

Can consumers 'fit in' yet remain unique?

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Most consumers want to fit in while still asserting their individuality—and they balance these conflicting desires when choosing products, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Consumers want both to signal their identity with desired groups and to be different from other group members. This research shows how people simultaneously satisfy these apparently conflicting motives in consumer behavior," write authors Cindy Chan, Jonah Berger (both University of Pennsylvania), and Leaf Van Boven (University of Colorado, Boulder). "Is it possible to be similar and different—at the same time?"

The authors conducted field and laboratory studies to demonstrate how [consumers](#) simultaneously satisfy competing desires for group identification and individual uniqueness. They found that participants often satisfy their need to fit in by choosing a brand that represents their in-group, but they differentiate by choosing colors or styles to set themselves apart. "For example, a snowboarder may sport a Burton jacket to identify himself as a snowboarder (rather than a skier), while choosing an unusual pattern to stand apart from other snowboarders," the authors write. Or a fashionable consumer might choose a popular brand handbag in an unusual color.

The experiments showed that participants who were concerned with communicating their social identity were more likely to choose a brand that was preferred by most members of an in-group (but not an undesirable out-group). That was especially true in categories that signify identity, like clothing. On the other hand, people with a strong need for

uniqueness preferred less-popular products.

"Our research provides insights into decision making and behavior when there are tensions between motives of assimilation and differentiation, even in situations that may not involve consumption," the authors write.

"For example, an employee may desire to both be an integrated team member and have a unique role in the organization. Similarly, elected politicians and their loyal constituents may wish to toe the party line and voice their individual opinions," the authors conclude.

More information: Cindy Chan, Jonah Berger, and Leaf Van Boven. "Identifiable but Not Identical: Combining Social Identity and Uniqueness Motives in Choice." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2012. ejcr.org/

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