



## AN EXPLORATION OF ADOLESCENTS' PURCHASING CONFORMITY: THE ROLE OF NEED FOR COGNITION AND COMMODITY CONSPICUOUSNESS

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### Abstract

Conformity is an easily observed phenomenon in the daily life of common. Related studies have pointed out that compared with people of other ages adolescents are more apt to adopt conformity. The social psychologist deems that conformity is the representation of social influence, but the marketing scholar does not care as much about whether the original thought or behaviors of the consumers are the same as they do about their decision-making and behaviors under the influence of the group they belong to. In present research, a profound discussion will be carried out on the purchasing conformity of the adolescents via the personality of need for cognition (NFC) and the commodity's characteristics. For this research a total of 4287 invitations have been emailed to invite people to fill in the questionnaire on our research website. The email addresses come from the colleges and universities in the Taiwan. 624 questionnaires have been sent back in total and 588 copies are valid. Consequently, the study demonstrated that adolescents with low NFC possess more purchasing conformity than those with high NFC. Also, more purchasing conformity is exhibited in the consuming behaviors of conspicuous commodity than on those of non-conspicuous commodity. The conclusion of this research will deepen our understanding of the conforming purchasing behaviors of adolescents.

**Keywords:** *Conformity, Adolescence, Need For Cognition (NFC), Commodity Conspicuousness.*

### 1. Introduction

Conformity is an easily observed phenomenon in the daily life of common, and is readily seen in fashion, popular culture, and the mentality of following suit, etc. In the consuming behaviors of adolescents, conformity has also cast its shadow everywhere. Though emphases have been laid on different aspects of the definition of conformity in different areas, the concept itself is roughly the same. For example, the social psychologist deems that conformity is the representation of social influence (Allen, 1965), but the economist deems that conformity is the behaviors exhibited or decisions made by the individual who imitates others but usually ignores his own personal information while he is observing others' behaviors or decision-making under the condition of information asymmetry (Banerjee, 1992; Bikhchandani et al., 1992). However, the marketing scholar does not care as much about whether the original thought or behaviors of the consumers are the same as they do about their decision-making and behaviors under the influence of the group they belong to (Wilkie, 1994; Macinnis, 1997).

In an oriental society that emphasizes collectivism, most people care about others' views and opinions, thus causing everyone to be to some extent influenced by others in their behaviors of purchasing and using products. Peer group, reference group and cultural pressure all have influence on consuming behaviors, so people do not make their purchasing decision completely on their personal likes and dislikes, and their decision is usually the mixed opinions of their own and others. Due to the fact that the social force may influence every person's evaluation of and choice of the products, and in the course of their growth the adolescents whose personality has not become mature are constantly seeking their self-image, looking for their self-worth, they are more apt to choose conformity as compared with people of other ages (Park & Lessig, 1977). Additionally, related studies also pointed out that females are keener on conformity than males (Eagly & Carli, 1981). However, it is to some extent insufficient to understand the conformity of the adolescents by probing their inclination merely from the variables of demographic statistics. In the aspect of research topics, there have already been some to probe into the adolescents' conformity in apparel (Workman & Johnson, 1994), and some to carry out cross-cultural comparison (Zhang & Thomas, 1994), and the present research, which is different from the studies on social influence emphasized by the social psychologist, are being carried out from the perspective of consuming behaviors. And in this research of ours, we will explore the influence of the personal character on the purchasing conformity of the adolescents from the perspective of personal character, define the commodities characteristics and discuss the role that these characteristics may play in the conforming purchasing behaviors of the adolescents.

### 2. Theory Development and Hypotheses Formation

#### 2.1 Conformity

Early in 1951, the social psychologist Asch adopted the term conformity in one of his published papers, but at that time it was not clearly defined. The term that was used in his paper to mean almost the same thing is a majority effect, which connotes,



“when the majority of people hold a mistaken idea, an individual will also follow suit”. In order to probe into the majority effect, Asch (1951) carried out a series of studies. He once had an experiment together with six research assistants that had been previously arranged and a subject. As a result he discovered that when his assistants on purpose chose the wrong answers, the subject would usually choose the same wrong answer. This aroused the interest of all fields in the studies on conformity. The social psychologists deem that conformity is an important part of social influence (Allen, 1965), they are mainly interested in what has caused people to follow suit and how they can be influenced by others, and they sum up two main reasons, i.e. “normative social influence” and “informative social influence”. The “normative social influence” implies that since an individual wishes to be liked and accepted by others, he or she will exhibit the behaviors of complying with the group, that the norms may cause conformity is not because the individual wants to take others’ behaviors as the source of information, but because that will enable him or her to continue to stay in this group and get the interests that belong to this group. The “informative social influence” implies that when they do not know what action to take or what opinions to express in a confused situation, people usually depend on the observation of others’ behaviors to get the important source of information. Thus they use their observation to guide their own choice of proper behavior. In the marketing field, conformity is defined as, “the thought or behaviors adopted by a consumer that are similar to those of other members in his or her group for the purpose of identifying himself or herself with the group and conforming to the expectation of the group (Wilkie, 1994; Macinnis, 1997)”, and “the inclination of the members to establish the group norms and to make an individual to comply with these norms (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999)”. The marketing scholar does not care so much about whether the original thought or behavior of the consumers are the same as about their decision-making and behaviors under the influence of the group they belong to.

## **2.2 Related Factors that Influence Conformity**

Sociology, psychology, and consumer behavior studies all discovered the importance of relating others (reference group and peer group) both in theory and practices, and pointed out that the related others have a marked influence on the decision-making of an individual (Wind, 1976). As is pointed out by Moschis and Churchill (1978), the peer group can influence the process of socialization of individual consumption directly or indirectly. By studying the influence of TV advertisements on adolescents, Moshis and Moore (1982) pointed out that the discussion on consumer affairs with the peers have a sharp influence on the cognition of both the consuming role and activities of the adolescents no matter how many TV advertisements they have watched. The peer group plays an important role during the adolescence. In order to identify themselves with the peers, the adolescents are certain to show the value conceived by their peers, and since the products have the function of demonstrating their image, they naturally will have influence on the consuming motive of those adolescents who are under the pressure of their peers or who want to express themselves or win the recognition of their peers (Moshis & Moore, 1979; Moschis & Churchill, 1978).

Besides the social influence that constitutes the main factors that influence the conformity, the personal character also has influence on the occurrence of conformity (Lascu & Zikhan, 1999). For example, those confidential people will exhibit less conformity for they care seldom about the response of others. The higher a person’s ATSCI (Attention-To-Social-Comparison-Information) is, the more likely he or she will exhibit the conformity (Bearden & Rose, 1990). And it is easier for those people with a higher self-monitoring capacity to exhibit conformity than those with a lower self-monitoring capacity for the former are willing to follow the social norms (Nantel & Strahle, 1986). Moreover, those people with a higher public self-awareness are constantly aware that they are members of the society (Feningstein et al., 1975), so it is easier for them to exhibit conformity (Bearden & Rose, 1990), whereas those with a lower self-esteem do not know so much about what kind of people they are. Therefore, they are more apt to be influenced by external information in action (Brockner, 1988). More over, age is an important variable in population statistics that will influence conformity. As is pointed out in studies made by Park and Lessig (1977), adolescents are more inclined to follow suit than people of other ages, and there are also studies to point out that females are more apt to do so than males (Eagly & Carli, 1981).

## **2.3 Influence of NFC on the Purchasing Conformity**

The NFC is an important personal character, which refers to the degree of an individual’s keenness on thinking about things (Cacioppo et al., 1984). Quite a lot of researches demonstrate that in the degree, manner and result of information processing there is a sharp difference between people with a high NFC and those with a low NFC. For example, under a proper persuasive situation, people with a high NFC will take more pains to consider the persuasive information than those with a low NFC. Therefore, the strength of the argument quality in the information will usually decide the cognitive response and attitude change of those people with a high NFC. In the meanwhile, those people with a high NFC will demonstrate a higher consensus in their attitudes and behaviors that are brought about by the process. But since they are not so willing to take pains to think about the persuasive information, the attitude of those people with a low NFC will be more likely to be influenced by the external information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). When one choice is needed to be picked out among many,



the means of seeking the information adopted by those people with a high NFC will be to compare the attribute of different options to make a single choice. When they are required to make a judgment on each option, those with a high NFC will take into consideration the different information of each option, so as to combine the different properties of each option to make an overall judgment. On the contrary, those with a low NFC will adopt a reverse method to seek the information.

Mantel and Kardes (1999) also note the difference between those people with a high NFC and those with a low NFC in the product attribute information processing means. Mantel and Kardes deem that since people with a high NFC have a high sensitivity towards each product attribute, it appears easier for them to encode, retain and recall each product attribute, which in turn makes it easier for them to adopt the attribute-based processing model. On the contrary, people with a low NFC have a quite low sensitivity towards the product attribute, so most of them adopt the attitude-based processing model. Under the attribute-based processing model, the consumers will evaluate the product attributes one by one; but under the attitude-based processing model the consumers may depend on their own general impression or the external information not related to the product to make a choice.

Based on the above understanding about the NFC, we can infer that in a practical consuming situation, since people with a high NFC have a stronger internal motive to engage in information processing and cognitive activities. In the task of choosing a product, they will make a detailed comparison by using the information provided by the product itself rather than pay attention to the external information not related to the product itself, and it can be expected that they will have a lower possibility of choosing conformable consumption. In contrast, those people with a low NFC will make every possible means to prevent themselves from engaging in situation that will take them a lot of time to make reference and consider the info, no matter how important the things may be. Since people with a low NFC comparatively do not like to engage in thinking work, it is less likely for people with a low NFC to make a careful comparison on the attribute of the product itself when they are faced with the choice of a product; and since they always try to seek a simple means of making decisions, they are more apt to be influenced by the information that has nothing to do with the product and thus exhibit the inclination of conformity. For example, in the purchasing task of choosing a mobile phone, people with a high NFC may compare the product attributes of all mobile phones before choosing the one that is akin to their own preference, but people with a low NFC, as compared with those people with a high NFC, are less likely to make a comprehensive comparison on the product attributes of all mobile phones. When other information is available, say, most other people have bought a certain brand of mobile phone, those people with a low NFC may apply this external information to make a decision, as a result causing them to exhibit a higher inclination of purchasing conformity. Moreover, since people with a low NFC has little evaluation about the product itself, they will have comparatively less confidence about the product they have chosen and most probably will try increase their confidence by choosing the product that is identified by the majority of people. Based on all these, we form Hypothesis 1.

H1: The subject with a low NFC will exhibit a markedly higher inclination of purchasing conformity than the subject with a high NFC.

#### **2.4 Influence of the Commodity Consciousness on Conformable Purchasing Behaviors**

Besides the influence of NFC, the related studies on whether the commodity characteristics can enlarge or restrain the conformable consuming inclination have pointed out that exclusivity and public visibility are two key dimensions in judging whether a product is a conspicuous commodity (Bourne, 1957). There are also studies that have divided the products into four categories, namely public luxuries, private luxuries, public necessities and private necessities according to whether they are necessities or luxuries and whether they are used by the public or by the private. There is an extremely great difference between the consuming behaviors of the products used in the public status and those used privately. Besides, related studies also point out that the consuming motive of a product is comprised of a practical consuming motive and image expression motive. The consumers will have more motivation of image expression when they are buying overtly displayed products (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

Via the above analyses, this research claims that the conspicuousness of products will enlarge the conformable consuming inclination of the adolescents. Because the conspicuous products have larger public visibility and the adolescents have a higher degree of group identification than other groups do, in purchasing the conspicuous products they are more apt to care about others' opinions about them, and to exhibit a comparatively higher inclination of purchasing conformity. Based on all these, we form Hypothesis 2.

H2: The inclination of purchasing conformity exhibited in the purchase of the conspicuous commodity is obviously higher than that in the purchase of non-conspicuous commodity.



### **3. Method and Data**

#### **3.1 Sampling**

For this research a total of 4287 invitations have been emailed to invite people to fill in the questionnaire on our research website. The email addresses come from the colleges and universities in the Taiwan. 624 questionnaires have been sent back in total and 588 copies are valid.

#### **3.2 Measurement**

The key dependent variable in this research is the conformable purchasing inclination. Via following the procedures, we adopt the interactive webpage to carry out the measurement. After entering the questionnaire on the webpage, in the first part we first measure the degree of likeness of the subjects towards the function of each category of the commodities, which includes electronic dictionaries, desktop computers, mobile phones, and digital cameras. Among these products the mobile phone and digital camera are the overtly displayed commodities (conspicuous commodities) that are most commonly used in the public place by college students in the Taiwan Area. Relatively speaking, the electronic dictionary and desktop computer are not overtly displayed commodities (non-conspicuous commodities). Take the mobile phone as an example, we have provided five functions, which are respectively self-edited ring, sound control dialing, built-in loudspeaker, replaceable shell, and infrared transmission. On the webpage the subjects are invited to choose five items in order, attach importance to the function of each category of product, and arrange them according to their importance. This part is aimed at getting to know the order of the importance of each function in the mind of each subject, on which is based the measurement of conformable consuming inclination in the next part.

Next, the subjects enter the second part of questionnaire. Two kinds of commodities (A, B) in each category are provided for the subjects for reference. These two items of commodity are designed according to the arrangement made by the individual subject on the order of importance of the commodity functions in the first part. For example, if the arrangement made by a certain subject according to the order on the importance order of the mobile phone functions are self-edited ring, sound control dialing, built-in loudspeaker, replaceable shell, and infrared transmission, then first commodity will possess the functions of importance order I, IV, and V; the second commodity will possess the functions of importance order I, II, and III. Moreover, how many people have chosen these two commodities at present on the webpage will also be manipulated, and this manipulation will be so made as to make the subjects believe that the commodity with the functions of importance order I, IV and V have been apparently chosen by more people, and then the subject will be asked the possibility of their choosing this commodity. The 5 point scale is adopted as the scale of measurement, ranging from extremely possible (5 points), possible (4 points), a bit possible (3 points), impossible (2 points) to extremely impossible (1 point). If the subject chooses the function he himself thinks is rather unimportant, but that is the commodity most people have chosen, then the higher the possibility becomes. An inclination toward purchasing conformity can be expected from the subject.

The third part is to measure the NFC level of the subjects, the NFC measurement questionnaire that contains 18 questions proposed by Cacioppo et al. (1984) will be adopted, in which 9 are positive statement, the 5 point scale will be used and the subjects can make their choices according to the degree of congruity between the stated contents and their own case, including such options as range from very congruous (5 points), congruous (4 points), fairly congruous (3 points), not congruous (2 points) and extremely not congruous (1 point). Additionally, there are nine negative statements, where reverse grading is adopted. The classification of NFC will take the mean value as the dividing line, where those whose grading is higher than the mean value are classified into the group of high NFC, while those whose grading is lower than the mean value are classified into the low NFC.

In the fourth part are the basic data of the subjects, including 2 questions, which are respectively sex and age.

### **4. Findings**

#### **4.1 NFC and conformable purchasing inclination**

In the 588 valid samples, there are 234 males (covering 39.8%), and 354 females (covering 60.2%). In the age part, there are 121 persons aged 19 (covering 20.6%), 184 persons aged 20 (covering 31.3%), 154 persons aged 21 (covering 26.2%), and 129 persons aged 22 (covering 21.9%). As to the classification of NFC level, the mean value of all subjects' NFC is  $M=2.89$ , with 292 persons ( $M=3.38$ ) higher than the mean value and classified into the high NFC group, and 296 persons ( $M=2.41$ ) lower than the mean value.

In order to examine the influence of the NFC on the conformable consuming inclination, we have adopted ANOVA to carry out the analysis. Showing that whether people have a high or low NFC will cause an apparent difference to the conformable consuming inclination of all four commodities, as shown in Table 1. in the part of the electronic dictionary, the mean evaluation of conformable consuming inclination of those people with a high NFC is  $M=2.36$ , whereas that of the people





with a low NFC is  $M=2.47$  ( $F(1, 587) = 3.196, p < .05$ ); in that part of the desktop computer, the mean evaluation of the conformable consuming inclination of those people with a high NFC is  $M=2.49$ , whereas that of the people with a low NFC is  $M=2.62$  ( $F(1, 587) = 5.89, p < .05$ ). In the part of mobile phone, the mean evaluation of the conformable consuming inclination of those people with a high NFC Besides, C is  $M=3.01$ , whereas that of the people with a low NFC is  $M=3.18$  ( $F(1, 587) = 5.418, p < .05$ ). And finally with the subject a digital camera, we also get the same results, namely, the mean value of the conformable consuming inclination of those people with a high NFC is  $M=3.05$ , whereas that of the people with a low NFC is  $M=3.31$  ( $F(1, 587) = 11.685, p < .001$ ). All these results demonstrate that those people with a low NFC apparently have a higher inclination of purchasing conformity than those people with a high NFC, so they also support Hypothesis 1. As indicated in Table 1 (Appendix).

#### 4.2 Commodity Conspicuousness and Conformable Purchasing Inclination

In the aspect of the influence of the commodity conspicuousness on the conformable consuming inclination, the conformable consuming inclination of all four commodities has reached a significant difference ( $F(3, 2348) = 138.171, p < .001$ ). In the part of electronic dictionary, the mean evaluation of conformable consuming inclination is  $M=2.41$ , that of the desktop computer is  $M=2.56$ , that of the mobile phone is  $M=3.09$ , and that related to the digital camera is  $M=3.18$ . From these mean evaluation it can be seen that the conformable consuming inclination of such conspicuous commodities as mobile phone and digital camera are apparently higher than that of such non-conspicuous commodities as electronic dictionary and desktop computer, so they also support Hypothesis 2.

#### 5. Conclusion

Though the main factor that causes conformity is attributed to social influence, and the adolescents are more apt to be influenced by others and exhibit conformity, what are the reasons that have caused the variation of the conformable inclination of the adolescents? In this research a profound discussion will be carried out on the purchasing conformity of the adolescents via the personal character of NFC and the commodity characteristics. Our studies demonstrate that the adolescents with low NFC possess more purchasing conformity than those with high NFC and more purchasing conformity is exhibited in the consuming behaviors of conspicuous commodity than on those of the non-conspicuous commodity. The conclusion of this research will deepen our understanding of conformable purchasing behaviors of adolescents.

Since the adolescents with a high NFC have a stronger motive to engage in the detailed consideration of the problem, they are less likely to be influenced by others. In the aspect of consuming behaviors, the adolescents with a high NFC will make a detailed comparison on the attribute of the product itself and finally choose the commodity that is akin to his own preference. But in purchasing a product the adolescents with a low NFC are more likely to be influenced by the external information since they have a weaker motivation to engage in a detailed consideration of the problem, for example, in the choice made by most of them they will exhibit a higher possibility of conformable consuming inclination than the people with a high NFC. Future studies may be continued to be carried out on the discussion of the personal character of the adolescents that has influence on their inclination of purchasing conformity so as to deepen our understanding of the conformable purchasing inclination of the adolescents.

The conspicuousness of commodity is one of the most important factors that influence the conformity of the adolescents. When they are faced with the consumption of public visibility commodities, the adolescents are more apt to be influenced by others. In this present research we have chosen the mobile phone and digital camera as two representatives of the public visibility overly commodities. Since, these two commodities are mostly used by adolescents in public places in the Taiwan, it is easier for the adolescents to compare their commodities with those owned by their peers. Also, they are more likely to be influenced by the majority choice. Future studies can be extended to other categories of the commodity so as to deepen our understanding of the conformable consuming behaviors of the adolescents.

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**(Appendix)**

**Table 1 Mean Evaluation of Conformable Purchasing Inclination**

	NFC		Average
	High NFC	Low NFC	
Electronic Dictionary	2.36	2.47	2.41
Desktop Computer	2.49	2.62	2.56
Mobile Phone	3.01	3.18	3.09
Digital Camera	3.05	3.31	3.18
Average	2.73	2.90	