

# Social isolation: Are lonely consumers actually loners or conformers?

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Despite the proliferation of social networks, many Americans feel alone and isolated. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, lonely individuals behave differently in the marketplace than people with strong social networks.

"Despite the popularity of Wi-Fi technologies and social networks such as Facebook, Americans are more socially isolated than two decades ago," write authors Jing Wang (University of Iowa), Rui (Juliet) Zhu (University of British Columbia), and Baba Shiv (Stanford University). According to the authors, in 2004 almost twenty five percent of [respondents](#) in a social survey said they had no one to discuss important matters with.

The authors set out to discover how this growing segment of consumers reacts to social consensus information. "Consumers often construct their preferences based on consensus-related cues and prefer majority-endorsed products," the authors write. But the authors wondered whether people who feel lonely respond to consensus-related information in the same way.

During their experiments, the researchers asked participants to evaluate products based on information that included social consensus information—the percentage of previous consumers that liked the products. They measured participants' feelings of loneliness and found that to a large extent, non-lonely people preferred majority-endorsed products (preferred by 80 percent of previous consumers). But lonely

people, on the other hand, vastly preferred minority-endorsed products (preferred by only 20 percent of previous consumers)."

But, according to the authors, the lonely people don't want to advertise their minority status. "Lonely people's preference for the minority-endorsed products was only found when their preferences were kept private," the authors write. "They switched to majority-endorsed products once their preferences became public."

The authors suggest that marketers keep in mind the lonely factor when targeting consumers, like seniors, who might be less likely to respond positively to rave reviews from a majority of customers, for example.

**More information:** Jing Wang, Rui (Juliet) Zhu, and Baba Shiv. "The Lonely Consumer: Loner or Conformer?" *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2012 (published online July 12 2011).

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