. focus on interdependent self-construal) X 2 (self-construal priming: independence vs. interdependence) between-subjects design (N=60). Half of the participants were presented with 18 scrambled sentences to activate an independent self and the other half were given sentences to activate an interdependent self (Skrull, 1978). Next, all participants were asked to image an interaction with a salesclerk where they were going to buy a camera. Half of participants were told