Experimental Study of Consumer Behavior
Conformity and Independence

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Results of a laboratory experiment indicate that in consumer decision making, in the absence of any objective standard, individuals tended to conform to the group norm. However, when the group pressure was to "go along" with the group, resulting in restriction of choices, the individuals tended to resist the group pressure.

Although group influence is one of the important factors in the attention directing stage of the purchase process, "very little empirical work has been carried out" on this stage of the decision process [4, p. 51]. Attempts have been made to relate the findings on group influence from small group studies to consumer behavior [2]. While the investigations of group influence in consumer behavior are relatively recent, social psychology has long focused on the small group and its influence on the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of its members.

Now there is a sizable body of social psychology literature on the experimental study of social influence. A number of experiments have demonstrated that with sufficient group pressure it is possible to influence what the individual believes he perceives. Other experiments suggested that in the absence of objective standards, an individual turns to other people for judgment and evaluation.

The Conformity Studies of Asch [1] and the Social Judgment experiments of Sherif [8] are best known and most representative. In the Asch experiment the task was to state which of the three lines on a card was equal in length to a comparison line. The critical subjects were exposed to the contrary-to-fact opinion of a unanimous majority (three or more confederates). The confederates had been instructed to give the same incorrect answer. Asch found that 76 percent of the critical subjects also gave the same incorrect response despite the fact that the majority response was obviously incorrect. In the autokinetic experiment of Sherif the subjects individually and in groups estimated the range of movement of a light which, in fact, was stationary. He demonstrated that in an unstructured situation the subjects, in making their decisions, were entirely dependent on the group for the norm and range.

Generally, laboratory studies of social influence demonstrated that individuals are highly susceptible to group pressure. A majority of the individuals conform to a group norm. When objective standards were absent, more individuals tended to conform to a group norm than when the objective standards were present. The small group studies were not concerned with group influence in buying situations. Assessing their relevance to buyer behavior after an exhaustive search of the social psychological literature, Howard [5, p. 136] concluded:

Other people seem to be important influence on the individual's perception. There are two hypotheses in this connection. First, a number of experiments suggest that, in the presence of a sufficient amount of group pressure, it is possible to influence what the individual believes he perceives. The second hypothesis is that, in the absence of objective standards or accepted authority, an individual will turn to other people for judgments and evaluations. To whom he turns depends upon the circumstances.

From these hypotheses he speculated about marketing situations.

Although knowledge about conformity to group norms in the marketplace is slight, common sense would lead us to conclude that consumer decision making takes place in an environment where conformity is a major force. However, the operation of group norms in many buying situations needs to be empirically established, and the social influence of groups on consumer behavior needs to be investigated systematically.

Although group influence in the consumer decision-making process is recognized, generally the attempts to...
influence are thought of as "pressures toward conformity." This view probably results from lack of attention to the phenomenon of independence in the social psychological literature. Little attention has been given to conditions under which independence occurs. Jahoda pointed out that "there is ample evidence for the existence of independence not only in common-sense observations but also in every single experiment which rejects the null-hypotheses of independence on statistically impressive levels of confidence [6, p. 99]."

Many buying actions come from a desire to identify with a membership or reference group. The influence exerted by given groups, such as neighborhood groups, bridge clubs, on its members is informal and subtle. Moreover, group norms establish a range of tolerable behavior or a frame of reference. Ferber [4, p. 49] divided the consumer decision-making process into three distinct stages: (1) Attention directing stage; (2) Deliberation among alternative forms of action; and (3) the actual choice. Awareness, therefore, of a group norm and any tendency to conform to that norm relate to the attention-directing stage of consumer decision making.

Few individuals would care to be complete conformists in their consumption patterns. In many buying situations, an acceptable range of alternatives is available within a given norm. We all know cases where individuals conformed to the group norm by buying a product, but each individual purchased a different color, brand, etc., thus maintaining a feeling of independence. Any attempt to force compliance in a buying situation would tend to restrict the consumer's choices and consequently his independence. Therefore, to study the phenomenon of independence in consumer decision making, one would have to study the effect of restriction or usurpation of choices by group pressure on the consumer decision-making process.

In a recent theoretical paper by Brehm [3], the motivational state which impels an individual to establish his freedom has been called "reactance". Reactance is viewed as dissonant with compliance. Any attempt by the inducing agent, in our case the group influence, which threatens the freedom of the individual, according to this theory, would lead to a tendency for the individual to avoid compliance. Brehm [3], in an exploratory experiment found that in a dyadic situation, the attempted influence by the confederate tended to make the subject do the opposite of what was suggested. Generally, other exploratory studies in this area supported the view that if an inducing force threatens the individual's freedom, the individual tends to oppose the inducement.

**THE STUDY**

The two main objectives of this study were: (1) to gain insight into this phenomenon—conformity to group pressure in the consumer decision-making process; and (2) to study the effects of choice restriction by group pressure in the consumer decision-making process.

Based on the theoretical discussion so far, the following two hypotheses were derived:

1. In a consumer decision-making situation where no objective standards are present, individuals who are exposed to a group norm will tend to conform to that group norm.
2. In a consumer decision-making situation where no objective standards are present, individuals who are exposed to a group norm, and are induced to comply, will show less tendency to conform to the group judgment.

**RESEARCH PLAN**

Since this study is exploratory, what we learn in the laboratory can help in understanding the effect of group pressure on the consumer decision-making process. Therefore, a controlled laboratory experiment was used to evaluate the above hypotheses.

In most instances the laboratory studies of group influence created artificial situations unlike those found in everyday buying. For this study a laboratory situation was devised in which the consumer decision-making process would come close to an actual buying situation. Since the subjects for this study were male college students, a buying situation was chosen that would reflect their familiarity with the buying process for that product.

**Procedure**

Subjects were 144 college juniors and seniors who were drawn from a pool of the basic students in the School of Business Administration, University of Minnesota.

The task required the subjects to evaluate and choose the best suit among three identical men's suits labeled A, B, and C. The three suits were of the same style, color, and size. All other means of identification were removed from the suits. The positional arrangements were varied in Latin square design so that each suit was displayed in each position with equal frequency. The subjects were told: (1) that the three suits were from three different
DISTRIBUTION OF CHOICES OF BEST SUIT

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<td>Conformity</td>
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<td>Reactance</td>
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manufacturers, (2) that there were quality differences, (3) that the previous studies conducted at the Center for Experimental Studies in Business had indicated that experienced clothiers and tailors were able to pick the best one and (4) that the present study was to find out whether consumers would be able to pick the best one.

Three experimental conditions were created for the experiment: Condition I was a Control Condition; in Conditions II and III, which will be called Conformity Condition and Reactance Condition, respectively, group pressure (independent variable) was manipulated.

The task remained the same for all three conditions. In each condition, the subjects were allowed two minutes each to physically examine the suits to help them arrive at their choices. In the Control Condition, after the subject had been seated, the experimenter read aloud the instructions. After examining the suits for two minutes, the subject returned to his seat and indicated his choice on a form provided for this purpose. Thus, in the Control Condition the subjects evaluated the suits individually in the absence of any group influence.

In Conditions II and III the suits were evaluated and the choices were made in a face-to-face group consisting of four individuals, three confederates of the experimenter, and one subject. The confederates had been told to choose B as the best suit. In addition, the confederates had been instructed earlier about seating arrangements. In these two conditions, after the subjects were seated around a table, the experimenter read instructions explaining the task. They were told that after they each examined the suits, they were to publicly announce their choices of the best suit. After examination of the suits, the subjects returned to their seats. Then the experimenter asked each person to announce his choice. Because of the seating and the prior instructions to the confederates, the first conferee was the first to be asked and to respond; then it was the turn of the second and the third confederates respectively. The naive subject was always last to respond.

In the Conformity Condition the unanimous majority judgment of Suit B was communicated by each conferee enunciating his choice clearly and unmistakably. The naive subject was faced with a unanimous majority opinion (group norm).

The manipulation of group pressure in the Reactance Condition was similar to that in the Conformity Condition. The task, the instructions, and the procedures were the same, but the response pattern of the confederates was changed. The responses were as follows:

Confederate 1: I am not sure if there is a difference—it is not great; but if I have to choose, then B is the best suit.
Confederate 2: (Looking at Confederate 1) You say B. . . . Well, I cannot see any difference either—I will "go along with you"—B is the best suit for me.
Confederate 3: Well, you guys chose B. Although I am not sure, I am just going along to be a good guy. I choose B too.

Then it was subject's turn to announce his choice. As in the above condition, group pressure was aimed at restricting the individual's choice.

Forty-eight subjects were run in the Control Condition and 48 subjects in each of the other conditions. Confederates came from the "subjects pool" and from the subjects who had been through the Control Condition.

The situation permitted a quantitative measure of yielding. The proportion of choices for B was taken to be the measure of yielding, and the proportion of choices for A or C was taken to be the measure of nonyielding. The experimenter casually recorded the choices while the subjects were filling out a questionnaire in Phase II. The responses had not been recorded during the public announcements of the choices to avoid creating suspicion about the sequence used in the interrogation.

After the post-experimental interview, the subject was debriefed and was requested not to disclose the nature and method of the experiment to any other student until results were officially announced in class by his instructor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The distribution of choices obtained for the three conditions are shown in the table. The results are based on the N shown in the table. The data for the remaining were discarded because of the subjects' familiarity with the experimental procedure.

Analysis of the proportion of choices obtained for choice B in the Conformity Condition indicated that it was significantly greater than one-third. (Z = 2.5, p < .01). Therefore, by rejecting the null hypothesis it was concluded that group pressure was effective and that individuals tended to conform to the group norm. The results supported Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported by the results obtained for the Reactance Condition. Analysis of the proportion of choices for choice B in this condition indicated that it was not significantly different than one-third. The null-hypothesis cannot be rejected for this
condition \( Z = -0.63, NS \). Therefore, it was concluded that in this condition, where acceptance of group pressure would have restricted the choices available, the subjects tended either to be indifferent or to deliberately make a choice that would negate the effect of group pressure.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING**

Implications from this study for consumer decision-making processes are limited because study was exploratory and was set in the laboratory. However, the findings support other small group studies on conformity to group pressure and the preliminary findings of the studies based on the theory of reactance.

The acceptance of social influence, as shown in the Conformity Condition, implies that consumers accept information provided by their peer groups on the quality of a product, of a style, etc., which is hard to evaluate objectively. More generally, the group norm or the prevailing group standard directs attention of its members to a new style or a product. It provides a frame of reference which is the first stage in the consumer decision-making process. In many buying situations there exists no objective standard independent of others' opinions. For those situations the implications are clear. The findings also imply that peer groups, friends, and acquaintances may be a major source of influence and information in the attention-directing stage of the buying process for major items.

The findings that group pressure for compliant behavior is ineffective implies that any attempt to restrict independent choice behavior in the consumer decision-making process may be resisted under certain conditions. In the marketplace we can observe that individuals purchase a product or adopt a new style, but reserve the right to choose different brands or variations. In this way, it seems, the feeling of independence in the consumer decision-making process is maintained. The theory of reactance is undergoing extensive empirical testing. However, our findings are supported by Whyte's study [9] of the effectiveness of personal interaction in influencing the purchase of air conditioners. His analysis indicated that an "individual may sell his neighbor on the idea of a (air) conditioner; he does not necessarily sell him on a particular brand or a particular store; where you see a row of adjacent (air) conditioners, only a few of them will be of the same make, and only a few from the same store [9, p. 117]."

**REFERENCES**
