Unique Like Everybody Else? The Dual Role of Consumers’ Need for Uniqueness

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ABSTRACT

Uniqueness has a positive and attractive connotation, but being too unique can result in social sanctions. This paper focuses on the dual role of consumers’ need for uniqueness. The findings of two studies in Israel support the notion that expressing uniqueness via consumption behavior is a safe way to achieve a different sense of being without damaging an individual’s sense of social assimilation. The results imply a possible new theoretical view of the interplay between consumers’ need for uniqueness and their need for social assimilation. © 2008 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a “mass-world” era, with mass production, mass media, and mass communication. Everything we see, touch, and buy is available in abundance in the same form to us and everyone around us. How do we present our uniqueness to the world? How far would we go to do so? And how do we balance our need for distinctiveness with our need to be part of the “mass”?
These questions are addressed by the need for uniqueness (NFU) theory (Snyder, 1992; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980) and the consumers’ need for uniqueness (CNFU) construct that evolved from it (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). According to the NFU theory, all individuals crave uniqueness to some extent. At one NFU extreme, some people desire to be “just like everybody else.” At the other extreme, people want to be as different and distinct as possible. Given that possessions are often perceived as part of the “extended self” (Belk, 1988), one form of the expression of individuality and uniqueness is through the selection and use of products and brands. Accordingly, the CNFU construct utilizes three dimensions of consumption behavior to capture how people fulfill their need for uniqueness: creative choice counterconformity, unpopular choice counterconformity, and avoidance of similarity (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). The CNFU concept is thus an application of the NFU in the consumer behavior context.

The conceptualizations of NFU and CNFU assume that most individuals prefer to demonstrate uniqueness within public norms to avoid the social isolation or disapproval potentially resulting from their uniqueness disposition (Lynn & Harris, 1997a, 1997b; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). This assumption can be traced to broader psychological theories. Optimum Distinctiveness Theory, for example, recognizes two distinct forces, a need for assimilation and a need for differentiation, which simultaneously influence individuals’ behavior. However, the social forces that might affect CNFU behavior have not been explicitly identified in the literature, and to date, no systematic empirical studies about the relationship between individuals’ social attributes and CNFU have been reported.

This paper was designed to contribute in three ways to the limited body of research on CNFU. First, it explores the notion that CNFU enables consumers to satisfy their needs for assimilation and differentiation simultaneously. Two studies tested four constructs as proxies for assimilation and differentiation forces: attention to social comparison information (ATSCI), importance of social approval, normative susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII), and public self-consciousness.

Second, the two studies tested the hypothesis that CNFU mediates the relationships between these two forces and objective and subjective manifestations of unique consumption behavior. Finally, previous empirical research has been conducted in the United States. This study is the first test of a CNFU nomological network outside the United States, namely in Israel. Although it is not a cross-cultural study, the research does have implications regarding the validity of the CNFU scale.

Building on NFU theory and Tian, Bearden, and Hunter’s (2001) conceptualization of CNFU, the paper begins with a discussion of the CNFU concept, its antecedents, and its consequential behaviors. It then tests the nomological model of CNFU using structural equation modeling in two studies and ends with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and suggested directions for future research.

1 The ATSCI construct is presented as conformity motivation in The Handbook of Marketing Scales (Bruner & Hensel, 1992).
CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Consumers' Need for Uniqueness

The notion of CNFU emerged out of the more general theory of NFU (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). NFU theory focuses on people's perceptions of and reactions to their similarity to others (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980). According to this theory, people constantly evaluate their degree of similarity or dissimilarity to others and act on such evaluations. Early research on uniqueness motivation suggested that high levels of similarity or dissimilarity are perceived as unpleasant and reduce individuals' self-esteem (Fromkin, 1970, 1972). Hence, people react emotionally and behaviorally to maintain a moderate level of uniqueness from others. Conversely, when people feel too similar to others, they will increase those activities or behaviors that express their uniqueness.

The intensity of one's behavioral change depends on how powerful the need for uniqueness is. The more powerful it is, the greater the individual's sensitivity to similarity and the more different from others he or she will want to be (Snyder, 1992). However, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) emphasize that the desire for uniqueness is constrained by the need for social assimilation and social approval. Hence, uniqueness is sought only to the point of avoiding social isolation or strong disapproval. Using material possessions is a vehicle for individuals to distinguish themselves from others (Belk, 1988) and to express their uniqueness without provoking extreme social reactions for deviating from social norms (Snyder, 1992). Such individuality could be achieved through acquisition of distinctive or personalized labels, novelty items, or scarce products.

This conceptualization of NFU underlies the perception of CNFU, which reflects individual differences in consumer counterconformity (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) define CNFU as “the trait of pursuing differences relative to others though the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's self-image and social image” (p. 52). As such, CNFU conveys self- and social-image enrichment processes. These two images are embedded in each other and, unlike other related traits (e.g., individualism and independence), cannot be separated. Enriching a consumer's self-image through products is an internal, subjective process and will occur if the consumer sees the product as having symbolic meaning, as well as symbolic public importance.

NFU theory, nonconformity research, and the consumer behavior literature led Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) to conceptualize CNFU as comprising three behavioral dimensions (see also Tian & McKenzie, 2001). The first, creative choice counterconformity, reflects an individual's ability to create a personal style, which expresses self-image through material products (Lynn & Harris, 1997a). By making creative choices, the consumer can gain a positive social evaluation as a unique individual (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980).

The second CNFU dimension, unpopular choice counterconformity, refers to the consumers' selection or use of products not entirely within group norms. Individuals seeking to distinguish themselves from others by making unpopular consumption choices risk social disapproval. Although such differentiation is sometimes used by those unable to distinguish themselves in a socially appropriate manner, Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) argue that like creative choice counterconformity,
unpopular choices may also enhance self-image and social image. The logic underlying this argument is that people who take social risks to express their uniqueness often possess strong characters, so uniqueness-seeking behavior may enhance their self-image. Additionally, an unpopular and norm-breaking consumption behavior in the present may gain social approval over time, and mark the consumer as an innovator or fashion leader (Heckert, 1989).

The third dimension is avoidance of similarity. Individuals in search of differentiation from others avoid buying and consuming commonly used products and brands. Such individuals lose interest in, avoid purchasing, or discontinue using those brands when they become common. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997) report that some consumers maintain fashionability by disposing of fashion items once they become popular and seek out emerging innovations in an effort to resist conformity. Unique consumer choices may attract followers in search of a similar sense of distinctiveness (Fisher & Price, 1992; Snyder, 1992). This possibility applies especially to consumers’ creative choices, although, as noted earlier, even unpopular choices may gain acceptance over time (Heckert, 1989).

In sum, Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) conceptualize CNFU as a three-dimensional behavioral tendency construct that underlies different ways in which individuals can express their NFU through consumption. They identify consumers’ creative and unpopular choices and their similarity-avoiding actions as a means of establishing uniqueness. These authors emphasize the role of dual images, self and social, and the way they interact in constructing CNFU. The social context of CNFU is described next.

**Assimilation vs. Differentiation—A Tug of War? The Role of CNFU.**

Snyder and Fromkin (1980) argue that individuals experience different NFU levels as a result of their concern for social norms. Although some wish to be unique at any cost, others long to be “just like everybody else.” The importance of social surroundings in forming individuals’ desire to be unique can be explained and understood using Brewer’s (1991) Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT). This theory proposes that individuals are motivated by two competing needs: the desire for assimilation and the desire for differentiation (Brewer, 1991, 1993; Pickett & Brewer, 2001). The need to belong, or to “fit in” (assimilation), is offset by the need to feel distinct or unique compared with others (differentiation). Most people are satisfied only when these needs are balanced. Disequilibrium between these forces leads to two possible undesirable outcomes. Using a tug-of-war metaphor, pulling the rope too hard to the distinctiveness and differentiation side might result in social isolation; pulling it too hard to total disindividuation damages one’s self-definition and comparative appraisal. Brewer (1991, 1993) emphasizes that most people seek to preserve their uniqueness without provoking a negative social response. Simonson and Nowlis’ (2000) series of studies, which tested the interaction between providing reasons or explanations for one’s choices and general NFU on buyers’ decision making, supports this notion. They find that consumers who expect to explain their decisions and who have a strong need for uniqueness tend to make unconventional choices. However, they also report three boundary conditions involving forces that promote conformity over uniqueness for such choices, namely, evaluation by others, explicit information about the preferences of others, and negative feedback on previous decision making.
performance. Simonson and Nowlis (2000) conclude that, in line with prior work on the tendency of consumers to conform to norms (e.g., Schiffman & Kanuk, 1994), the need for uniqueness is bounded by the desire for social approval and conformity. Only when consumers “are not concerned about others’ criticism, [do] expressions of uniqueness come to the surface and affect choices” (p. 65).

Using products to satisfy one's distinctiveness is a socially safe way to achieve equilibrium (Tepper, 1997; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). People try to build their unique image through the material objects they buy and display, and are motivated by social perceptions (Snyder, 1992; Tepper & Hoyle, 1996; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). Uniqueness has a positive connotation and is perceived as normative in most Western cultures (Kim & Drolet, 2003). Hence, exhibiting uniqueness via consumption allows individuals to win social appreciation and a sense of assimilation. Demonstrating that one is different from the rest signals an individual's freedom to express his or her own mind and indicates that one is special (Kim & Drolet, 2003; Kim & Markus, 1999).

Thus, CNFU theory acknowledges that individuals pursue uniqueness and differentiation within social norms in ways that will not generate social disapproval or sanction. Furthermore, according to ODT theory, distinctiveness and assimilation can be achieved simultaneously. However, most studies regard uniqueness as a mirror image of assimilation and conformity (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Several constructs have been tested in relation to CNFU, including consumers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Clark & Goldsmith, 2005; Lynn & Harris, 1997a, 1997b), perceived social similarity as a consumer (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001), tendency to conform (Clark & Goldsmith, 2005), and public self-consciousness (Tepper & Hoyle, 1996). These studies posit a negative correlation between the constructs tested and CNFU.

Nevertheless, in most cases these studies provide only weak support or no support at all for their hypotheses. For example, Clark and Goldsmith (2005) tested the tendency to conform, CSII and CNFU, within a wider nomological network that examined psychological influences on market mavenship and opinion leadership. They reported weak correlations between CNFU and tendency to conform (–0.14), and between CNFU and CSII (–0.08). Similarly, Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) found that perceived social similarity as a consumer has a weak relationship with CNFU (–0.17) and is unrelated to NFU.

Lynn and Harris (1997a) reported that, contrary to their hypothesis, no relationships exist between susceptibility to normative influence and self-attributed NFU. However, they did establish a positive relationship between a tendency to pursue uniqueness through consumption and normative CSII (0.21). In another study, Lynn and Harris (1997b) reported a positive correlation between CSII and the desire for a unique consumer product scale. They used Brewer’s (1991) theory to explain this lack of relationships, arguing that “people need to fit in and belong as well as to be distinctive and unique. Apparently, people who satisfy one of these needs through consumer products also use consumer products to satisfy the other need” (Lynn & Harris, 1997b, p. 611).

Based on the review of the literature, this paper postulates that CNFU enables individuals to fulfill their needs for assimilation and differentiation simultaneously. Two studies were designed and conducted to test the notion that people manifest their uniqueness within social norms rather than moving outside the boundaries of social convention.
STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to test whether CNFU is expressed within social norms or, as traditionally viewed, against social norms. In accordance with the evidence from ODT, this study posits that optimal distinctiveness is achieved only when the need for assimilation and the need for differentiation are met equally (Brewer, 1991, 1993). Individuals engage in behaviors or activities that satisfy and help preserve the equilibrium of both desires at the same time. Uniqueness is perceived as a positive attribute in Western societies (in the United States, in particular), as it connotes freedom and independence. Demonstrating uniqueness is perceived as an acceptable and approved behavior, so individuals who engage in such activities can satisfy social and self-identities simultaneously and maintain optimal distinctiveness (Kim & Markus, 1999).

The positive relationship between uniqueness and social acceptance was discussed earlier as a major tenet of Snyder and Fromkin’s NFU theory (1977, 1980). They argue that individuals with a strong NFU pursue their uniqueness in ways that will not generate social disapproval or sanctions. Snyder (1992) later elaborates on this tenet by claiming that social rewards are accorded to people who are different, yet not too different (i.e., deviants), from others. Therefore, most people aspire to establish moderate levels of uniqueness as a means of satisfying their need for social assimilation. Applied to the CNFU context, Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) emphasize that “individuals driven by counterconformity motivation should seek or pursue differentness as an end goal and, where possible, often choose to do so in nonconfrontational venues” (p. 60). In Study 1, two social traits were used to explore this argument: ATSCI and the need for social approval. These traits serve as proxies for individuals’ need to assimilate. Thus,

H1: ATSCI is associated positively with CNFU.

H2: The need for social approval is associated positively with CNFU.

Behavioral Consequences of CNFU

In addition to the two antecedents of CNFU, two behavioral consequences were tested: subjective and objective unique consumption behavior. Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) expect high-CNFU people to express their need behaviorally (see also Tian & McKenzie, 2001). They find that people with high levels of CNFU demonstrate unique consumption behaviors, such as tattoos or body piercing, own customized low-rider cars, are members of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), attend drawing classes (art majors), or purchase new art posters. They also report a positive relationship between CNFU and personal consumer preferences for unique exterior product designs.

The literature also notes other strategies that individuals use in pursuit of a unique image, such as purchase and/or display of scarce, novelty, handcrafted, or unpopular products (hopefully used by fewer people), and distinctive or personalized labels (Lynn & Harris, 1997a, 1997b; Snyder, 1992; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Another way of enhancing uniqueness is by collecting commonplace items that, as a whole, have unique meanings (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989) and acquiring in-depth knowledge about them (Holt, 1998). Shopping at small, less frequented stores, garage sales, secondhand stores, auctions,
and through the Internet (Burns & Warren, 1995; Lynn & Harris, 1997a; Tepper, 1997) also enhances self-distinctiveness. High-CNFU individuals thus satisfy their need behaviorally and perceive themselves as unique compared with others (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Based on the discussion above:

**H3**: CNFU is related positively to individuals’ subjective perception of their consumption behavior as unique relative to others.

**H4**: CNFU is related positively with individuals’ actual unique consumption behavior.

### Method

**Sample.** Data for Study 1 were collected from a convenience sample of Israeli consumers. A total of 220 questionnaires were distributed randomly at shopping malls and community centers in northern Israel. In all, 140 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 64%.

The average age is 38.03 years, very similar to the average age of the adult population in Israel (37.7 years). The percentage of females (56%) in the sample is somewhat higher than in the general population (51%), an issue revisited in the limitations section of this paper. Education (29% high school or less and 71% undergraduate or more) and income (27.8% below average and 72.1% average or above) demonstrate the same tendency and are skewed to the higher end of the demographic spectrum. These distributions are not surprising in light of the products included in this research (discussed below), which are generally acquired by better educated, higher-income households in Israel. In sum, data were generated from diverse individuals. However, given the nature of the sample and the skewed demographics, generalizing should be done with caution, a limitation discussed later.

**Measures.** All the scales used in this study have been utilized previously, except for the two behavioral scales (Table 1). Given that the original scales were developed in English, a back-translation method was used to prepare the Hebrew version for this study. One bilingual individual translated the questionnaire from English into Hebrew. Then the Hebrew version of questionnaire was translated back into English by another bilingual individual, who had not seen the original questionnaire. The final step was a comparison of the three versions of the questionnaire and an assessment of the translation and its cultural accuracy by the two translators and a third bilingual individual. Disagreements were resolved through a discussion to arrive at the final Hebrew version for the study.

This study tested CNFU, ATSCI, social approval from friends, and subjective and objective unique consumption behavior. Because only the last two scales were developed especially for this study, they are described below in detail.

**Subjective Unique Consumption Behavior.** This scale assesses respondents’ preference for unique products relative to others (Appendix). The items were developed especially for this study through interviews conducted with consumers during a pretest. A convenience sample of 30 consumers was queried about unique products they use, and six such products were included in the questionnaire. Reliability for this scale in the present study is $\alpha = 0.84$. 
### Table 1. Scales’ Description.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales used</th>
<th>No. of items</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Study 1 reliability</th>
<th>Study 2 reliability</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CNFU</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Tian, Bearden, &amp; Hunter (2001)</td>
<td>0.89–0.96</td>
<td>0.90–0.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSCI</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bearden &amp; Rose (1990)</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social approval from friends</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fisher (1993)</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative CSII</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bearden et al. (1989)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public self-consciousness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fenigstein, Scheier, &amp; Buss (1975)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective unique consumption</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Developed especially</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>for this research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective unique consumption</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Developed especially</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>research, based on Tian, Bearden, &amp; Hunter (2001)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Objective Unique Consumption Behavior. Based on Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001), a 7-item scale was developed especially for this research (Appendix). Items were selected to fit Israeli consumers of all ages, while retaining the original meaning of Tian, Bearden, and Hunter’s scale (2001). Respondents indicated whether they did or did not own each item. The items were summed to create a measure of unique consumption behavior, ranging potentially from 0 to 7.

Most data were collected using scales with a similar response format, raising a concern about common method variance. The potential impact of common method variance was assessed by Harman’s one-factor method (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The first factor did not account for a majority of the variance (less than 20%), and there was no one general factor in the factor structure. These findings imply that common method variance was not a problem.

Results of Study 1

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the constructs are presented in Table 2. As is evident, respondents reported moderate levels of CNFU, ATSCI, and objective unique consumer behavior. Table 2 also indicates higher levels of respondents’ need for social approval and subjective perception of their unique consumption behavior. All constructs were positively and significantly correlated with CNFU.

Structural equation modeling with AMOS 4 software was utilized (Byrne, 2001) to test the hypothesized nomological model. Following Anderson and

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation* Coefficients—Study 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St.d.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CNFU–Total score</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ATSCI</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social approval</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Subjective unique consumer behavior</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Objective unique consumer behavior</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation† Coefficients—Study 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St.d.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CNFU–Total score</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ATSCI</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social approval</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Normative CSII</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-consciousness</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Subjective unique consumer behavior</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.19†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Objective unique consumer behavior</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.18†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All correlations are significant at the $p < .01$ level.
† Significant at the $p < .05$ level; all others are significant at the $p < .01$ level.
Garbing’s (1988) two-step approach, the measurement model and then the structural model were tested.

**Measurement Model.** The measurement model assessed whether all items on a given scale represent the same latent construct. Because most of the constructs were measured with more than five items, a parceling procedure was used (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994). The items in each construct were randomly parcelled into three composite indicators, which were entered into the measurement model as multiple indicators to estimate the latent constructs.

The measurement model fit the data well. Although a significant \( \chi^2 (92.97; df = 56; p = .00) \) was expected, given the sample size, other fit statistics were good (CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.98, NNFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.07). In addition, factor loadings ranged from 0.55 to 0.98 in support of the model’s measurement properties. The average variance extracted (AVE) from the constructs (CNFU = 0.58; ATSCI = 0.71; social approval = 0.74; and subjective uniqueness behavior = 0.60) exceeds the recommended level of 0.50. Correlations between the constructs ranged from 0.43 to 0.77. All these measures indicated good model fit with satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity, enabling the author to proceed to the next step.

**Structural Model.** Table 3 shows regression weights, correlations, and fit measures of the hypothesized structural model. The hypothesized model fit the data well: All fit indexes exceeded 0.90 and RMSEA was 0.11, which is somewhat higher than the recommended level of 0.08. Notably, the total explained variance for CNFU and subjective and objective unique consumption behavior were also satisfactory (55%, 29%, and 24%, respectively).

According to H1, people with a high level of ATSCI exhibit high levels of CNFU. The data supported H1, with a significant \( (p < .01) \) positive \( (\beta = 0.50) \) relationship between ATSCI and CNFU.

H2 posited that individuals with a strong need for social approval exhibit high levels of CNFU. Again, this hypothesis was supported. Need for social approval was positively \( (\beta = 0.55) \) and significantly \( (p < .01) \) associated with CNFU.

| Table 3. Regression Weights and Fit Measures of the Structural Models of Studies 1 and 2. |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|
| From                           | To      | Study 1 | Study 2 |
| ATSCI                          | CNFU    | 0.50    | 0.49    |
| Social approval                | CNFU    | 0.55    | 0.35    |
| Normative CSII                 | CNFU    | —       | 0.24    |
| Self-consciousness             | CNFU    | —       | 0.33    |
| CNFU                           | Subjective unique consumer behavior | 0.54    | 0.49    |
| CNFU                           | Objective unique consumer behavior   | 0.49    | 0.39    |
| \( \chi^2(df) \)               | 166.34 (61) | 628.43 (146) |
| NFI                           | 0.96    | 0.95    |
| NFI                           | 0.96    | 0.95    |
| CFI                           | 0.97    | 0.96    |
| RMSEA                         | 0.11    | 0.11    |

* All regression weights and chi-square values are significant at the \( p < .01 \) level.
Finally, H3 and H4 focus on the consequences of CNFU and suggest that high levels of CNFU are associated with high levels of subjective and objective unique consumption behavior. The data fully supported the hypotheses. CNFU had significant ($p < .01$) positive relationships with subjective ($\beta = 0.65$) and objective ($\beta = 0.59$) unique consumption behavior.

**Discussion of Study 1**

As predicted, positive relationships were found between ATSCI and CNFU (H1), and between the need for social approval from friends and CNFU (H2). These findings strongly support the main premises of this study that individuals will demonstrate their uniqueness, but within the boundaries of their milieu, and that the desire for social approval and acceptance dominate their need for uniqueness (Brewer, 1991; Lynn & Harris, 1997a, 1997b; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000).

The results also indicate that people with a high level of CNFU perceive themselves as more unique than their friends (H3) and demonstrate their uniqueness in their consumption behaviors (H4). These findings are in line with accumulating evidence that high-CNFU people express their need behaviorally (e.g., Simonson & Nowlis, 2000; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). In order to revalidate these findings and provide wider support for the notion that individuals tend to demonstrate their uniqueness within social norms, Study 2 was conducted.

**STUDY 2**

Study 2 presents a replication and extension of Study 1. Specifically, it tests ATSCI and social approval from friends as antecedents to CNFU (H1, H2) and subjective and objective unique consumer behavior as consequences of CNFU (H3, H4). In addition, normative SCII and public self-consciousness are included as CNFU antecedents. Previous studies tested both constructs in relation to CNFU and produced mixed results. Lynn and Harris (1997b) found positive correlations between CSII and the desire for unique consumer products. Using Brewer’s (1991) theory to explain this relationship, they argued that individuals tend to use consumer products to satisfy their needs to fit in and to be unique. Thus:

**H5:** Normative CSII is positively related to CNFU.

Public self-consciousness refers to individuals’ tendency to direct their attention toward themselves as social objects (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). People with a high level of public self-consciousness are also sensitive to the opinions and reactions of others to their public persona (Bearden & Rose, 1990). Thus, individuals seeking to express their uniqueness through products must have a clear perception of which products are viewed as unique in their social surroundings. Accordingly:

**H6:** Public self-consciousness is positively related to CNFU.
Method

Sample. Data for this study were also collected from a convenience sample of Israeli consumers. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed randomly at a major transportation center in central Israel. In all, 241 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 68.9%.

The average age is 35.3 years, very close to the average age of the adult population in Israel (37.7 years). The percentage of females (50.2%) in the sample is also similar to the general population (51%). In this study, education and income were also skewed to the higher end of the demographic spectrum, but less so than in Study 1. Specifically, about 39% of respondents had a high school education or less, and about 61% had some undergraduate education or higher. Similarly, 43.7% earned less than the average income, and about 56.3% had an average or higher income.

Measures. Study 2 includes all the variables measured in Study 1 (CNFU, ATSCI, social approval from friends, subjective and objective unique consumption behaviors), along with two additional social measures—consumers’ normative susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII) and public self-consciousness. The scales and their reliabilities in this study are presented in Table 2.

Results of Study 2

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the constructs in Study 2 are presented in Table 2. The results indicate moderate levels of respondents’ CNFU, ATSCI, need for social approval, and subjective perception of their unique consumption behavior. However, respondents report a high level of self-consciousness and low levels of normative CSII and objective unique consumption behavior. The average on the latter was almost twice as high as that reported in Study 1, reflecting the individualistic nature of the population in the center of Israel compared to the population in the northern part of Israel. All constructs are positively and significantly correlated with CNFU, closely paralleling those obtained in Study 1.

Measurement Model. The measurement model fit the data well. As expected, given the sample size, \( \chi^2 (232.40; df = 132; p = .00) \) was significant, but other fit statistics were excellent (CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.98, NNFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06). In addition, factor loadings ranged from 0.62 to 0.89 in support of the model’s measurement properties. The average variance extracted (AVE) from all the constructs exceeded the recommended level of 0.50 (CNFU = 0.54; ATSCI = 0.74; social approval = 0.68; public self-consciousness = 0.65; CSII = 0.76; and subjective uniqueness behavior = 0.60). Correlations between the constructs ranged from 0.29 to 0.81. All these measures indicated good model fit with satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity, enabling the author to proceed to the next step.

Structural Model. The regression weights, correlation coefficients, and fit measures of the structural model of Study 2 are presented in Table 3. The hypothesized model fit the data well, with all fit indexes exceeding 0.90, although the RMSEA (0.11) was somewhat higher than the recommended 0.08. Total explained
variance for CNFU and subjective and objective unique consumption behavior were close to Study 1’s (50%, 21%, and 21%, respectively).

The results of Study 2 generally replicate those of Study 1 (Figure 1). A significant ($p < .01$) positive ($\beta = 0.47$) relationship between ATSCI and CNFU provides additional support for H1. H2 was re-supported as need for social approval was positively ($\beta = 0.34$) and significantly ($p < .01$) associated with CNFU. However, the strength of the relationship was weaker than in Study 1 ($\beta = 0.50$). Study 2 also supports H3 and H4, which focus on the consequences of CNFU. CNFU had significant ($p < .01$) and positive relationships with subjective ($\beta = 0.46$) and objective ($\beta = 0.45$) unique consumption behavior.

Beyond replicating Study 1, Study 2 supports the hypothesized positive relationships between normative CSII (H5) and public self-consciousness (H6) and CNFU. The data support H5, with a significant ($p < .01$) positive ($\beta = 0.25$) normative CSII-CNFU relationship.

According to H6, people with a high level of self-consciousness exhibit high levels of CNFU. H6 was supported as self-consciousness was positively ($\beta = 0.32$) and significantly ($p < .01$) associated with CNFU.

**Discussion of Study 2**

The second study provides further support for H1–H4, as well as initial support for H5 and H6. ATCSI (H1) and the need for social approval from friends (H2) were positively and significantly associated with CNFU, as were normative CSII (H5) and public self-consciousness (H6). These findings emphasize the importance individuals place on their social environment in their expression of uniqueness (Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). The model clearly underscores the importance of people’s sensitivity to their social surroundings when using possessions to express their need for uniqueness. Thus, possessions may serve as a means for achieving both assimilation and differentiation.

Finally, positive and significant relationships between CNFU and subjective (H3) and objective (H4) unique consumption behaviors were also revalidated.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colors. And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him. . . . And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colors that was on him; And they took him, and cast him into a pit. . . . (Genesis 37:3–24; King James Bible)

The idea of using products to express uniqueness is as old as the Bible. Although uniqueness usually has a positive connotation, the story of Joseph and his “coat of many colors” demonstrates that uniqueness can result in social sanctions. This paper explores the notion that individuals generally prefer to exhibit uniqueness in a way that will not provoke social punishment. Specifically, the two studies presented here assessed whether using products enables
individuals to satisfy their need for uniqueness and their need for assimilation simultaneously.

In line with Brewer’s (1991) Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), the two studies confirmed the idea that individuals’ consumption behavior is driven by two competing needs: the need for assimilation (NFA) and the need for differentiation (NFD) (Brewer, 1991, 1993; Pickett & Brewer, 2001). The findings corroborate Brewer’s view (1991, 1993) that most people seek to satisfy these needs by preserving their uniqueness without provoking negative social consequences (Snyder, 1992; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980). Furthermore, individuals may use possessions as a means of satisfying both NFA and NFD simultaneously (Lynn & Harris, 1997a, 1997b).

Consumers’ need for uniqueness was associated with high levels of ATSCI, social approval from friends, CSII, and public self-consciousness. These results might be interpreted as suggesting that consumers’ uniqueness is a means of obtaining differentiation and social approval at the same time. A possible explanation for this finding is based on the effects that culture has on CNFU. Western cultures embrace uniqueness and individuality as desirable attributes (Kim & Drolet, 2003; Kim & Markus, 1999). Having a unique identity in such

*Only significant results ($p < .05$) are presented.

**Figure 1.** Results: Structural model of Study 2.*
cultures often requires a distinctive personal style, which is exhibited through ownership and use of material possessions that reflect self-image (Kim & Drolet, 2003; Kron, 1983; Lynn & Harris, 1997a, 1997b). For example, Kim and Drolet’s (2003) study shows that in individualist cultures, uniqueness is positively related to consumer variety-seeking, underlining the notion that in individualist cultures one of the proposed drivers of variety-seeking behavior is impressing others with consumption creativity. Examining the impact of culture on CNFU is a fruitful direction for future research.

The results of this study support the basic assumption of uniqueness as a positive attribute, which can serve to fulfill NFA and NFD. Thus, NFA and NFD can and should be perceived as two distinct forces (Brewer, 1991) rather than as two ends of a continuum. As such, these two dimensions may result in four possible NFD/NFA combinations, which are summarized in Figure 2.

Individuals exhibiting high levels of NFA and NFD will perceive possessions as a means of establishing their distinctiveness in a way that will be accepted and even admired in their social environment. Furthermore, they will tend to use material goods to depict their self- and public image as unique, and they will be perceived as such by others. Their uniqueness places them in the potentially powerful position of influencing others’ consumption behavior, by acting as role models and by being imitated. In the marketing literature, such people are recognized as opinion leaders (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996) whose impact on others is more likely to occur in products that provide a form of self-expression (Feick & Price, 1987). In terms of consumption behavior, such individuals are most likely to be first adopters of new and innovative products and tend to shop at small, less frequented stores, and through the Internet (Burns, 1989; Lynn & Harris, 1997a; Rogers, 1983). Though the association between CNFU and opinion leadership has been substantiated (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006; Clark & Goldsmith, 2005), further research is needed to explore the boundary conditions for the relationship between the two constructs.

In terms of CNFU conceptualization, it is important to remember that in some cases people use unique consumption behavior in a way that departs from social norms. Such individuals satisfy their NFD but not their NFA. Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) address this issue in the context of unpopular choice counterconformity. Some people deliberately make socially marginal and risky consumption choices. They use these choices as a form of self-expression and a vehicle for transmitting information about their uniqueness in a way that sets

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![Figure 2. CNFU/NSA matrix.](image-url)
them apart from social norms (Sanders, 1985; Watson, 1998). Such behavior could, in some cases, subject them to social sanctions and even expulsion. Such deviate unique consumption behavior characterizes fringe groups and at times rebellious adolescents (Grover, 1997; Libbon, 2000). Future research should explore this “dark side” of CNFU.

In addition to the combinations of high NFD/high NFA and high NFD/low NFA, two other possible combinations exist—low NFD/high NFA and low NFD/low NFA. Although these latter combinations should not affect CNFU behavior, they are addressed below to complete the studies’ discussion.

Low NFD/high NFA individuals want to “be like everybody else.” In other words, these individuals can be portrayed as opinion seekers (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Easton, 1996). For these individuals, products are a means for attaining social support and group identification. Such individuals will be sensitive to social cues relevant to their product choices and usage (Bearden & Rose, 1990), will often turn to leaders for opinions on products and purchase decisions (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Easton, 1996), and will tend to be late adopters of new products (Rogers, 1983). In contrast to CNFU-induced unique consumption, this group will exhibit assimilation-based consumption. A consumer’s need for assimilation construct (CNFA) should be developed in future research to reflect individual differences in consumer assimilation and inclusion motivation as determinants of consumption behavior.

Lastly, low NFD/low NFA will typify those who do not perceive consumption as a way to demonstrate uniqueness or gain social assimilation. Some individuals are unaware of social norms or unconcerned by others’ reactions to their consumption behavior; they conceive of products in practical and utilitarian terms. For these individuals, an extrinsic view of material goods does not serve intrinsic motivations or needs (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Voss, Spangenberg, & Grohmann, 2003). Their consumption behavior is cognitively driven and goal oriented to accomplish functional or practical tasks (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000).

The findings of the two studies suggest two additional directions for future research. First, such research should explore contextual effects (i.e., subcultures, different reference group affiliations, and the family) on the simultaneous impacts of NFD and NFA on CNFU. Especially interesting are situations of conflicting forces, when one facet of an individual’s affiliation clashes with another (e.g., subculture versus the general culture or one reference group versus another). Types of products and level of consumers’ purchase involvement are two additional contextual effects worthy of further research.

Finally, future research should consider using the two distinct forces as conceptualized here to examine additional self-related (e.g., self-monitoring, self-regulating, self-image, and self-presentation) and social-image constructs (e.g., consumers’ susceptibility to interpersonal influence, social comparison, and extraversion). Understanding the interplay of differentiation and assimilation and accounting for it in future studies might result in richer and more elaborate models.

**Methodological Implications**

The two studies have two methodological implications. First, they demonstrate that the impact of CNFU generalizes successfully to a non-American culture,
namely Israel. Although additional studies are required for a more definite generalizability claim, the results presented here are encouraging.

Second, the CNFU scale and its three dimensions exhibit a high level of reliability. Such evidence is important in that the original scale and its subdimensions were developed in the United States and have not been tested elsewhere. Thus, the results of this Israeli study provide preliminary evidence for the scale’s reliability in non-American settings.

**Managerial Implications**

The findings presented and discussed in this paper can be used by practicing marketing managers. First, the four types of consumers identified by crossing consumers’ need for assimilation with their need for differentiation can be used to segment the population and to position products and services. Many products and services target each of these quadrants. For example, body art (e.g., tattooing and body piercing) should appeal to individuals with a strong need for uniqueness, who should prove to be a prime target market. However, the approach used here classifies such individuals into two distinct groups, namely consumers with strong and weak needs for social assimilation. Positioning for each of the two groups should differ according to this second dimension. For example, when the need for social assimilation is high, advertising might stress consumption and the use of body art as part of a group interaction. Conversely, advertising directed at customers with a weak need for social assimilation should stress the personal benefit of being unique, regardless of group interactions. If anything, it might be wise to stress that such products will make one stand out.

Second, people with a high level of CNFU, especially those who demonstrate positive uniqueness consumption, might be opinion leaders for relevant products. They would constitute prime targets early on in the life cycle of unique products. In contrast, when the need for social assimilation is high but the need for uniqueness is low, individuals will tend to be opinion seekers, and advertising and promotions should reflect this tendency.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this research are twofold. First, convenience samples were used in both studies. Study 1 included relatively more women and more educated and high-income respondents than the Israeli average. In addition, the outcome constructs included products whose use requires a higher than average income. Consequently, better educated and higher income respondents were needed to create variance in the dependent variables. Additionally, respondents were recruited at shopping malls and community centers in Study 1 and at a large transportation center in Study 2. Thus, Study 1 included more women than Study 2, because shopping in Israel is more often done by women than by men. These explanations notwithstanding, the author believes that the impact of this limitation is minimal in light of research suggesting that demographic-based leisure differences are declining (Weiss, Holbrook, & Habich, 2001). Still, future research should examine the issues studied here with a representative sample of the population.

Second, a question arises about the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. It is believed that the results can be generalized to other developed nations.
Specifically, the findings for the most part form a nomological model for the constructs, which are generally in line with findings in previous research in the United States. However, cultural differences exist even among developed countries. Individualism (versus collectivism) might well affect the importance and exhibition of uniqueness in general and unique consumption in particular. For example, social scientists such as Hofstede (2001) have established that the United States is the most individualistic country, Israel is close to the middle point of the individualism/collectivism continuum, and Portugal (another developed country) is collectivistic. It would be illuminating to examine the model used in this paper, particularly with regard to the question of individualism, in different cultural environments in future research.

REFERENCES


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### APPENDIX

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age [mean and (st.d.) in years]</td>
<td>38.03 (12.4)</td>
<td>35.30 (21.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate or more</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above average</td>
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<td>14.6%</td>
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