

Differentiating the “I” in “In-Group”:
How Identity-Signaling and Uniqueness Motives
Combine to Drive Consumer Choice

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Descriptive Summary

People often behave similarly to those around them—they adopt the music their friends listen to and buy the latest clothing trends to help them fit in. At the same time however, people also often differentiate from others—they purchase shirts with distinctive logos to set them apart from the masses or wear a designer suit when they want to stand out for an important interview.

These two patterns of behavior are well-documented, but have mostly been examined in separate research streams (Hornsey and Jetten 2004). Research has demonstrated that people conform to others' behavior (Asch 1955; Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Sherif 1936) and that making similar choices to in-group members facilitates the communication of desired social identities (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005). In contrast, other work supports the notion that people want to be at least somewhat differentiated from those around them (Snyder and Fromkin 1980; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). But while it is clear that consumers often assimilate to or differentiate from the behavior of others, less is known about how consumers reconcile these competing tendencies. How do conflicting motives for similarity, identity-signaling, and distinction from others combine to drive consumer choice?

I, along with my collaborators Jonah Berger (Assistant Professor of Marketing, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania) and Leaf Van Boven (Professor, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado at Boulder), are developing an integrative perspective on how opposing motives for assimilation and differentiation combine to drive consumer choice. Specifically, we propose that consumers can simultaneously satisfy each motive at different levels of choice. They may select a product that allows them to assimilate at a category level (e.g., choosing a brand preferred by other members of their in-group), yet also allows them to differentiate within the category (e.g., choosing a less popular product from that brand). Our approach also addresses a weakness in existing work,

which has taken a one-dimensional view of choice (e.g., people either have to assimilate by choosing the same product or differentiate by choosing a different product). In contrast, we use a multi-faceted dependent measure that allows us to better understand the nuances of real consumer choice.

To date, we have conducted four laboratory studies that support our perspective. However, two to three additional studies are required for publication. These studies will explore boundary conditions and demonstrate our effect in real consumer choice situations. Based on preliminary feedback and reviews from researchers in this field, we are optimistic that these studies will provide the necessary evidence for this paper to be accepted at a top-tier journal.

I am requesting \$1600 of financial support from the Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Program to complete these final studies and fund conference costs to present this paper, which has already been accepted for the 2010 Society for Consumer Psychology Conference. The estimated total cost for data collection and travel will be \$2100, \$500 of which will be funded by a Wharton Ph.D. Travel Grant (itemized costs attached).

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