

Study explores distinction between 'different' and 'uncool'

Just as some products reveal our aspirations, there are other products that consumers avoid, lest we be associated with a particular group. An environmentalist would never buy an SUV. Baby boomers avoid products associated with being elderly.

A recent Apple computer campaign framed PCs as bumbling and dorky. What's the difference between products we actively avoid and those that are simply "not us"? A new study from the *Journal of Consumer Research* reveals an important distinction between non-membership in a group and groups with which we want to avoid association – and also highlights the mitigating effect of social pressure.

"Although past research has confirmed that consumers often choose products and brands that represent who they are, the current research suggests that consumers also choose products in ways that demonstrate who they are not," explain Katherine White (University of Calgary) and Darren W. Dahl (University of British Columbia).

Through a series of studies, the researchers found that people are only motivated to avoid products related to "disassociative reference groups" – that is, groups with which the consumer seeks to avoid association. However, this avoidance tendency did not occur in response to products associated with an "outgroup," or, a group in which the consumer does not belong, but is also not particularly motivated to avoid. For example, the baby boomer who avoids geriatric shoes might not be a basketball fan, but may be neutral about basketball in general and gladly wear basketball shoes.

"First, we show that not all outgroups are created equal and that dissociative reference groups have a stronger influence on consumers than do outgroups more generally," the researchers explain. "We found that consumers evaluated more negatively and avoided choosing a product that was associated with a group they did not wish to belong to and this tendency was most pronounced when they were reminded of their own group identity."

Specifically, in one of the four studies, the researchers had Canadian undergraduates choose among an "American" pen, a "Belgian" pen, and a "vintage" pen. The researchers found that the tendency to avoid the "American" pen was most pronounced among students who had just been reminded of their Canadian identity or for whom being Canadian was a strong part of identity

However, the avoidance of the dissociative option – the "American" pen – was reduced when participants were motivated to make a particular impression on the experimenter (i.e., when she revealed that was American, not Canadian).

"We believe the effects in the current studies are driven by a desire to avoid the negative associations of the dissociative referent," the researchers write. "An additional implication is that when marketers utilize a differentiated marketing strategy that targets multiple and distinct markets, they should be cognizant that one market segment might have dissociative associations regarding another segment."

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