Residential Mobility and Uniqueness Seeking

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Four studies show that residential mobility predicts desire for uniqueness consumption, and the relative centrality of the personal versus collective self mediates this effect. Moreover, this effect is only observed among people with a tendency to engage in exploratory buying behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People have a general desire to distinguish themselves from others (Brewer 1991; Snyder and Fromkin, 1977). This desire for uniqueness is clearly manifested in consumption as material possessions that consumers acquire and display make them look and feel different, and signal their distinctiveness to other consumers (Belk, 1988; Lynn and Harris, 1997a; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). The goal of the present research is to introduce personal history of residential mobility, the frequency of geographic relocation, as a novel predictor of the preferences for unique consumption and examine its underlying mechanism and moderating conditions.

We posit that personal history of residential mobility enhances the motivation to strive for personal distinctiveness, expressed by a preference for possessing and displaying unique consumer products. This is because residentially mobile people tend to place more importance on their personal selves (e.g., personality, skills) than collective selves (e.g., group affiliation, membership) as the former are less susceptible to social environmental changes than the latter (Oishi, Lun, and Sherman 2007). Since the personal self is achieved by possessing unique personal attributes that differentiate oneself from others (Brewer and Gardner 1996), residentially mobile (vs. stable) people who place more emphasis on their personal (vs. collective) selves will have a greater need for unique consumption.

We further expect that the link between residential mobility and uniqueness seeking would be heightened only when one’s personal self can be manifested through consumption but not when such manifestation is not likely. Specifically, we predict that the effect on uniqueness seeking would be observed for symbolic products with which one could express one’s desired identity (Berger and Health 2007) rather than utilitarian products (Shavitt 1990). It is because people’s preferences and identity can be inferred from the products they purchase (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982), and particularly consumption of products with symbolic versus functional benefits is likely to be diagnostic of consumer characteristics (Shavitt 1990).

In addition, we assume that not everyone with the experience of moving prefers unique products because residential mobility has both positive and negative affective consequences (e.g., excitement as well as anxiety or loneliness) (Oishi et al. 2012). If moving to another city or town brings about significant changes in the existing social network and affiliations and thus the need to regain a sense of belonging in the new community, the need for social conformity may increase while the desire to stand out may decrease. In other words, while residential mobility can enhance the need for uniqueness through a heightened sense of personal self, this effect could be mitigated by the need for conformity associated with moving and shifting social relationships.

Uniqueness seeking involves social normative characteristics as manifested in the choice of uncommon or counter-conformity products that are endorsed by a minority group (Kim and Markus 1999). We predict that if the need for conformity is heightened in the process of moving and settling in a new community, individuals will be motivated not to stand out through the choice of counter-conformity products but to fit in with others by choosing more common or conventional products. This would particularly be the case when individuals are more prone to avoid risks and less explorative in trying new options but not when they are not afraid to take risks and tend to seek novelty.

In Study 1, we tested our central hypothesis that one’s personal history of residential mobility predicts a general uniqueness-seeking tendency. Participants were shown seven sets of different combinations of shapes and asked to indicate the one that they liked the most. One of the shapes in each set was different from the other six shapes and thus was more unique than the rest. Participants reported the number of times that they had moved during elementary school, during middle school, and during high school. The total number of moves across the three different time periods was summed and served as an index for personal history of residential mobility. As expected, we found that one’s personal history of residential mobility predicts their preferences for unique shapes.

In Study 2, we examined one’s self-concept as the underlying psychological mechanism of the effect of residential mobility on the desire for uniqueness by measuring people’s emotional reactions and intention to purchase unique products in a hypothetical scenario involving consumer products and brands. We found that personal history of residential mobility predicts positive emotional reactions and greater willingness to purchase unique products over common products when the product domain is identity-symbolic but that this effect disappeared when the product domain is not symbolic of one’s identity.

In Study 3, we directly investigated the underlying mechanism by showing that the relative centrality of one’s self-concept (personal versus collective) (Triandis and Gelfand 1998) mediated the relationship between personal history of residential mobility and self-reported chronic need for uniqueness (Lynn and Harris 1997b).

In Study 4, instead of measuring one’s personal history of residential mobility, we established the causal relationship between residential mobility and consumer uniqueness seeking by priming the mindset for moving versus staying. Participants who were primed with a mobility (vs. stability) mindset showed greater desire for unique products. More importantly, this effect was observed only among those who have a tendency to engage in exploratory buying behaviour (Baumgartner & Steenkamp, 1996), a chronic disposition to seek novelty, to be curious about, and take risks in trying new options.

Our findings offer a number of important theoretical as well as practical implications for understanding the impact of geographic relocation of consumers by revealing the novel effect of residential mobility on uniqueness seeking. These findings also have novel practical implications for market segmentation and managerial decisions suggesting that the demand for unique products such as limited editions or the effectiveness of the use of popularity cues in advertising messages could be estimated based on the residential mobility of target consumers.

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