

Brief Research Note:

SELF CONGRUITY, REFERENCE GROUPS, AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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The decision to buy certain products and brands depends on a number of factors; some social, and some personal. In this report, we explore the potential relationship between self image, reference group influence, and consumer behaviour.

A well-known distinction in the literature on the self is drawn between the actual self (how a person perceives him/herself) and the ideal self (how a person would like to perceive him/herself) (e.g. Belch & Landon, 1977). From marketing and consumer behaviour perspectives, self-image is strongly influenced by social environment. Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel (1989) used the term "normative influence" to indicate the attempt to conform to the positive expectations of self and others in order to gain approval and avoid rejection.

One hundred and seven students at the University of Cape Town, South Africa completed a questionnaire containing 29 bipolar dimensions (e.g. successful - unsuccessful) from which an actual self - ideal self incongruity score was calculated for each individual (Graeff, 1996). Respondents also were asked to indicate, on a sliding scale, the percentage of their friends who owned the same brand of athletic/sport shoes as they do (consumer behavior). Finally, they completed Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel's (1989) questionnaire to measure reference group influence, that delivered three scores: normative (the conformity to the positive expectations of self and others in order to gain approval and avoid rejection), informational (based on the desire to make informed decisions), and overall susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Firstly, individuals with high incongruence between actual self and ideal self were expected to be more likely to be influenced by their reference group. This was confirmed by a significant correlation between the congruence score and the overall reference group influence score ($r = .29$; $p = .003$). The correlation between the congruity score and the normative influence score also was significant ($r = .35$; $p = .001$), but the correlation between the discrepancy score and informational influence was not ($r = .10$; $p = .33$). In other words, an individual with high incongruence between actual and ideal self was more likely to be susceptible to normative influence from others, but this was not the case with regard to informational influence.

Secondly, the relationship between self congruity and the percentage of friends who buy the same product brand, was

confirmed [$F(2,96) = 3.75$; $p = .04$]. Post-hoc Tukey HSD analyses showed that the group with high congruity scores had fewer friends (Mean = 31.8%) owning the same brand of athletic shoes than the group with medium congruity scores (Mean = 49.3%).

Thirdly, the variable "susceptibility to reference group influence" was related to the percentage of friends who buy the same brand as the individual [$F(2,101) = 3.55$; $p = .03$]. Participants with high reference group influence have a higher percentage of friends owning the same brand (Mean = 46.9%) than the low reference group has (Mean = 30.3%).

The results support the notion that the more incongruity an individual experiences, the more this individual is influenced by others when making product/ brand choices. This relationship also held for normative influence. In other words people with high self incongruity have a stronger tendency to conform to the expectations of others than people with less. It seems reasonable to assume that incongruity between actual and ideal self leads to more reference group influence due to a stronger need for social feedback. Because of the symbolic value of certain products and brands, this association can be obtained through buying the same products and brands as positively evaluated group members.

Results contradicted the hypothesis that the percentage of friends who own the same brand would be higher for individuals with high congruity scores. In retrospect, it is possible that the operational definition of the variable "consumer behavior" in terms of "percentage of friends who own the same brand" was less than perfect. Nevertheless, we believe the results of this study are promising, and fit in reasonably well with what we know about the relationship between these variables.

REFERENCES

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