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# When Do Consumers Follow Majority Choice?

- Different Effect of Purchase versus Usage Situation -

어떤 상황에서 소비자는 다수의 선택을 따를까?

- 구매상황과 사용상황이 미치는 상이한 영향을 중심으로 -

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People have competing desires. Hence, people not only chase others' choices due to the need for assimilation but also avoid others' choices due to the need for differentiation. This study attempts to uncover under which conditions consumers assimilate with or differentiate from others' choices. Specifically, the study extends previous research about the effect of others' choices by focusing on the effect of a choice situation (purchase vs. usage) based on the conformity theory and the uniqueness theory. It was found that purchase (vs. usage) situation makes people more conform to others in case of identity-irrelevant product (e.g., USB memory stick). Also, the effect of the choice situation was moderated by the perceived identity-relevance level in case of identity-relevant product (e.g., jeans).

Key words: Choice Situation, Conformity Theory, Uniqueness Theory, Identity-relevance

## I. Introduction

Suppose that you are in a shopping mall to buy a T-shirt. If you observe that other shoppers

are choosing a certain T-shirt, would you chase their choices? However, if you imagine usage situation before selecting the same T-shirt (e.g., some people are wearing the T-shirt in your class), will your choice be affected?

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Would you follow their choices or deviate from their choices? Of course, your answer will vary depending on the purchaser or user of that-shirt (e.g., reference group or not) and your characteristics (e.g., fashion leader or follower). Nevertheless, it is expected that your selection might be influenced by a choice situation (purchase situation [former case] vs. anticipatory usage or consumption situation [latter case]). That is, if you are framed of purchase situation, other shoppers' choices might signal the quality of the T-shirt and therefore you might converge toward others' choices. In contrast, if you are framed of anticipatory usage situation, you might infer that the popularity of the T-shirt implies a threat to wear the identical product with your reference group member and might diverge from others' choices.

As the above scenario shows, people are influenced by others' choices of product. The information that others selected certain product results in the increase of the demand for the product (i.e., "bandwagon effect": chasing others' choices due to the need for similarity to others) and, on the other hand, results in the decrease of the demand (i.e., "snob effect": avoiding others' choices due to the need for differentiation from others) (Leibenstein 1950).

Previous research tried to explain which social influences between conformity and differentiation are dominating by using the conformity theory and the uniqueness theory. Those research examined the effect of others' choices based on

product type (e.g., symbolic/instrumental products [Shavitt 1990]; identity-(non)signaling products [Berger and Heath 2007]); (in)visible products [Bearden and Etzel 1982]), consumer characteristics (e.g., level of need for uniqueness [Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001]), and reference group (e.g., people follow the choice of the reference group members while people avoid the choice of the dissociative reference group members [Argo, White, and Dahl 2006]).

However, situational effects were not studied enough except for some research (e.g., Byrne and Griffitt 1969; Snyder and Fromkin 1980). Although consumer research was defined as studies of consumer behavior involving acquisition, usage, and disposition of products (Holbrook 1987), differences in consumer behavior depending on situations—purchase situation and usage or consumption situation—have not been empirically investigated to a sufficient degree. Moreover, the knowledge about the choice situation and the effect of others' choices could give meaningful implication for the marketers.

The purpose of this article is to explore whether a choice situation (purchase vs. usage) influences consumers' choices (i.e., whether to follow others' choices or not) using the conformity theory and the uniqueness theory. This research focuses on two products of which identity-relevance level is different, high versus low (jeans vs. USB memory stick). As a result, uniqueness of an option could be either important or unimportant consideration for choosing an

option. It is proposed that people will follow others' choices when they are primed with a purchase situation than with a usage situation because desire for assimilation overwhelms desire for differentiation in the purchase situation (or vice versa). Also, the effect of a choice situation is hypothesized to depend on the product category and individual difference (i.e., perceived identity-relevance level). Further, the effect of situation and individual difference will vary with the product types.

## II. Literature Review

People are confronting two competing social influences: assimilation and differentiation (Baumeister 1982; Snyder and Fromkin 1977). Sometimes, people conform to social norms to please others, get their approval, and avoid criticism and rejection, while at other times, people deviate from social norms not to be perceived as a "follower of the masses" but as an "independent and unique people from the majority" (Snyder 1992). Also, in consumer behavior context, people purchase products that are purchased by others because of the needs for validation from and similarity to others. On the other hand, people do not purchase products that are bought by others because of the countervailing needs for uniqueness and individuation (Brewer 1991; Leibenstein 1950). Previous

research investigated such a chasing or deviating behavior of consumers based on the conformity theory and the uniqueness theory.

### 2.1 Conforming toward others' choices

Conformity is the act of changing one's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to fit with the others (Brewer 1991; Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). There are two kinds of influence on conformity: informational social influence and normative social influence. The motivation of informational conformity comes from one's desire to understand and interpret the situation correctly by using the accurate information, while the motivation of normative conformity comes from one's desire to avoid the disapproval and to be accepted by the members of the group. Therefore, informational influence occurs more often when a situation is ambiguous and the appropriate judgment or behavior is not clearly given (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Deutsch and Gerard 1955), while the normative influence is large when people are sensitive to the social comparison (Bearden and Rose 1990).

Especially for consumers, there is a "bandwagon effect", a kind of conformity phenomena. That is, consumers tend to purchase products purchased by others (Corneo and Jeanne 1997; Leibenstein 1950). There are two rationales for bandwagon effects. First, people get information about products and infer the quality of the

product from its popularity (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Kardes, Posavac, and Cronley 2004). This is because consumers do not have complete information about the product, are not perfect information processors, and use various cues (e.g., price, market share, market growth, etc.) to infer the quality of the product (Hellofs and Jacobson 1999). For example, if people find a restaurant whose seats are almost occupied, people infer its quality high from its popularity and want to eat at the restaurant (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1998). Second, people follow the majority's choices to get into "the swim of things" (Leibenstein 1950) and conform to the choice of reference or aspiration group to get the feeling of belongingness to or acceptance by the group (Argo et al. 2006). For example, if people saw a popularity of a product in a shopping site, they might hop on the bandwagon not to lose the opportunity to keep up with the trend. Although these two rationales of bandwagon effects are too intermingled with each other to separate them clearly, it could be said that the first one is related with the motivation of informational conformity and the second one is related with the motivation of normative conformity which is the opposite to the motivation of differentiation.

## 2.2 Differentiating from others' choices

People have a motivation to be different from others (Brewer 1991; Snyder and Fromkin

1977) and feel negative emotion when feeling overly similar to others (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). Therefore, people choose unique products which could differentiate themselves from others. This desire is called need for uniqueness or NFU and defined as "an individual's pursuit of differentness relative to others that is achieved through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's personal and social identity" (Tian et al. 2001, p.50).

Uniqueness research showed that the degree of which people differentiate themselves from others' choices depends on product type and consumer characteristics. First, people use certain types of products to express their identity and infer the users' identity more than they would do with other types of products. That is, people use symbolic (vs. instrumental) product [Shavitt 1990]), identity-relevant (vs. identity-irrelevant) product [Berger and Heath 2007]), and visible (vs. invisible) product [Bearden and Etzel 1982]) to express their identity and deviate further from others' choices in the selection of those product types. For example, people consider T-shirt as more identity-relevant product (i.e., people think T-shirt to express their identity and infer others' identity based on the choice of T-shirt) than pencil and therefore, people select a more unique option when they purchase T-shirt than pencil.

Second, some people are more interested in showing their attributes and setting them

distinct from others (Lynn and Snyder 2002). For example, people with high NFU are sensitive to the degree to which they are seen as similar to others and are most likely to exhibit the behaviors that establish a sense of specialness, such as acquiring unique or scarce products (Snyder 1992; Tian et al. 2001; Tian and McKenzie 2001). Therefore, people with high NFU tend to select option chosen less by others to differentiate themselves from others compared to people with low NFU do.

Especially for consumers, there is a “snob effect”, a differentiation phenomenon driven by the motivation for distinctiveness. This effect represents the desire of people to be exclusive and to dissociate themselves from the “common herd” through the purchase of different products (Corneo and Jeanne 1997; Leibenstein 1950). This effect is salient for conspicuous product (“Veblen effect”) but sometimes occurs irrespective of product prices (Arnaldoss and Jain 2005). For example, people prefer limited editions to regular products, because the limited editions may not be owned by majority and therefore guarantee exclusiveness.

### 2.3 Conforming or Differentiating?

Putting it together, when the motivation of informational or normative conformity is activated, people follow others’ choices whereas when the motivation of differentiation is prominent, people deviate from others’ choices.

Specifically, when people choose among the products whose identity-relevance level is low (or “identity-irrelevant product” including pencil and USB memory stick), people are not sensitive to the social comparison (Bearden and Rose 1990) and do not concern over whether their chosen option might communicate their identity appropriately (Berger and Heath 2007). And, thus the motivation of informational conformity will dominate over the motivation of normative conformity or the motivation of differentiation. In contrast, when people choose among the products whose identity-relevance level is high (or “identity-relevant product” including T-shirt and jeans), people are sensitive to the social comparison (Bearden and Rose 1990) and people concern over whether their chosen option might express their current or ideal identity appropriately and whether others infer their desired identity based on their chosen option as they intended (Berger and Heath 2007). Therefore, not only the motivation of informational conformity but also the motivation of normative conformity and motivation of differentiation will play an important role depending on the choice situation and the perceived identity-relevance level.

It is proposed that the degree of conforming toward others’ choices varies with product category. That is, conformity toward majority’ choice is more prominent among identity-irrelevant products than among identity-relevant products (Berger and Heath 2007) because the

motivation of informational conformity is influential among identity-irrelevant products while the motivation of differentiation and the motivation of normative conformity is mixed among identity-relevant products.

H1: Consumers will select the option chosen by majority in the identity-irrelevant products than in the identity-relevant products.

Also, it is expected that when consumers are primed with purchase situation, consumers would focus on the purchase situation itself and interpret majority's choices of certain product as popularity information. This interpretation instigates consumers to follow majority's choices, because the information of popularity not only guarantees the quality of the product (i.e., motivation of informational conformity) but also propel consumers to keep up with the trend (i.e., motivation of normative conformity) (van Herpen, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2009).

In contrast, when consumers are primed with usage situation, consumers would consider the anticipatory usage situation as well as purchase situation itself and interpret majority's choices as popularity which might lead to the usage of the identical products. Although consumers tend to follow the choice of reference group members rather than the choice of non-reference group members, consumers do not want to own the same product with reference group

members, because owning the identical product could threaten their distinctive identity (Brewer 1991; Fromkin 1970; Snyder 1992). Especially, if consumers worry over whether close others (e.g., friends, classmates, etc.) use the same product, consumers would deviate from others' choices that might undermine their distinctiveness from others (i.e., motivation of differentiation) (Fromkin 1970; Snyder 1992; van Herpen et al. 2009).

However, situational effect will vary with the product type. That is, when consumers choose among identity-relevant products (e.g., T-shirt, jeans), they are concerned about social comparison and about whether their chosen option might express their current or ideal identity appropriately and whether others infer their desired identity based on their chosen option as they intended (Bearden and Rose 1990; Berger and Heath 2007). Therefore, the motivation of informational conformity, the motivation of normative conformity and the motivation of differentiation will play an important role depending on the choice situation. Also, given the fact that the identity-relevance level of a product is relative for each consumer, the perceived identity-relevance level of a product might moderate the effect of situation on consumers' choices. To be specific, if consumers perceive the identity-relevance level of a product as high, they will farther deviate from others' choices in the usage situation because they are afraid of losing their distinctive identity by using the same product used by others (i.e.,

motivation of differentiation). Conversely, in the purchase situation, they will less deviate from others' choices because they worry about being left behind trend (i.e., motivation of normative conformity) or interpret majority's choices as quality information (i.e., motivation of informational conformity). However, if consumers perceive the identity-relevance level of product as low, their choices will not vary with the choice situation. Since these consumers do not think their choices express their identities, a choice situation might not activate the motivation of differentiation or the motivation of normative conformity clearly compared to those consumers who perceive the identity-relevance level of a product as high. Also, it is assumed that these consumers are less interested in their choices and some of them do not mind using the identical goods with close others and some of them want to use the identical goods leading to counterbalancing the effect of the informational conformity.

H2a: For the identity-relevant product, the perceived identity-relevance level will moderate the effect of a choice situation on consumers' choices. Specifically, consumers who perceive the identity-relevance level of a product as high will select majority option in the purchase situation priming than in the usage situation priming, while consumers who perceive the identity-relevance

level of a product as low will not be affected by the choice situation.

In contrast, when consumers choose among the identity-irrelevant products compared to the identity-relevant products (e.g., pencil, USB memory stick), consumers do not mind social comparison nor are concerned about whether their chosen option might communicate their identity appropriately (Bearden and Rose 1990; Berger and Heath 2007). Thus the motivation of informational conformity will dominate the motivation of normative conformity or the motivation of differentiation. Therefore, the perceived identity-relevance level does not play an important role in the choice and only the choice situation will influence the consumers' choices. That is, consumers will select an option chosen by more people in the purchase situation than in the usage situation because the motivation of informational conformity is prominent in the purchase situation compared to the usage situation.

H2b: For the identity-irrelevant product, consumers' choices will be determined by a choice situation. That is, consumers will select the option chosen by majority in the purchase situation priming than in the usage situation priming.



## III. Method

### 3.1 Selection of Products

To select products which represent identity-relevant or identity-irrelevant product, undergraduate and graduate students ( $N=20$ ) were recruited and shown a list of fourteen products familiar to students (e.g., bag, jeans, mp3 player, USB memory stick etc.). Then, the students rated the products on the two identity-relevance level items adopted from Berger and Heath (2007) (i.e., “Does bag express your identity a lot?”; “Do you know a lot about a person based on their choice of bag?”) on nine-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 9 = strongly agree). Based on the rating scores and the subsequent interview with the students, jeans (or USB memory stick) were selected for identity-relevant (or identity-irrelevant) product ( $M_{\text{jeans}} = 6.5$  vs.  $M_{\text{USB}} = 3.0$ ).<sup>1)</sup> Although identity relevance score of bag ( $M = 7.1$ ) was higher than that of jeans, jeans were selected for identity-relevant product because interviewed participants told that they were confused about which types of bag (backpack, shoulder bag, messenger bag, tote bag, etc.) were meant by the question.

### 3.2 Participants and Design

Ninety-five people were recruited in a library (45% were female; mean of age was 26 and approximately 90% were twenties; 32% were undergraduate students, 54% graduated university, and others were above the graduate). For an examination of the differential effects of a choice situation and the perceived identity-relevance level depending on the product category (i.e., jeans as an identity-relevant product vs. USB memory stick as an identity-irrelevant product), this study used a 2 (choice situation priming: purchase vs. usage)  $\times$  2 (product category: USB vs. jeans) between subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. And the perceived identity-relevance level was measured as a continuous variable. Participants did not show any significant difference of gender, age, and education level across conditions ( $p > .1$ ).

### 3.3 Procedures

Participants were given a survey booklet and read a scenario that was either purchase or usage situation for jeans or USB memory stick. The text of the purchase [vs. usage] situation priming scenario for USB memory stick was as follows:

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1) This pretest data was based on a portion of the second author's master thesis.

You went to the electronics store to purchase USB memory stick (which you need daily). Various types of brands, design and colors are available. You've been wondering which USB to choose and started observing others to see what kind of USBs they purchase [*started remembering what kind of USBs others use*]. Some USBs are purchased [*used*] by few people. Some USBs are purchased [*used*] by majority people. Will it be better to choose USBs which few people are purchasing [*using*]? Will it be better to choose USBs which majority people are purchasing [*using*]?

To measure the level of conformity toward others' choices, participants were asked to remind of the purchase [*usage*] situation and to select the point on a 130-millimeter line with each end-point labeled '0% (USB which was purchased [*used*] by 0 consumer among 100 consumers)' on the left end and '100% (USB which was purchased [*used*] by 100 consumers among 100 consumers)' on the right end. After that, the perceived identity relevance level was measured using two items adopted from Berger and Heath (2007) (e.g., "Does USB express your identity a lot?"; "Do you know a lot about a person based on their choice of USB?"  $\alpha = .89$  (for jeans = .79; for USB = .84)) on seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

## IV. Results

As expected, the perceived identity-relevance level of jeans was significantly higher than the perceived identity-relevance level of USB ( $M_{\text{jeans}} = 4.3$ ,  $M_{\text{USB}} = 2.3$ ,  $t(93) = -8.03$ ,  $p = .000$ ), while there was neither significant main effect of situation nor interaction effect between situation and product category on identity-relevance level ( $F_s(1, 91) < 1$ ,  $p_s > .1$ ). To test the effect of product category on choice (Hypothesis 1),  $t$ -test was performed on choice. As expected, participants selected majority option when they consider identity-irrelevant product category (i.e., USB) than identity-relevant product category (i.e., jeans) ( $M_{\text{USB}} = 76$ ,  $M_{\text{jeans}} = 40$ ,  $t(93) = -7.1$ ,  $p = .000$ ), indicating that consumers more conformed to the choice of others in the identity-irrelevant product category. A regression was performed on choice with situation (dummy coded as 0 = purchase and 1 = usage), product category (dummy coded as 0 = USB memory stick and 1 = jeans), mean-centered participants' perceived identity-relevance level for product, their three two-way interactions, and one three-way interaction as predictors (Aiken and West 1991). As <Table 1> shows, the overall model was significant ( $F(7, 87) = 11.16$ ,  $p = .000$ ). There were significant simple effect of situation and product category ( $\beta = -.32$ ,  $t = -2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\beta = -.68$ ,  $t = -4.2$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and

<Table 1> Regression Analysis for Choice

	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
(Constant)		12.233	.000
Product	-.678	-4.222	.000
Situation	-.321	-2.269	.026
Perceived Identity-relevance	-.031	-0.151	.880
Situation $\times$ Product	.364	1.979	.051
Situation $\times$ Perceived Identity-relevance	-.273	-1.359	.178
Product $\times$ Perceived Identity-relevance	.127	0.640	.524
Situation $\times$ Product $\times$ Perceived Identity-relevance	-.188	-0.898	.371
$R^2$	.473		
$R^2$ Adjusted	.431		
$F$ -value ( $p$ -value)	11.159 (.000)		

marginally significant interaction between situation and product ( $\beta = .36, t = 1.98, p = .051$ ). No other effects including three-way interaction were significant ( $ps > .05$ ).

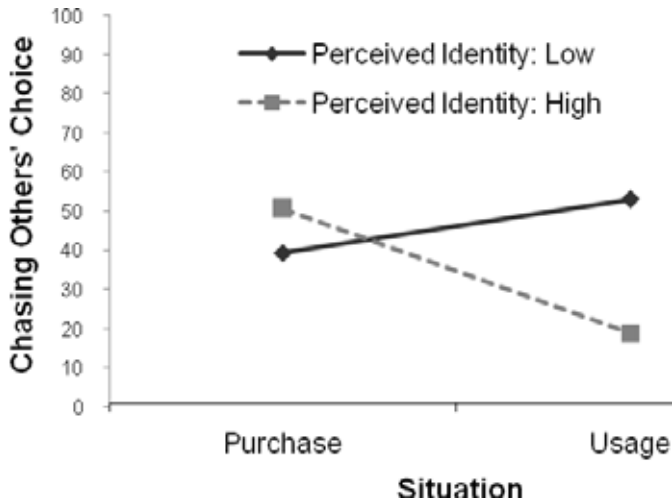
To explore the different choice mechanism (Hypothesis 2) depending on the product category (i.e., jeans as an identity-relevant product vs. USB as an identity-irrelevant product), separate regressions were conducted for each product

category. To test Hypothesis 2a, a regression was performed on choice with situation (dummy coded as 0 = purchase and 1 = usage), mean-centered participants' perceived identity-relevance level for jeans, and their interaction as predictors. As <Table 2> shows, the overall model was significant ( $F(3, 43) = 3.12, p < .05$ ). As expected, there was a significant interaction effect between situation and the

<Table 2> Regression Analysis for Choice of Jeans

	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
(Constant)		8.732	.000
Situation	-.178	-1.284	.206
Perceived Identity-relevance	.151	0.655	.516
Situation $\times$ Perceived Identity-relevance	-.491	-2.130	.039
$R^2$	.179		
$R^2$ Adjusted	.122		
$F$ -value ( $p$ -value)	3.122 (.036)		

⟨Figure 1⟩ Conformity as a Function of Situation and Perceived Identity-Relevance Level for Jeans



perceived identity-relevance level ( $\beta = -.49, t = -2.13, p < .05$ ). However, neither the simple effect of situation nor the perceived identity-relevance level were significant (for each  $\beta = -.18, t = -1.28, p > .1$ ;  $M_{\text{purchase}} = 45, M_{\text{usage}} = 36, \beta = .15, t < 1, p > .1$ ).

To further explore the nature of this interaction effect, simple slope tests were performed at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of the perceived identity-relevance level for jeans. Because the perceived identity-relevance level is a continuous variable, the test procedures followed the recommendation of Aiken and West (1991) and Fitzsimons (2008). As ⟨Figure 1⟩ shows, the planned contrast for participants with low perceived identity-relevance levels (-1 SD) did not show a significant simple effect of situation ( $M_{\text{purchase}} = 40, M_{\text{usage}} = 53; \beta = .13, t < 1, p > .1$ ).

However, the planned contrast for participants with high perceived identity-relevance levels (+1 SD) showed a significant simple effect of situation ( $M_{\text{purchase}} = 51, M_{\text{usage}} = 19; \beta = -.34, t = -2.13, p < .05$ ; see ⟨Table 3⟩), such that participants who perceived the identity-relevance level of jeans as high were more likely to diverge from others' choices in the usage situation compared to the purchase situation, while participants who perceived the identity-relevance level of jeans as low were not influenced by the choice situation. These findings indicate that the choice situation priming influences only consumers who think that jeans show their identity. For example, consumers who consider jeans as identity-relevant product select less-chosen option in the usage-primed condition because they want to diverge from others' choices whereas they do not diverge from others' choices

〈Table 3〉 Regression Analysis for Choice of Jeans at High Perceived Identity-Relevance Levels (+1 SD)

	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
(Constant)		6.072	.000
Situation	-.487	-2.411	.020
Perceived Identity-relevance (+1 SD)	.151	0.655	.516
Situation $\times$ Perceived Identity-relevance (+1 SD)	-.575	-2.130	.039
$R^2$	.179		
$R^2$ Adjusted	.122		
$F$ -value ( $p$ -value)	3.122 (.036)		

〈Table 4〉 Regression Analysis for Choice of USB

	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
(Constant)		18.003	.000
Situation	-.270	-1.988	.053
Perceived Identity-relevance	-.034	-0.161	.873
Situation $\times$ Perceived Identity-relevance	-.307	-1.451	.154
$R^2$	.200		
$R^2$ Adjusted	.145		
$F$ -value ( $p$ -value)	3.658 (.019)		

in the purchase-primed condition. Putting it together, because the motivation of informational conformity, the motivation of normative conformity and the motivation of differentiation were activated in the choice of the identity-relevant product, the perceived identity-relevance level as well as the choice situation influenced the choice.

To test Hypothesis 2b, a regression was performed on choice with situation (dummy coded as 0 = purchase and 1 = usage), mean-centered participants' perceived identity-relevance level for USB, and their interaction as pre-

dictors. As 〈Table 4〉 shows, the overall model was significant ( $F(3, 44) = 3.66, p < .05$ ). As expected, only the simple effect of situation was marginally significant ( $M_{\text{purchase}} = 83, M_{\text{usage}} = 69; \beta = -.27, t = -1.99, p = .053$ ) and neither the simple effect of the perceived identity-relevance level nor the interaction effect between situation and the perceived identity-relevance level was not significant (for each  $\beta = -.03, t = -.16, p > .1; \beta = -.31, t = -1.45, p > .1$ ). These results indicate that participants selected majority option in the purchase situation priming than in the usage

situation priming regardless of the perceived identity-relevance level. This is because USB is not an identity-signaling product and thus the motivation of informational conformity explains the more conforming behavior in the purchase situation than in the usage situation.

## V. Discussion

People have competing desires (i.e., assimilation vs. differentiation) and therefore, the information that others selected a certain product leads to different results: chasing others' choices due to the need for assimilation with others versus avoiding others' choices due to the need for differentiation from others (Leibenstein 1950; Snyder and Fromkin 1977). The current study aimed to find under which conditions consumers want to be assimilated with or differentiated from others' choices. Especially, this study extends previous research about the effect of others' choices by including not only product category and individual difference but also a choice situation (purchase vs. usage).

First, consistent with previous research (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Berger and Heath 2007), this study found that consumers' conforming or diverging behavior vary with the product category. That is, consumers tend to conform others' choices in the identity-irrelevant product category (e.g., USB memory stick)

compared to the identity-relevant product category (e.g., jeans). This is because the identity-relevant product category is considered to be a more appropriate vehicle to express their identity than the identity-irrelevant product category and is used for social comparison. Therefore, the motivation of differentiation leads consumers to select the less chosen option when selecting the identity-relevant product to avoid too similar products with others', whereas the motivation of informational conformity leads consumers to select the majority option in the selection of the identity-irrelevant product.

Also, this research takes one more step from the previous research and examines the effect of choice situation on the conforming or deviating behavior. This study found that the purchase situation priming triggers the motivation of informational conformity and the motivation of normative conformity. That is, because consumers do not have complete information about the product, consumers seek various cues to complement such an incomplete information. If consumers notice that the majority of shoppers select a certain product, they interpret such a popularity as quality information (Hellouf and Jacobson 1999). In addition, because consumers want to be accepted by others, they chase others' choices to keep in pace with the trend based on the popularity information. As a result, consumers follow the selection of the majority in the purchase primed condition. Conversely, the usage situation priming activates the concern

about the potential threat of chasing popular products. That is, anticipatory usage situation reminds consumers that if they follow the majority's choices, they might use identical products with close others in a consumption context. Therefore, consumers would avoid the majority's choices to protect their distinctiveness from others (Fromkin 1970; Snyder 1992; van Herpen et al, 2009). These different effects of choice situation priming highlight the importance of empirical research about consumer behavior depending on purchase situation versus usage (consumption) situation.

More importantly, this research showed that the situational effect varied with product category and individual differences (e.g., perceived identity-relevance level of certain product). In the choice of the identity-irrelevant products, the motivation of informational conformity is prominent over the motivation of differentiation. Therefore, the perceived identity-relevance level does not play an important role in the choice and only the choice situation influences consumers' choices. That is, consumers follow the majority's choices in a purchase situation (vs. usage situation) because the purchase situation (vs. usage situation) activates the motivation of informational conformity. Conversely, in the choice of identity-relevant products, individual difference in the perceived identity-relevance level plays an important role. Specifically, people who perceive the identity-relevance level of jeans as high are concerned about the

consumption of the identical product with others, and the motivation of differentiation is activated in the usage situation while they are less concerned about it in the purchase situation. In contrast, if people perceive the identity-relevance level of jeans as low, their choice will not change with the situation condition because they do not mind using an identical product with close others and the motivation of differentiation is not activated.

In sum, it could be said that the conformity theory (i.e., especially, the motivation of informational conformity) is effective to explain the choice behavior of identity-irrelevant products while both the conformity theory (i.e., the motivation of informational conformity and the motivation of normative conformity) and the uniqueness theory (i.e., the motivation of differentiation) are required to explain the choice behavior of identity-relevant products.

These findings suggest some managerial implications for marketers who want to use the social influence (conformity vs. deviance). First, marketers could implement the effect of situation priming. If a marketer is in charge of a market leading brand, he or she needs to advertise the brand with purchase situation priming, which leads consumers to follow the majority's choice or to keep purchasing the brand. Conversely, if a marketer is in charge of the 2nd or 3rd ranked brand, usage situation priming would be helpful in making consumers to deviate from the majority's choice (i.e., 1st ranked

brand) and try 2nd or 3rd ranked brand. Second, marketers need to consider the different situational effect depending on the product category and the individual difference. If a marketer deals with identity-irrelevant products (e.g., USB memory stick), the marketer could implement the above situation priming technique. However, if a marketer deals with identity-relevant products (e.g., jeans), the marketer needs to implement a different promotion campaign based on the individual difference (e.g., perceived identity-relevance level). For consumers who regard jeans as an identity-relevant product, the marketer could influence the consumers with the appropriate choice situation priming. Specifically, purchase (vs. usage) situation priming is effective for the market leading brand (vs. following brand).

The current research has some limitations. This research employed imagined situations with some sentences to prime a certain situation. However, it is not easy to adequately specify a situation. Those sentences have not included all situational attributes and thus participants might not perceive the given situation identically (Bonner 1985). For example, participants might imagine different brands (e.g., for jeans Levis or Calvin Klein), users (e.g., reference group or not), and shoppers (e.g., friends or passerby). Especially, participants might perceive the level of identicalness differently (e.g., identical company brand, product brand, model, design, color, etc.). Further research is required

to investigate the conforming or deviating behavior based on the level of identicalness before implementing the marketing portfolio strategy.

In addition, the present research used only two products. Given that there are many kinds of product category dimensions (e.g., IT product vs. fashion product) which could influence conforming or deviating behavior, future research is needed to deal with additional product category dimensions. Moreover, there might be differences in conforming or deviating choice behavior even among the same product category. For example, whereas the motivation of informational conformity played an important role in the choice of USB memory sticks in this study, the motivation of normative conformity and of differentiation will play important roles in the choice of a mobile phone. This is because though a mobile phone is categorized as IT product like USB memory sticks, a mobile phone is used as a vehicle to express users' identities. Popularity of i-Phone could be explained by consumers' desire to follow the trend of aspirational reference group (i.e., motivation of normative conformity) and to differentiate themselves from the dissociative reference group as an IT leader (i.e., motivation of differentiation). Therefore, considering the multifaceted aspects of symbolic meaning of product consumption or usage, it is required not only to carefully interpret and apply the results of current research but also to investigate such a



different conforming or deviating behavior depending on the various product category and subcategory.

Also, the current study did not specify whether the focus of this study is consumer choice on product level or brand level and could not address the behavioral pattern—conforming or deviating behavior—depending on each level. It is likely that people conform to the choice of their reference group on the brand level compared to the product level because conforming or deviating behavior is influenced by various factors including situational and individual characteristics on the product level. For example, whereas people choose polo brand preferred by their reference group, people tend to differentiate themselves from other members on the product level (e.g., color or style). Additionally, consumers' awareness level of brand will affect the motivation of normative or informational conformity. In case of well-known brands, normative conformity will play a major role while informational conformity will be more significant in case of unknown brands. Further research is required to investigate differences in conforming or deviating behavior depending on the product level or brand level.

In addition, this study skipped the manipulation check of choice situation priming, following the tradition of other priming manipulation research (e.g., Berger and Fitzsimons 2008; Epley and Gilovich 1999). However,

several pretests and in-depth interviews were conducted to make the final version of choice situation priming scenario and to select two products which were confirmed to differ in identity-relevance levels. Also, whereas expected results were obtained from separate regressions for each product category, three-way interaction was not significant from a full model regression. Given the solid theoretical grounds of hypotheses and subsequent results from the separate regression analyses, the results may have to be further examined by using different products or samples.

The current research was conducted in Korea (i.e., interdependent culture) where conformity is recommended for harmony with group members. Future research might be expanded to examine the effect of situation in western cultures (i.e., independent culture) where uniqueness is emphasized for freedom and independence (Kim and Markus 1999). Given that fashion trends spread more quickly and widely in Korea and Japan representing the interdependent culture, it is expected that purchase situation priming propels people into more conforming behavior in the interdependent culture than in the independent culture while usage situation priming drives people into more differentiating behavior in the independent culture than in the interdependent culture.

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# 어떤 상황에서 소비자는 다수의 선택을 따를까?

## - 구매상황과 사용상황이 미치는 상이한 영향을 중심으로 -

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김 재 일\*\*\*

### 요 약

동조욕구와 차별화욕구라는 상반된 욕구에 의해, 소비자는 타인의 구매선택을 추종하기도 하고 회피하기도 한다. 본 연구는 동조이론과 차별화이론을 사용하여 이러한 현상을 살펴보았다. 특히, 제품유형이나 소비자특성뿐만 아니라, 선택상황(구매상황 혹은 사용상황)도 함께 고려함으로써, 소비자의 제품 선택에 있어서의 사회적 영향에 대한 기존 이론을 확장시켰다. 실험 결과, 정체성 표현과 무관한 제품(예, USB memory stick)의 경우, 사람들은 사용상황에서보다 구매상황에서 동조 행동을 보였다. 하지만, 정체성 표현과 관련된 제품(예, 청바지)의 경우, 소비자가 해당 제품을 정체성 표현과 관련되었다고 지각하는지 여부에 따라 선택상황의 영향이 달라졌다. 즉, 청바지가 자신의 정체성을 표현하는 제품이라고 지각하는 소비자는 사용상황에서는 차별화 행동을 구매상황에서는 동조 행동을 보인 반면, 청바지가 자신의 정체성을 표현하는 제품이라고 지각하지 않는 소비자는 선택상황의 영향을 받지 않았다.

핵심개념: 선택상황 (구매상황 혹은 사용상황), 동조, 차별화, 정체성 관련성

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