

When imitation doesn't flatter: When do consumers care about mimicry?

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Consumers react strongly to their product choices being copied, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. They really dislike it when the copycat is someone similar to them.

"Have you ever gone to a party only to learn upon arrival that another guest is wearing the same dress or shirt as you?" ask authors Katherine White (University of British Columbia) and Jennifer J. Argo (University of Alberta). The researchers looked at what happens when someone else copies a consumer's product choice.

Although past research suggests that people are often motivated to avoid choosing the same products as dissimilar others or outgroup members, the researchers found that being copied by similar others leads to avoidance behaviors such as throwing products away, re-customizing them, or exchanging the item for a new one.

"This effect is driven by consumer desire to be distinct and unique individuals," the authors write. They found that [study participants](#) only wanted to get rid of products that were copied when the [possessions](#) were symbolic in nature. "It is more threatening to a person's sense of distinctiveness to be copied on our perfume selection, rather than something more mundane like an iron," the authors write. They also found that the rejection of the products was less strong when the consumer exerted a low degree of effort to obtain the possession.

"From a consumer standpoint, it is interesting to better understand why

we might be upset and how we might respond when a close friend (or similar other) copies a product selection," the authors write. They found that participants showed a surprising willingness change or get rid of products that had nothing wrong with them, simply because of the [social context](#).

Marketers might want to look at additional ways for consumers to assert their distinctiveness through products. "Examples of this include changing the style of the face plate on a cellular phone, to altering to color of a watch wrist-band, to changing one's options on an automobile," the authors conclude.

More information: Katherine White and Jennifer J. Argo. "When Imitation Doesn't Flatter: The Role of Consumer Distinctiveness in Responses to Mimicry." Published online May 3, 2011. Journal of Consumer Research: December 2011. ejcr.org

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