CONFORMITY DIVIDED: CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR AMONG THE SUBSETS OF CONFORMITY

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Spring 2011

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Marketing
with honors in Marketing

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the social effects of conformity on consumer buying behavior. College students from Penn State University were asked about their role within certain social groups on campus and in what ways they identified with their reference group. Behavior and personal beliefs in relation to the group norms were identified and plotted on a chart measuring low and high levels of conformity. The results showed that conformity could be categorized into three different types: aspirational conformity, adaptive conformity, and innate conformity. Attitudes varied for each type of conformity, and recommendations were made to market brands based on specific buying behavior.
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**Introduction**

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we have all been subject to conformity in one way or another. Our attitudes are easily influenced by social settings and group pressure where actions may be forced upon us or sought out. Consider the Nazi era when Hitler was able to sway millions with his vision for a new Germany. Soldiers conformed to his Nazi Party either because they agreed with its ideals or feared losing their lives. Young boys became members of the Hitler Youth where they wore uniforms and learned the Nazi ideology. The result of these conforming soldiers was the death of millions during the Holocaust and World War II.

Although this is an extreme case, conformity happens at any age in everyday life. American children conform to saying the Pledge of Allegiance before school begins, teenagers will dress a certain way to fit in at school, and adults give handshakes when meeting someone for the first time. But why do we buy cakes instead of pizza to celebrate a birthday, wear black instead of green at a funeral, and eat cereal for breakfast rather than dinner? These questions can be answered by looking at conformity and the evaluation of our behavior through cognitive dissonance.

**Cognitive Dissonance**

As stated by Leon Festinger, “If you change a person’s behavior, his thoughts and feelings will change to minimize the dissonance” (Groenveld, 1999, p. 1). Social psychologists have conducted extensive amounts of research regarding group influences, and studies show that people are highly susceptible to conform when under group pressure. Group influence is “one of the most important factors in the attention stage of the purchase process,” (Venkatesan, 1966) so one can infer that the consumer decision process happens in social settings where conformity is high.
Cognitive dissonance suggests that humans thrive for consistency in their beliefs and behavior. When the two attitudes become disharmonious, we feel “aversive arousal” and become motivated to reduce this psychological tension (Breckler, Olson, & Wiggins, 2006, p. 253). Consonance can be achieved if the conflicting attitude is changed, but often times adjusting well-known cognitions can be difficult. Alternative actions for reducing dissonance are to either acquire new information or reduce the importance of cognitions and achieve consistency.

Conformity

People conform to social pressure to gain acceptance from others in fear of being rejected or out of a desire to be right (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). For example, if you attend a Penn State football game for the first time as a visitor from San Diego, California, you may wear the team’s colors to fit in with the crowd. You arrive at the football game and notice all the students standing on the bleachers, so you decide to stand as well. Wearing the team’s colors would be an example of social pressure to gain acceptance (normative influence) and standing in the bleachers would be an example of wanting to do what’s right (informational influence). You didn’t know that students stand during the entire football game, but once you find out this information, you conform to the behavior.

Asch’s Conformity Studies (1951) provide classic examples of how normative social influence from the majority group can sway one’s decision regardless of whether it’s right or wrong. In Asch’s experiment, individuals were asked to evaluate three lines and choose which one was the same length as the reference line. Exposure to the contrary-to-fact opinion of the majority group (three or more confederates) caused 76% of the participants to conform to the obviously incorrect answer. When faced with a discrepancy between opinion and majority belief, Moscovici’s Dual-process Model (as cited in Fiske et al., 1998) shows that participants
compared both views and conformed to the majority rather than believing their own opinion. In addition to this model, Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory says that we compare ourselves to others deemed socially superior (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler 2002). The intention of this upward social comparison is to make one’s self-view more positive by showing similarities with the comparison group.

Variations to Asch’s experiment showed that group size and the presence of a deviant altered the degree of conformity. A group as small as three to four people can exert enough pressure on an individual to conform to the majority whereas the presence of a deviant or minority influence decreases the likelihood to conform. In the presence of a minority influence, one will examine the accuracy of the minority’s position and the possibility of conforming to opposing beliefs becomes higher (Moscovici as cited in Fiske et al., 1998).

Social norms, whether implied or explicit, are what guide our behavior, values, and beliefs within a group (Monin, p. 628). Whether they are observed through human behavior or the surrounding environment, implicit norms are hard to define because they are ultimately determined by one’s own perception. Monin notes that pluralistic ignorance to the true attitudes of the group can create misperceptions or illusionary norms.

For example, a new member of a fraternity may make the misperception that hazing builds character and is acceptable behavior. In reality, older brothers who have been through the hazing process are privately against this belief but don’t publically express their opinion. Since both older brothers and new members don’t speak up, the illusionary norm remains for the following pledge classes. Therefore illusionary norms can create a dynamic nature to normative influence where a snowballing effect occurs and the group reinforces its grip on new individuals. However, do illusionary norms change everyone’s beliefs? When a false consensus is formed,
one overestimates the attitudes of the group. If other members do not agree with these assumed values, this may imply a deviant is present, and rejection may follow if the deviant does not conform.

**Situational Variables**

A number of studies explore the situational variables that increase conformity to a social group. They may include culture, source, role identification, clothing, likeability & similarity, and social status.

For example, conformity often times has a negative connotation in Western cultures like America where individualism is valued. However, collectivist cultures like China are more likely to conform because they value interdependence (as cited in Fiske et al., 1998). Adherence to social roles also influences conformity. The Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1973) illustrates how quickly participants adapted to the behavior of a “prisoner” or “guard” when told to do so. An important indication of role identification that should be highlighted in this case is the use of clothing. Uniforms were used as an informative role symbol to establish status within the group. Prisoners were given smocks with numbers sewn in and stocking caps while guards wore khaki pants, a khaki shirt, and sunglasses to prevent eye contact.

Likeability and similarities in common opinions, personality traits, background or lifestyle also increase conformity (Fiske et al., 1998). New interpersonal relationships are created or existing ones are strengthened because “we grant them favorable treatment in charitable, negotiation, and legal settings” (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981, p. 175).

Table 1 represents a list of additional situational variables composed by Argyle, Adrian, and Graham from the book *Social Situations* (1981, p. 176). From this table, group size, unanimity of group judgment, group attraction, and public vs. private behavior were used to
evaluate participants during the study. As mentioned before, groups consisting of three to four
people are large enough to cause conformity. The number of members in the reference groups
used in this experiment range from 40,000 members to 60 members. We should consider whether
a group that is too large will seem unattractive. Perhaps individuals will feel less inclined to
belong to the group since they may be just another one in a million. For example, someone who
references himself as an American and as a member of the Texas Trophy Hunting Association
may show higher conformity to the hunting association although he is a member of both groups.

Unanimity of group judgment will also be examined because this variable may show
differences in conformity among groups that contain multiple subgroups. Perhaps groups
containing more subgroups will have less conformity since values may seem less cohesive.
Additionally, group attraction will be used since a group may be considered attractive but not the
most attractive. For example, one may be restricted to choosing the most attractive group, so he
will turn to the next best available option where the degree of conformity is lower. Last, studies
show that people are more likely to conform when acts are performed in public rather than
private.
1. **Task difficulty and ambiguity.** The more difficult the task, or ambiguous the stimuli, the more subjects look to others as sources of information, especially in opinions and abilities that have reference to social reality.

2. **The nature of the stimulus.** Conformity behaviour varies considerably as a function of what type of judgement people are asked to make (count metronome clicks, give opinions, solve arithmetic problems); the more factual and clear the problem the less the conformity that results.

3. **Source certainty.** The more certain a person is of the reliability and correctness of his influence source, the more likely he is to conform to it.

4. **Group size.** Researchers have disagreed as to whether the relationship between group size and conformity is linear or curvilinear, though there does appear to be an optimal conformity-inducing group size (Rosenberg, 1961).

5. **Unanimity of group judgement.** The more unanimous the group judgement, the more conformity is elicited; quite small amounts of deviation within the majority lead to a large reduction in conformity responses.

6. **Group composition and attraction.** Cohesive groups of high status, and prestigious males, tend to elicit most conformity; the more attractive the group, the more a person is likely to be influenced by it.

7. **Group acceptance.** High-status people have idiosyncrasy credit and can deviate, as do very low-status or rejected group members; people of middle status usually conform most.

8. **Private or public behaviour.** People tend to conform more when asked to give their judgement or to behave publicly rather than privately.

9. **Previous success or failure of the group.** Numerous experiments have demonstrated that a person will conform more to a group that has a past history of success than to one that has consistently failed.

10. **Consistency of the minority.** Moscovici and Lage (1976) have shown that a convinced, coherent minority forming a representative subgroup of individuals can greatly influence majority opinion. It is most important that the minority is consistent in its position if it is to have any effect on the majority.

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**Table 1 – Situational Variables Affecting Conformity**

Source: Argyle, Furnham, and Graham, 1981, p. 176
Consumer Behavior

The idea of brand-choice congruence or the likelihood that consumers will buy what others in the group purchase goes hand in hand with normative influence and conformity. When looking at the decision-making process, conformity to group norms can be identified right from the start. The need recognition stems “from a desire to identify with a membership or reference group” (Venkatesan, 1966, p. 385). Next, one seeks information from the group, especially personal sources, about quality and style which are often difficult to evaluate objectively. Consumers often times face difficulty in choosing which brand to purchase since they must evaluate the positive and negative attributes of each product. Because this process may be time consuming with so many brands to choose from, consumers will deliberate on whether they purchased the right brand during the post-purchase evaluation. If the consumer experiences dissonance during this process, he will purchase a different brand in the future.

Reference groups have been shown to exert a great influence on the consumption of luxury goods and brands consumed in public (Hoyer & Macinnis, 2007). When one displays brands to the public, opportunities arise for sanctions or acceptance. The use of logos or images can also aid consumers in differentiating brands. Additionally, products that signify membership within a group are affected by normative influence. Refer back to the introduction with the given example of Nazi soldiers. Uniforms with the swastika symbol identified Germans as members of the Nazi party. The use of this logo helped strengthen one’s identity within the group as well as to the public. Thus, brands hold much value to consumers in social settings. The swastika brand was so powerful that it still has negative associations and is considered an offensive image.

Considering the idea that dissonance arises after making an important decision as well as with conformity, we can apply the theory of normative influence and the consumer decision
making process to different social groups. The goal of this study is to identify the different variables affecting conformity and relate these findings to consumer behavior.

**STUDY**

**Research Method**

Eight Penn State undergraduate students were interviewed in a discussion-based setting. First, three social groups (sorority sisters, out-of-state students, and local students) were selected for the study. Selecting three reference groups created variability since they were different in size and beliefs, thereby allowing a deeper analysis. The sorority sisters showed group cohesiveness, strong unanimity of group judgment, and group attractiveness.

Out-of-state students were selected to see if a difference in culture would affect conformity. Members within this group had exposure to multiple social settings and offered a unique outside perspective to Penn State culture. Also, the ability for out-of-state students to be far from home showed that they were independent and willing to try new things.

Last, local students were chosen to see if they were content with the already existing group or if they would conform to the new one. With strong ties to the community, local students may have wanted to either stay close to home or experience a new environment. At the same time, other in-state students were also conforming to the Penn State group, but they did not have the alternative option available like the local students.

Four sorority sisters, one international student, one out-of-state student, and two students from the local town of State College, PA participated in the study. Out of the participants, seven were female and one was a male. Each participant was categorized into a distinct social group, and their names as well as the name of the sorority were changed for reasons of anonymity.

The research objective was not given until the end of the interview, and students were
asked to answer questions about their social role according to the reference group. For example, students were asked “what life as a sorority sister, out-of-state student, or Penn State student from State College” is like. First, group norms were defined to compare the participant to the reference group by asking what a typical member of the reference group was like. Then, students were asked how they identified with the group and what beliefs, values, and opinions made them similar as well as different from peers. Last, eating habits, personal style, music taste, and general demographics were recorded. Instances of conformity were then graphed on a single axis based on low and high levels of conformity.

**Results & Analysis**

**Sorority Sisters – Aspirational Conformity**

Out of the four sisters interviewed from the Alpha Beta Gamma sorority, one was the President of her chapter while the other three held leadership roles within the group. Before gaining acceptance into the sorority, members went through a process called Recruitment where they got to know all of the sororities on campus and narrowed down nineteen choices to their top three. Judgments were made based on conversations with members of each sorority, which may imply that new members made decisions based on aspirations to be like the members of the group.

All of the sisters stated their reasons for joining Alpha Beta Gamma were that they identified with its values and beliefs. The typical Alpha Beta Gamma member was described as an outgoing, confident female who liked to have fun but was also very studious. Her interests included partying, working out, spending time with friends, and studying to get good grades. It was established among all participants that the common dress code for sorority girls on campus
was sweatpants during the day and tight-fitting dresses at night.

The president, Ashley, is a 19 year-old Secondary Education major from Chicago, Illinois. She said that her personality didn’t change when arriving at Penn State, but rather her clothing style. In high school, she planned outfits the night before and got dressed to a T. Now she wears sweatpants to class and no make-up during the day, which she would never consider in high school. Ashley’s reasoning was that in high school, she felt like she had to impress the quarterback whereas “here you can be whoever you are and people accept you for that.” Conformity is considered high because Ashley converted to the day dress code and switched from one extreme of caring so much to another. She ends up liking the idea of not having to put much effort into her day outfits and values the idea of being accepted for who she is.

At night, Ashley states that the typical dress outfit for a sorority girl is usually tight fitted clothing that is somewhat revealing. She usually wears a high-waist skirt from American Apparel, solid prints, no accessories, and high heels. But if she were at her hometown, her dress would be much different. Ashley says, “In Chicago, the style is more fashionable and something you would see in a fashion magazine.” She describes her style as more conservative than the group and loves shopping at Nordstrom and J. Crew. Because the Greek community has influenced Ashley’s nighttime outfits, conformity is high.

Both instances of high conformity may be influenced by social status and a need to fulfill a specific social role. Recall the Stanford Prison Experiment where clothing helped participants identify themselves as “guards” and “prisoners.” Ashley conforms to the typical dress of a sorority girl because she must establish herself as part of Greek life, especially since she is President of her chapter (Figure 1).
Betsey is a 19-year old Nutritional Sciences major from Wyomissing, PA. She also shows high conformity to the “sorority girl” style. During the day, she typically wears yoga pants and a V-neck. At night, she wears short skirts, tight dresses, and flashier jewelry. Betsey says, “My style has changed, but not my values. I have just as much respect for myself.” Because the campus is so large, she feels that she doesn’t have to care as much about impressing others because she is accepted by Alpha Beta Gamma and can be herself.

Low conformity occurs at socials or mini parties where the sorority is paired with a fraternity within the Greek community. Betsey goes to socials, but she’s not used to dealing with large amounts of people because she is from a small town in Pennsylvania. Since she always had a close knit group of friends in high school, she feels no need to be in the limelight or throw herself out for attention.

However, Betsey notes that she has become more willing to meet new people. As a
member of Alpha Beta Gamma, she must be conscious of what she says and where she goes. She is aware her actions will reflect upon the group, so she avoids ending up at the wrong place at the wrong time. Betsey attends socials to maintain the sorority’s reputation by socializing with outsiders.

Betsey’s feels accepted by Alpha Beta Gamma and expresses likeability as well as similarity towards the group. She expressed interest in joining a sorority because the campus was so large that she wanted to have a smaller community of friends. Perhaps the sorority offered a more cohesive group than the Penn State culture. Betsey’s dress also helps her identify with her role as a sorority sister within the group and to the rest of the Penn State campus (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 – Betsey, Aspirational Conformity

Casey is a 19 year-old Business major from Princeton, New Jersey who describes herself as more athletic than the other sisters and always dressed “sporty.” She shows high conformity with her nighttime dress and states, “I wouldn’t wear heels if I wasn’t in Alpha Beta Gamma.”
For the night, Casey says, “I get dolled up to the maximum, but I’m sporty during the day. It’s two extremes, but I like the best of both worlds.” She also notes how older sisters make comments about new members’ outfits on their first night out. “It’s horrendous what some girls first wear out,” she says, but eventually being a member of the sorority makes them change their style. Similar to Betsey, Casey is more reserved and shows low conformity at socials. She doesn’t like to dance with the other girls at socials and isn’t as outgoing, but still enjoys making friends at these events.

Casey conforms to Alpha Beta Gamma because of likeability and similarity. She says, “I picked Alpha Beta Gamma because the values were closest to my own.” She also assumes her role as a sorority girl with her nighttime dress. Although she conforms to attending socials with other Greek organizations, she doesn’t fully conform because she is less outgoing and doesn’t dance at socials.

**FIGURE 3 – Casey, Aspirational Conformity**
Dana is 20 years-old and a Graphic Design major from Chicago, Illinois. Her interview showed high conformity for dress and low conformity for developing relationships within the sisterhood. In high school, Dana put much more effort in what she wore to class, but now she wears spandex and a T-shirt to class. At night, she usually wears a dress with high heels. She says, “I didn’t pack any in-between clothes this semester. It was either sweats or going out clothes.” However, in Chicago, the most dressed up she will get is wearing jeans and a shirt when she goes out with her friends.

When discussing why they chose Alpha Beta Gamma over other sororities, Ashley, Betsey, and Casey stated that older members shared the same values and interests they did. The idea of a strong sisterhood was apparent among the three. However, Dana mentions there being no specific type for Alpha Beta Gammas because anybody can fit in. She says she is similar to her sisters because they all came into the sorority with friends from outside groups. Although they are part of the sorority, they still “value friendships outside just as much as inside.” This is not the case because the other sisters value sisterhood over outside friendships. Therefore in reality, the members don’t perceive outside friendships to have equal value, and Dana believes in an illusionary norm.

During the discussion, Dana said, “Since I came from Chicago, I’m more of a foreigner. Most people are from Pennsylvania, New York, or New Jersey and have more things in common.” She also states that people are less familiar with things she talks about because they’re not from the same area. Dana describes the lifestyle in Chicago as being much different than State College. “People in Chicago seem more stuck up than here where it is mellow,” and appearance seems to be a major focus.

Dana joined Alpha Beta Gamma because she wanted to get involved on campus. She
chose joining a sorority over other student organizations on campus because of group composition and attraction. Recall earlier that more cohesive groups of higher status will elicit the most conformity. Greek organizations are highly involved on the campus and student activities. For example, the majority of money raised for the annual Penn State Dance Marathon (the university’s largest student run fundraiser) comes from Greek organizations. However, once accepted by the group, Dana didn’t connect with other members. As a result, she transferred to Indiana University where she was closer to her home and boyfriend (Figure 4).

![Diagram showing Low Conformity and High Conformity]

**Low Conformity**
- Sisterhood Relationships - Makes strong friendships with people outside the group. Feels like sisters can’t relate to her at times.

**High Conformity**
- Dress - Spandex and a T-shirt to class, dress and heels at night

**FIGURE 4 – Dana, Aspirational Conformity**

**Out-of-State Students – Adaptable Conformity**

Both out-of-state students had experienced multiple social groups and diverse cultures before arriving at Penn State. Their low conformity to the Penn State culture may be caused by the fact that they are aware their conformity to the group will be temporary since they are
constantly changing environments. Therefore they just go along with the group for the time being. The first participant was Abby, a 21-year-old Advertising major who has spent 8 years in Texas, 5 years in Oklahoma, 5 years in Montana, and 4 years in Pennsylvania. In 1997, Abby moved from Texas to Oklahoma because her father’s construction company was quickly growing. Before the burst of the economic bubble, Abby’s father was trying to sell off his company while her mother was getting her doctorate degree. Shortly after receiving her PhD., Abby moved to Montana where her mother taught at the University of Montana.

When asked why she picked Penn State, Abby replied that it was sheer luck. She applied to schools all over the country and chose different majors for each one. She knew she wanted a large population of students, but says she didn’t realize how important choosing the right major was at the time. North Carolina, LSU, University of Montana, and San Diego were some schools she had considered with Business, Marketing, Dermatology, and Liberal Arts majors. Abby spent two years at the Altoona branch campus before transferring to the main campus at University Park.

A typical Penn State student to Abby is defined as middle class, from the suburbs, and passionate about both college and professional sports teams. Most students are involved in organizations or clubs on campus, and she also mentioned that many girls on campus wear sweatpants or casual clothes to class while wearing dresses with heels at night.

When it came to style, Abby has high conformity. She follows along with the dress of Penn State students by wearing yoga pants and comfortable clothes to class and was excited to talk about her love for online shopping and fashion blogs. She takes pictures from magazines and decorates her room, constantly refreshing her walls with cutouts from the newest magazines. In Montana, there was nowhere for Abby to go where she could get dressed up. She said she would
look ridiculous if she dressed up in Montana, but she likes how she can get dressed up in State College at night.

When asked how she identifies with the Penn State culture, Abby said she uses school resources such as the computer lab and library, but she doesn’t have many Penn State branded items. The only PSU merchandise she has is one sweatshirt and a few schoolbooks she kept over the semesters. However, Abby says she identifies with the drinking and partying lifestyle of students, but also thinks she is not like most Penn State students. “I understand that I’m weird and have a different sense of humor than most people.” Abby played on the tennis team at a satellite campus for two years, but the sport was becoming too much of a time commitment and more about competing than playing. Since then, Abby quit the team and hasn’t been involved with any other clubs or organizations at State College. Conformity to the Penn State culture is low since Abby adapts to nightlife, but does not get involved with student organizations or clubs. However, Abby points out that “your experience at Penn State is what you make out of it. There are so many things to get involved in and I’m just realizing this now. For the first two years, I was still adjusting.” Perhaps if Abby was given more time, she would show higher conformity to the culture. Unfortunately, Abby is a senior and will be graduating in a few months.

When Abby first arrived at Penn State’s Altoona campus, she was nervous and made friends immediately with students living on her dorm floor. She stuck with them during her freshman year, but realized the group lacked diversity. After a messy breakup with her boyfriend, Abby cut ties with the group and started to make friendships with new students. She says, “Penn State has many subcultures. I’m not really a part of any, but I’m on the outskirts of all of them.” Abby categorized her friends in many groups including “members of the Left Wing Movement, musicians, young adults living in State College, graduated students living in State
College, sorority sisters and fraternity brothers, and athletes.”

Thus, Abby’s conformity to a group of friends is low because she identifies with multiple groups, but does not have full membership within one specific social crowd. Instead she selects individual members from various groups that she finds likeability in and similarity with. This may be caused by the fact that she knows her membership will be temporary. She may feel that by the time she conforms she will have to re-conform to another social group elsewhere. Abby has been used to moving around her whole life, and she sells most of her clothes and belongings whenever she moves. She basically starts a new life and said, “I love how I can just move somewhere and be someone completely different since nobody knows who I was before.”

The service industry is the only social group where Abby shows high conformity. She says, “If you work at a bar, you’re automatically going to be friends with everybody else at that bar.” Because she had to maintain a full-time job to pay for tuition, Abby had no other choice but to be exposed to the social influence of the service industry. She states that people in the industry are “out every single night. If they’re not working, they’re drinking till 5 AM.” Abby adopted this behavior and was out at the bars every day of the week, but stopped going out because her body began to feel the negative effects of heavy drinking. Another reason for her change in behavior was that she started dating a college graduate who was still living in town. Perhaps she subconsciously felt the need for a boyfriend to avoid conforming.

Abby was attracted to Penn State because the university offered a large student population and an excellent education, but she randomly made a choice and didn’t put much thought into her decision. She conforms to the clothing and partying lifestyle based on likeability and conforms less to the values of getting involved in student organizations. However, if Abby had more time on campus, she would probably get more involved. This may suggest that time is
an important variable to conformity. She also doesn’t fully conform to a group of friends and temporarily conforms to whatever social group she is hanging out with based on likeability. At one point, she conforms to the attitudes of employees in the service industry because of similarity and role identification. At night, she also identifies herself as a member of this group to outsiders (Figure 5).

![Figure 5](image)

**FIGURE 5 – Abby, Adaptable Conformity**

Brittany is a 21 year-old public relations major at Penn State. She is an international student from Beijing, China and has been living in State College for three years. Brittany described typical Penn State students as loyal to their school and highly involved in organizations and extracurricular activities on campus. She says students love partying, going to dive bars in town, and attending football games while sweatpants and a sweatshirt was the usual dress to class.

Brittany pointed out that in Beijing; females typically wear retro vintage clothing and
dressy heels which is quite contrary to the average female Penn State student who wears comfy spandex and a plain T-shirt to class. She believes Penn State females only get dressed up at night or for special events, but Chinese students get dressed up for class and the nighttime.

Brittany’s level of conformity to Penn State’s college fashion is low. She wears her retro vintage outfits to class, but hides her style with a casual cardigan to avoid comments from students about being the “most fashionable” or too dressed for class. Although she doesn’t wear her heels to class, Brittany still keeps them in her State College apartment and wears them at night when she feels more comfortable getting dressed up.

Brittany may show low conformity to campus fashions, but she notes that many Asian foreign-exchange students have high conformity when it comes to clothing and conforming to the Penn State culture. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch, a near luxury brand that symbolizes the American lifestyle, is very popular among foreign students. To conform to the American style, Asian students religiously buy their comfortable zip-up sweatshirts and soft cotton tees.

When it comes to hanging out, Brittany says if her friends are doing something, she’ll usually go along with the group. Since her American friends exercise daily and frequently eat salads, a typical American meal, she conforms to their lifestyle. On the other hand, her friends and parents living in China don’t exercise because it is more of a necessity rather than an option. Beijing is so large that people must do a lot of walking to get around. Veronica’s exercise and eating habits change according to location which indicates location may also be a variable affecting conformity.

To identify with the Penn State culture, Brittany has a few Penn State notebooks and binders along with one single Penn State sweatshirt she rarely wears. She is also involved with PRSSA, the Public Relations Student Society of America, on campus. As a member of the Event
Planning committee, she helps the Penn State Dance Marathon (the university’s largest student run fundraiser) with their public relations activities. Although she attends weekly meetings, she lacks the resources needed to be fully involved with the group. The responsibilities of the Event Planning committee are to contact personal networks and ask for donations towards THON and related promotional events. Most students contact their friends and family, but Brittany is restricted because her closest contacts live in China.

In regards to social life at Penn State, Veronica likes to spend the day eating lunch and exercising with her American friends. However, she doesn’t like American football and has never attended a football game or watched the Penn State Dance Marathon despite her involvement on the Event Planning committee in PRSSA. On the weekends, she makes frequent trips to NYC where she visits her Chinese friends who are also studying abroad. Therefore, her conformity to PSU culture is low because she values getting involved on campus, but does not find value in the social aspect. She is interested in making American friends, but not interested in doing specific Penn State activities like attending football games or going to the dive bars at night.

Brittany conforms to the style at Penn State to avoid teasing from classmates. She notes that she doesn’t really get along with many other foreign exchange students at Penn State and wants to make American friends, which is one reason she chose to study abroad in America. Therefore she conforms to the eating and exercise habits because of likeability and attractiveness to her American friends. Brittany also conforms to the PSU culture based on attraction. She gets involved in PRSSA because it will help her get a job after college, but since her role on the Event Planning committee is restricted, her conformity is low. Since she doesn’t find similarities in nightlife interests among other PSU students, she frequently visits her friends in NYC who enjoy
going to lounge bars and nightclubs at night. We should also note that Brittany is from China which is a collectivist society. As mentioned previously, studies show that collectivist cultures are more likely to conform than individualistic societies (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6 – Brittany, Adaptable Conformity**

**Local Students – Innate Conformity**

We have already covered the sorority sisters who conformed to the sorority based on likeability, similarity, and attractiveness. Dress seemed to be the major implication of conformity as well as expressing their roles as sorority sisters of Alpha Beta Gamma to the public. We also looked at the out-of-state students whose main reasons for conforming to the Penn State culture were likeability and attractiveness. However, conformity is low and participants selected what aspects of the culture she wanted to conform to whether it was the social life or involvement with student organizations. For example, Abby conforms to the social life, but spends her time
working instead of getting involved on campus. On the other hand, Brittany is involved on campus but enjoys visiting her friends off campus in NYC. Now we will look at local students from State College.

The local students are faced with the choice of adapting to the State College group they have always been used to or the new Penn State group. Both students seemed to revert back to their State College social group because they were already familiar and comfortable with the group. Because they were closely tied to the State College community they had grown up in their whole lives, they used their instincts in selecting which social group to adapt to.

The first local student interviewed was Andrew, a 22 year-old male who grew up in State College but recently spent the last year living in Rehoboth, Delaware. His family is from the area, and he works at their local retail shop downtown. Andrew dropped out of Penn State after three semesters, but he plans on re-enrolling at Penn State University for the Fall 2011 semester as a Journalism major. Andrew says a typical Penn Stater goes to class, has a part-time job or internship, and looks for lifelong friends. They also get involved with Penn State on some level like a political or student organization in order to be a part of something or make connections.

When asked about his experiences at Penn State before dropping out, Andrew said he lived in a dorm with a business major who was pledging at a fraternity. He “had an 18-inch Macbook with crazy clear speakers and no wires, and he did frat stuff all the time,” so they didn’t spend much time together. Andrew wasn’t involved in any organizations and kept to himself. His attitude was “I was from State College, so I already knew people. Plus, I was in a serious relationship.” Thus, the level of conformity to Penn State culture is low since Andrew was already exposed to the social influences of his already existing network of friends and family living in State College. However, Andrew says that if he went to a school outside of his
hometown, he wouldn’t be as closed off and would want to meet new people. His books, notebooks, and a couple of sweatshirts were items in his room that helped him identify with Penn State.

When asked how he would term his style, Andrew said “My Style.” It’s not trendy or anything specific, but everyday casual. He likes to name his outfits such as The British Pilot, wearing long black tube socks with army green shorts, and The Crow, an all-black look. He doesn’t like wearing specific brands of clothing and shops at TJ Maxx and Wal-Mart. Therefore Andrew does not use clothing to express his role within the group.

Andrew shows low conformity to the PSU culture due to the lack of similarity and clothing. He had trouble relating to his freshman year roommate who didn’t share common interests with him. As a result, Andrew was discouraged to make new friends and ended up hanging out with his friends from high. Thus, his conformity to the State College culture is high. The lack of likeability and attraction to the Penn State culture may explain why Andrew dropped out of the university but continued to live in State College (Figure 7).
Brenda also grew up in the State College area and is a 20 year-old Architecture major. Her parents are both professors at the university, and she believes Penn State is part of the State College culture. She states the typical Penn State student has a lot of school pride, “works hard, but parties harder,” and is very involved with student organizations.

Originally Brenda planned on attending California College of the Arts, but was unable to enroll because of the expensive tuition. She notes that some students from State College want to get out of the town because they need a change. For her, the Penn State experience is different than what most students go through because her family is still in the area. Brenda must balance both lives as a family and student, and she still spends time with her family on a weekly basis. However, if she went to California College of the Arts, she would have been able to do her own thing and find out what it was like to be on her own without her family.

Although most freshmen at Penn State must live on campus their first year, Brenda lived
off campus with her friend from State College and didn’t have the typical freshman year dorm experience. She says she likes football and has school spirit, but it’s “a different type of school spirit.” Brenda thinks Penn was never new to her when she was freshman. Brenda didn’t have many items that helped her identify with Penn State. She said she had some blue decorations including blue and white lights and keeps binders and notebooks from her classes. Thus, her conformity to PSU culture is low, but conformity to the State College culture is high. Brenda chooses to conform to the State College culture over the PSU culture by living off campus and visiting her family frequently.

Another group Brenda identified with was the group of Architecture majors. She describes the program as very competitive where students always seem stressed out and don’t have much free time. She says, “Professors are harsh with their critiques and want everybody to be competitive to fight for an A. It’s almost like hazing since this is what the professors went through, so they expect the same from you.” Brenda is interested in architecture, but does not want to do if for a living. She is more interested in the design aspect and artistic side rather than the engineering part but believes having architecture major will help her get a job. She states that many students don’t have time for a job and students within the major are very close since they are around each other all the time. However, Brenda works at a local store downtown and considers herself to have many groups of friends outside of her major and the State College community. Thus, conformity is low for the architecture major group as well. This example also shows high conformity to the State College group since she works at a local store downtown and her family is good friends with the owner of the shop.

As a subgroup of Architecture majors, Brenda is also a member of the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), an organization that enables young architects to get involved,
network, and find internships. Brenda pays dues and has future plans to be involved with the THON committee, but conformity is low since she never attends the meetings and her words seem to speak louder than her actions. In fact, she almost forgot about the organization because she was so busy with school and “life things.”

Likeability, similarity, attraction, and role identification affect Brenda’s conformity. She shows low conformity to the Penn State culture because it wasn’t her first choice university to attend. The low attraction and likeability lowers her conformity because her attitude is that she is not similar to other Penn State students. She also has low conformity to the group of architecture majors since she points out more differences than similarities with the group. Since she is a member of AIAS but doesn’t have a specific role or responsibility within the group, her conformity is also low. However, her conformity to the State College group is high because she is still close with members of the group and is more involved in this group than the Penn State groups.

![Diagram showing Brenda's conformity levels]

**FIGURE 8 – Brenda, Innate Conformity**
DISCUSSION

After evaluating each participant and the corresponding social groups, it became clear that conformity is not a monolithic concept, but one that can be subdivided in several ways. Three newly developed subsets were identified based on the data and they are aspirational conformity, adaptable conformity, and innate conformity.

In the case of the sorority girls, likeability and similarity were the main factors of conformity. New members found similar values within the group and likeable traits in members who were already accepted by the group. To complement these variables, aspirations should also be considered. New members may have looked up to the members as if they were a role model or mentor. For example, Casey stated “Alpha Beta Gamma had the type of girls I wanted to hang out with.” Perhaps Casey saw something in the older sisters that she didn’t possess, but wished she did during Recruitment. Through **aspirational conformity**, Casey was accepted by the group and conformed to become her ideal person. In fact, Casey did achieve the qualities she aspired to have by breaking away from her “athletic” look. She took advice from the older sisters on how to dress and her idea of what looked good changed. Thus, aspirations to be like members who are already accepted by the group increases conformity.

Take for example a high school student who dreams of attending Penn State in the future so he can be just like his older brother. Aspirational conformity would suggest that he would wear a Penn State branded sweatshirt so he can feel like a member of the group he aspires to be a part of. It is suggested that marketers use celebrity endorsements and attractiveness to market products to those who follow aspirational conformity. By showing famous actors, a face is associated with a product and creates an identity for the brand. This influences consumers to buy the product and impersonate a false identity. For example, perfumes often use sex appeals and
attractive models in advertisements. Consumers may use social comparisons to lower or increase their self-esteem. Recall that upward social comparison occurs when consumers compare themselves to others who are deemed higher in status than themselves. This type of comparison would lead the consumers to purchase the product with intentions of increasing their self-esteem when wearing the perfume.

In Brittany’s case, she experiences dissonance between choosing whether to conform to her Chinese or Penn State culture. In order to combat the tension of dealing with both groups, she changes the importance of cognitions depending on her present environment. When she is studying at Penn State, she conforms to exercising and eating salads, but when she is in China, she fully embraces her personal style. Like a chameleon, Brittany’s attitudes adapt to her current environment, and she follows adaptable conformity where conformity is low and temporary.

Abby also experiences dissonance among opposing groups having lived in four different states. She has been exposed to four unique outlooks on life and deals with her dissonance by taking partial membership in many groups. She gains acceptance from a few individuals in each group, but not the whole. Because she assumes different roles within each group, she must adapt to each one accordingly at the moment.

An example of adaptable conformity can be explained with an international student arriving at Penn State from Brazil. She purchases a Penn State sweatshirt with her friends to identify with the university and purchases Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and Cheerios when grocery shopping with her roommates to identify with the American culture. However, her sweatshirt is rarely worn and hangs in the back of her closet while she almost never eats the American food she purchases.

Adaptable conformers will purchase brands that have a strong recognition when being
consumed or purchased publically. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch represents American style while Apple represents an innovative and creative style with their iPads and iPhones. Thus a consumer who wants to fit a specific personality type or style will purchase brands that communicate a specific identity to the public. Many brands may compete for the same customer such as one who wants to adapt to the “all-American look.” This type of consumer could choose from brands like Abercrombie & Fitch, Polo Ralph Lauren, or Tommy Hilfiger. Therefore, it is necessary that marketers ensure a strong brand image and a powerful marketing position with their products. Additionally a brand with a powerful logo such as the Apple logo or A&F moose will strengthen the brand.

Andrew and Brenda both show cultural dissonance where both social groups are present at the same time and same location. Brenda faces dissonance with the ability to have the typical college experience or revert back to the State College culture she has always been used to. She says, “I’m meeting new people and learning new things, but I’m still stuck in my hometown where the places and way things work aren’t new.” Andrew also faced cognitive dissonance when he first enrolled at the university. He was starting a new experience as a freshman but still had close ties with his family, friends, and girlfriend. Andrew mentions that if he wasn’t attending school in State College, he would be much more outgoing and willing to meet people.

When given the option to conform to the social group they were familiar with, both Andrew and Brenda chose to conform less to the Penn State culture and found more value in their State College community. Andrew and Brenda both followed innate conformity to the social groups they were most accustomed to. In both cases, the inherited values from State College proved to be stronger than the new social setting. Dana, the sorority sister, is also subject to innate conformity since she transferred to University of Indiana to be closer to home.
Let’s say a child receives a reward in school for getting an A on his math test. The teacher lets him choose from ten T-shirts that each have a college logo from one of the “Big 10 Universities.” If the child’s parents were die-hard Penn State fans and brought him to Penn State football games every year while filling his room with Penn State decorations, innate conformity would suggest that the child would most likely choose the Penn State T-shirt. Marketing efforts on consumers who follow innate conformity should focus on brand loyalty. If a consumer is overloaded with too many choices, he may select a brand based on familiarity. For instance, if a college student is buying detergent for the first time, he may select the Tide brand because his mother had always used this brand. Brand loyalty ensures long-term commitment from innate conformers and prevents the likelihood of brand switching. Figure 9 lists the key characteristics of each subset.

**FIGURE 9 – Subsets of Conformity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspirational Conformity</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associated with likeability, similarity, and attractiveness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspire to be part of group currently not accepted by.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High conformity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adaptable Conformity</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faced with pressure from multiple groups at different times.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt to multiple surroundings and conform to group at present time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low conformity that is temporary.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Innate Conformity</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faced with pressure from multiple groups at same time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conform to group most comfortable and familiar with.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High conformity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After discussing the three subsets of conformity, we can conclude that there are different motivations and reasons we conform to social groups. If the consumer follows aspirational conformity, marketers should focus on using attractive models or celebrities in their advertisements to create a brand identity. Marketing techniques for consumers following adaptable conformity should focus on a strong, concise brand position with a powerful logo. Last, brand loyalty and long-term commitment should be the focus for companies who are targeting consumers following innate conformity.

In all three marketing tactics, companies should ultimately be trying to strengthen their brand regardless of what approach they may take. In the case of the German Nazi’s and the use of the swastika symbol, branding could be seen as having negative effects. However, there aren’t many brands today that have negative connotations. Instead companies use branding as a useful technique to distinguish themselves from competitors. Without branding, consumers would have a difficult time differentiating products such as Pepsi and Coke, and making the decision-making process would be far more complicated. Thus, brands should be considered as a positive way to cause conformity. For example, commercials asking “Are you a Mac or a PC?” show that consumers differentiate brands and perceive the Macs to be more for the creative type while PC’s are more for the business focused and practical type. Thus, selecting which brand to purchase depends on which group consumers conform to. The stronger the brand, the more value consumers will see. Ideally, the brand should become a way for consumers to identify with a specific group.

**LIMITATIONS**

Results may have been skewed since participants were mostly females, who are more likely to conform than males (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966). Individual differences may also
influence how accurate each participant follows the theories postulated from previous studies. The sample was also only representative of young adults, so the assumptions cannot be generalized for everybody. For example, young adolescents are more likely to conform than adults (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966) and culture also affects conformity (as cited in Fiske et al., 199). Dissonance using the consistency process measured public actions and private opinion. However, private opinions may not have been fully expressed if participants wanted to hide their true opinions during the interview. The behavior of the participants and their beliefs are hard to measure and observing cognitive dissonance is difficult because it is somewhat subjective.

**FURTHER RESEARCH**

It is suggested that further research be conducted to investigate the effects of price on conformity. For example, fashion brands can range from basic goods to high fashion goods and low price to high price. The perceptual map below shows a variety of intimates and apparel brands in the market (Figure 10). Consider Victoria’s Secret and Aerie, two leading intimate brands that are categorized as high fashion. Would adaptable consumers be more likely to purchase Aerie for intimates over Victoria’s Secret because their prices are lower and they are less willing to invest? Consumers show higher conformity to stronger brands, but the low price vs. high price may suggest that adaptable conformers will spend less money because they are constantly changing social groups. As a result, they may purchase brands that aren’t used for a long period of time such as disposable fashions or “fast fashions” from retailers like Zara and H&M.
The participants who followed adaptable conformity said they identified with the Penn State culture through Penn State branded pens, notebooks, and sweatshirts. These goods used for public consumption were low involvement goods, and future research could be conducted to see whether conformity relates to the purchase of low vs. high involvement goods. For example, does the degree on conformity vary among a student who buys a Penn State license plate has a dog named Nittany compared to one who simply buys a notebook or pen to fit in?

Also, one could research whether conformity is higher for people who are willing to invest more money into the group. For example, social dues are a cost to joining the sorority, but one may not want to conform because they don’t want to “pay for their friends” or pay to be accepted. Therefore, further research could investigate the relationship between investment involved and conformity.
Last, we should consider time in relation to conformity. The out-of-state student Abby regretted not getting involved on campus earlier. At the same time, Andrew said he plans on getting more involved when he returns to school this upcoming semester. Although conformity to the Penn State culture was low for both students, it could be suggested that time may cause one to re-evaluate the values they once deemed less important.

**CONCLUSION**

This research was a start at investigating the subdivisions of conformity. By identifying different reasons to conform, marketers will be able to develop a better strategy in selling their products to consumers who have different motivations in the decision process. Future research should focus on pricing, low vs. high involvement of goods, amount of money invested, and time in relation to conformity.
REFERENCES


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HONORS AND AWARDS
Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant, November 2009
2008 President’s Freshman Award, May 2008
Dean’s List - 7/7 semesters

MARKETING EXPERIENCE
Marketing Intern, Lost in Fashion/Junk Food Productions, Milan, Italy
May 2010 – Dec 2010
- Researched trends daily, published and translated web posts on fashion website, and increased target audience
- Summarized press releases and generated intensive report to prepare *Vanity Fair* journalist for interview
- Assisted in all aspects of producing Fashion Week interviews and promotional Volvo S60 video
- Pitched project goals to prospective cast members and scheduled interviews for *8-Bit Generation* documentary

Penn State Marketing Association, University Park, PA
Project Manager, Retail Division
-Oct 2010 - Present
- Created and run fashion blog ([www.thneedme.blogspot.com](http://www.thneedme.blogspot.com)) to provide marketing services for retail brands

Associate Director, Retail Division
-Sept 2010 – Dec 2010
- Lead weekly meetings using PowerPoint presentations to update members on division goals
- Produced timelines and budgets, managed 60 members, and oversaw 7 projects ensuring deadlines were met

Associate Member, Retail Division
-Sept 2008 – Sept 2010
- Assisted in backstage management for *Release the Police* fashion show
Marketing Intern, JOYCE Milano Buying Office, Milan, Italy  
Feb 2010 – May 2010
- Contacted showrooms, produced buyers’ booklets, and delivered schedules using Word and Excel
- Assisted with order confirmations and updated showroom lists

WORK EXPERIENCE
Sales Associate, The Apple Tree, University Park, PA  
May 2009 – Present
- Select merchandise for upcoming seasons, re-stock and price inventory, and design advertisements

Brand Ambassador, TEAM Enterprises  
Aug 2010 – Dec 2010
- Used marketing and promotional tactics to engage consumers with Bacardi Limited products.

Model, URBAN Model Management, Milan, Italy  
Jun 2010 – Aug 2010
- Modeled showroom presentation and photo shoots for Italian designers and photographers

Sales Associate, Abercrombie and Fitch, King of Prussia, PA  
Jun 2007 – Jul 2009
- Maintained inventory, assisted customers, and handled transactions

ACTIVITIES
Member, Alpha Phi Sorority, University Park, PA  
Oct 2008 – Present

PNC Bank Leadership Assessment Program, University Park, PA  
March 2011
- Selected to assess leadership skills and create development plan using faculty and alumni feedback

Stylist & Fashion Writer, Valley Magazine, University Park, PA  
Jan 2009 – Dec 2010
- Communicated with businesses, models, and photographers to create fashion spreads and articles

SKILLS
Computer: Word, PowerPoint, Outlook, Excel, Google Apps, and Photoshop
Languages: Conversational Italian and basic Chinese (mandarin)