

To Be or *Not* Be? The Influence of Dissociative Reference Groups on Consumer Preferences

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The current research explores the effects of dissociative reference groups on consumer preferences. Males had more negative evaluations of, and were less inclined to choose, a product associated with a dissociative (i.e., female) reference group than a neutral product (Study 1). This finding was moderated by whether the product was consumed in public or private (Study 2) and public self-consciousness (Study 3). We suggest the mechanism underlying our effects is a desire to present the self to others positively. The role of dissociative reference groups in marketing communications is discussed.

Consider the following experience of the first author: One evening, my husband and I went to a high-end restaurant for dinner. As we sat deliberating over the menu, the server asked if we had made any selections. My husband looked up at the server in anguish and said that he felt like steak, but that he wasn't all that hungry. The server suggested that my husband select the smaller of the two steaks offered on the menu. My husband admitted that he had considered that option, but did not want to be perceived to "be a lady." Sure enough, I looked at the menu and saw that the smaller steak had been given the name "ladies' cut." Although my husband managed to overcome the negative associations of the ladies' cut and ended up choosing the smaller steak (only after ensuring that the server understood he was not a lady), the server told us that his intuition was that sales of the larger steak had increased since the renaming of the smaller steak.

Anecdotally, there are many examples of consumers avoiding products associated with particular groups: the teenager who doesn't want to wear his dad's aftershave, the baby boomer who won't use products that are associated with being "elderly," the college student who avoids dressing "geeky," and so forth. These examples demonstrate that groups can serve as points of reference for how consumers think and behave. Indeed, the term "reference group," which was first coined by Hyman (1942), refers to those groups or

group members who are "psychologically significant for one's attitudes and behavior" (Turner, 1991, p. 5). Notably, the majority of past reference group research has focused on positive reference groups (i.e., those groups individuals wish to be associated with), identifying the role they can play in determining an individual's attitudes and behavior (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992; Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Folkes & Kiesler, 1995; Moschis, 1982; Park & Lessig, 1977). The current research adds to this previous work by focusing on the role of dissociative reference groups in influencing consumer preferences.

The reference group literature typically distinguishes between three types of reference groups: membership groups, aspirational groups, and dissociative groups. Membership reference groups are groups to which an individual currently belongs (e.g., a family, a peer group, one's gender group). This is a type of positive reference group that the individual belongs to, identifies with, is attracted to, and feels psychologically involved with (Turner, 1991). Aspirational reference groups are also positive groups that the individual identifies with and is attracted to, but also that the individual aspires to be member of (e.g., celebrities, a desired social group membership, etc.; Englis & Solomon, 1995). Dissociative (or negative) reference groups are those groups an individual wishes to *avoid* being associated with and "disidentifies" with (Englis & Solomon, 1995; Turner, 1991). Our studies focus solely on dissociative reference groups in an effort to determine what influence these distinct referents have on consumer evaluations and choice. We do so

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by identifying self-presentation concerns as a mechanism by which these dissociative effects are realized. Although previous research links self-identity to reference group influence (Haslam, McGarty, & Turner, 1996; Platow, Mills, & Morrison, 2000; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Whittler & Spira, 2002), in the current studies we show that self-presentation concerns play an important role in determining the impact of dissociative influence.

The current research makes a number of contributions. Foremost, to our knowledge, this research is the first test of the notion that dissociative reference groups can impact consumer evaluations and preferences. Although past research on consumer reference groups has largely examined the role of membership groups on people's self-reports regarding social influence, the current studies demonstrate that the desire to avoid certain groups can influence consumer evaluations and choice. Second, we identify self-presentation concerns as a mechanism that motivates individuals in a dissociation context. We do so by examining key moderators of the influence of dissociative reference groups on consumer preferences, such as whether the consumption is to occur in public versus private, and individual differences in public self-consciousness. Third, we demonstrate the influence of dissociative reference groups not via actual or imagined dissociative group members, but through products associated with particular groups. Previous research (e.g., Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992; Sengupta, Dahl, & Gorn, 2002) has focused exclusively on the role of actual (or reported) group member influence, whereas we test whether a mere association of a product with a dissociative group will influence consumer preferences.

PAST RESEARCH ON REFERENCE GROUP INFLUENCE

Past research consistently demonstrates that membership reference groups can influence people's intentions, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990; Moschis, 1976; Turner, 1991; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Whittler & Spira, 2002). For example, members of one's own group have been shown to influence exercise intentions (Terry & Hogg, 1996), intentions to engage in sun protective behaviors (Terry & Hogg, 1996), the persuasiveness of messages (Haslam et al., 1996; Haslam, McGarty, Hutchingson, & Turner, 1994), evaluations of products and advertisements (Whittler & Spira, 2002), self-reports of product and brand selections (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Park & Lessig, 1977), as well as reports of information seeking and purchasing decisions (Moschis, 1976). In addition, researchers have documented a congruency between group membership and brand usage (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992; Mochis, 1985).

Research efforts have also focused on the aspirational role of referent others. People can become inspired and motivated

by relevant group members (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), particularly when the group member's state of affairs is perceived to be attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 2000). Similarly, aspirational reference groups have been shown to guide consumer preferences. Most of this research focuses on the role of celebrities or athletes in influencing consumers (Batra & Homer, 2004; Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001). For example, research suggests that celebrities are often effective endorsers when there is a "match-up" between the celebrity and the product (Kamins, 1990; Till & Busler, 1998) and when the celebrity doesn't endorse too many products (Tripp, Jensen, & Carlson, 1994). In addition, identification with admired groups relates to purchase intentions. For example, Madrigal (2000) demonstrated that the level of identification with a basketball team was positively related with intentions to purchase a sponsor's products. In sum, past research has largely focused on consumer social influence via both membership and aspirational reference groups.

DISSOCIATIVE REFERENCE GROUPS AND SELF-PRESENTATION CONCERNS

Although past research highlights the importance of membership and aspirational groups in determining consumer preferences, we suggest that dissociative reference groups will also have implications for consumer evaluations and choice, particularly when self-presentation concerns are salient. Research suggests that there are a number of "possible selves" that an individual has the potential to become in the future (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986) and that these possible selves include *undesired selves* that we wish to avoid (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ogilvie, 1987). Research also indicates that people not only favor in-groups (i.e., membership groups), but also avoid and disparage out-groups (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Marques, Abrams, & Paez, 1998; Turner, 1975) and decrease their association with groups that do not confer positive associations (Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996). Moreover, research suggests that consumers will avoid products with negative symbolic implications (Banister & Hogg, 2004), exhibit negative attitudes toward lifestyles they wish to avoid (Lowrey, Englis, Shavitt, & Solomon, 2001), and demonstrate who they are by avoiding particular products (Muniz & Hamer, 2001). It seems likely, then, that the desire to avoid dissociative reference groups will influence consumer preferences.

Such a desire to avoid association with dissociative reference groups should be particularly motivational (rather than the desire to avoid out-groups more generally) because a dissociative reference group is a very specific type of out-group. Although there are some out-groups the individual is not really concerned about, a dissociative reference group is an out-group that the individual is motivated to avoid being associated with. For example, consider a student who views herself as belonging to a particular in-group, "the

jocks.” She may consider “the skaters” to be an out-group, but is not concerned about them and would not go out of her way to avoid a product associated with being a skater (e.g., cargo shorts or certain styles of shoes). However, if she considers “nerds” to be a dissociative reference group, then she may indeed go out of her way to avoid a product associated with that group (e.g., a pocket protector).

We further propose that not only will dissociative reference groups have implications for consumer evaluations and choice, but that this effect will be more pronounced when self-presentation concerns are relevant. Indeed, self-report research suggests that membership reference groups may have greater influence when the product is publicly rather than privately consumed (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992). Bourne’s original theorization regarding reference group influence suggested that membership reference groups exert greater influence when consumption is more conspicuous (Bourne, 1957), presumably because this is when people are most concerned with self-presentation. In addition, attitude research indicates that individuals are more likely to oppose another person’s opinion when that individual is associated with a negative reference group, a finding that is correlated with public self-consciousness (Carver & Humphries, 1981).

Furthermore, products are often used to symbolize to others what type of person the individual is, and serve “... as a means of communication between the individual and his significant references” (Grub & Grathwohl, 1967, p. 24). Indeed, people’s consumption patterns (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005; Graef, 1996; Pliner & Chaiken, 1990; Ratner & Kahn, 2002) and tendencies to use products to represent the self to others (Sengupta et al., 2002) are related to self-presentation concerns. Similarly, it seems likely that products associated with particular reference groups will have implications for consumer evaluations and choice, particularly when self-presentation concerns are relevant. Drawing on the findings that reference group influence has been hypothesized to be more pronounced in public and that people use products symbolically to convey who they are to others, we propose that dissociative influence will be largely motivated by self-presentation concerns (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). Furthermore, research finds that those who are concerned with self-presentation are particularly focused on *avoiding* negative outcomes (Wooten & Reed, 2004). Because dissociative reference groups represent groups that consumers wish to *avoid* association with, and avoidance of negative outcomes is an important component of self-presentation, we propose that self-presentation concerns will underlie consumers’ tendency to avoid products associated with dissociative groups.

Across three studies, we test how dissociative reference groups influence consumer preferences. In our first study, we begin by demonstrating that dissociative reference groups can influence consumer evaluations and choice. In Study 2, we test for the role of self-presentation concerns in determin-

ing dissociative influence by examining the moderating role of consumption setting (i.e., whether the consumption occurs in public rather than private). Finally, in Study 3, we further explore the role of self-presentation concerns in dissociative influence by examining whether individual differences in public self-consciousness relate to the tendency to avoid products associated with a dissociative referent.

STUDY 1

The goal of Study 1 was to demonstrate that dissociative reference groups can influence consumer preferences. In Study 1, we used gender to manipulate reference group. Past research has demonstrated that one’s gender group is an important component of the self-concept (Cross & Markus, 1993; Oyserman & Markus, 1993) and that people sometimes have negative attitudes towards activities associated with the opposite sex (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). Importantly, this effect is often stronger for males who tend to be more motivated to avoid activities associated with being female (Elling & Knoppers, 2005) and tend to incur greater social ramifications for exhibiting feminine traits (Brooks, 2000). Thus, we used a product that was associated with being female to represent a choice associated with a dissociative reference group for males. We predicted that:

H1: Males will be less inclined to choose and will have more negative evaluations of a product that is associated with a dissociative (i.e., female) reference group than a product that is not associated with a dissociative reference group.

We tested this prediction by having participants choose from among various menu options. In the chef’s cut condition, participants’ choices of the key item—steak—included the chef’s cut (10 oz) or the house cut (12 oz). In the ladies’ cut condition, participants’ choices of steak included the ladies’ cut (10 oz) or the house cut (12 oz). We predicted that, in the ladies’ cut condition, males would be less likely to choose and would have less positive evaluations of the ladies’ cut steak than the house cut steak. In the chef’s cut condition we did not anticipate any differences in ratings or choice of the chef’s cut or house cut steak. We anticipated that females would have similar evaluations of the 10-oz steak regardless of whether it was called ladies’ cut or chef’s cut, because neither label represents a dissociative reference group for them. In fact, they might show a slight preference for the ladies’ cut steak, because this would represent a membership group for them.

Method

Participants. Eighty-two (41 males and 41 females) participants from a large North American university com-

pleted questionnaires regarding menu selections for course credit.

Procedure. Participants were run in small groups of three to six people, and completed questionnaires asking them to imagine that they had been invited to attend a banquet for work. They read that they had been asked to select the menu items that they would like for their appetizer, entrée, and dessert. In order to encourage participants to select steak, they read: "You are tempted to select a lighter appetizer and perhaps a steak for your main course. ..." Note that although this prompt should increase choice of steak in general, it should not differentially influence which steak was chosen across conditions. To reduce demand characteristics, participants viewed a menu with multiple options on it. Participants then selected which specific items they would choose and evaluated every option that was available on the menu.

Independent variables. This study used a 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) \times 2 (reference group label: ladies' cut vs. chef's cut) \times 2 (steak size: 10 oz vs. 12 oz) mixed model design (with steak size as the within-subjects measure). Participants were presented with two options for the key item, steak. In the chef's cut condition, the options provided were the house cut steak (12 oz) and the chef's cut steak (10 oz). In the ladies' cut condition, the two options were the house cut steak (12 oz) and the ladies' cut steak (10 oz). Thus, participants were always offered the same 12-oz option (the house cut), and what was varied was their second option (the 10-oz option labeled as either ladies' cut or chef's cut). The order of presentation of the two steak options was counterbalanced.

Dependent variables. Participants were given the opportunity to indicate which menu items they would choose for their appetizer, entrée, and dessert. The first dependent variable was the proportion of males and females who indicated they would choose the 10-oz versus the 12-oz steak for their entrée. The second dependent variable was participants' evaluations of the different steaks. Participants evaluated each menu option on three 9-point scales, ranging from 1 (*unfavorable*) to 9 (*favorable*), 1 (*dislike*) to 9 (*like*) (9), and 1 (*bad*) to 9 (*good*). These items were averaged to create indexes of steak evaluations for the 10-oz and 12-oz steaks (as = .92 and .96, respectively). Finally, participants completed a suspicion probe and were debriefed. Examination of responses across all three studies indicated that no participants were aware of the experimental hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

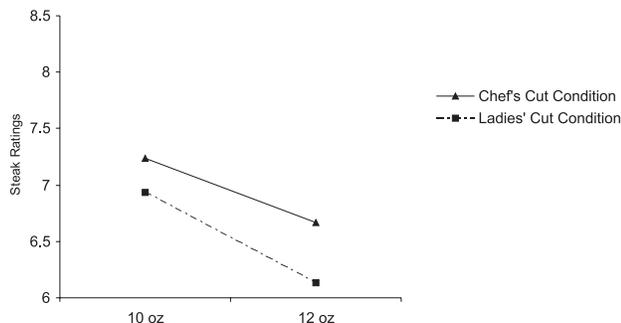
Choice of steak. Chi-square analysis was used to examine the menu choices that people made. First we examined the choices of males who selected steak (36 people). In the

chef's cut condition, 47% chose the 10-oz steak (i.e., the chef's cut) and 53% chose the 12-oz steak (i.e., the house cut). However, in the ladies' cut condition, only 5.3% of males chose the 10-oz steak (i.e., the ladies' cut) and 94.7% of males chose the 12-oz steak (i.e., the house cut), $\chi^2(1) = 8.36, p < .01$. Females' choices were not differentially affected by reference group condition, $\chi^2(1) = .84, p < .65$. In the chef's cut condition, females were more likely to select the 10 oz (78%) than the 12 oz (21%), and in the ladies' cut condition, females were more likely to select the 10 oz (82%) than the 12 oz (18%). The tendency to choose steak (vs. another menu item) did not significantly differ across the ladies' cut (72%) or chef's cut (80%) conditions, $\chi^2(1) = .82, p < .37$.

Evaluations of steak. Because each participant made ratings of the 10-oz steak and the 12-oz steak, steak size was analyzed as a within-subjects measure. A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) \times 2 (reference group label: ladies' cut steak vs. chef's cut steak) \times 2 (steak size: 10 oz vs. 12 oz) mixed model ANOVA revealed the predicted three-way interaction, $F(1, 78) = 5.52, p < .03$ (refer to Figure 1). Further, when selecting for males only, the interaction between reference group label and steak size was statistically reliable, $F(1, 39) = 7.45, p < .01$. Males rated the 12-oz and the 10-oz steaks similarly in the chef's cut condition (i.e., when the 12 oz was the "house cut" and the 10 oz was the "chef's cut"; $M_s = 7.95$ and 7.90 , respectively), $t(39) = .23, p > .4$. As predicted, in the ladies' cut condition (when the 12 oz was the "house cut" and the 10 oz was the "ladies' cut"), males rated the 12-oz steak significantly more positively ($M = 7.67$) than the 10-oz steak ($M = 6.80$), $t(39) = 4.35, p < .001$. In addition, males rated the 10-oz steak more positively in the chef's cut condition than in the ladies' cut condition, $t(39) = 5.23, p < .001$. Although females demonstrated a preference for the 10-oz over the 12-oz steak, they were not differentially influenced by reference group label, as indicated by a lack of an interaction between reference group label and steak size when selecting for females only, $F(1, 39) = 0.49, p < .50$.

Posttest. In order to confirm that males' avoidance of the ladies' cut steak was related to dissociative concerns, we conducted a posttest. Fifty-four male participants were asked to complete ratings of either the ladies' cut, the chef's cut, or the house cut steak on 9-point scales: "I dislike the name associations of this product," "I want to avoid being associated with this product," and "This product reflects who I do not want to be." These items were averaged to create a dissociative index ($a = .92$). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect for steak type on dissociative concerns, $F(2, 51) = 23.13, p < .001$. Although the house cut and chef's cut steaks did not differ in terms of dissociative concerns, $M = 2.80$ and 2.95 , respectively, $t(51) = .23, p < .81$, the ladies' cut steak was perceived as being more dissociative ($M = 6.20$)

Females:



Males:

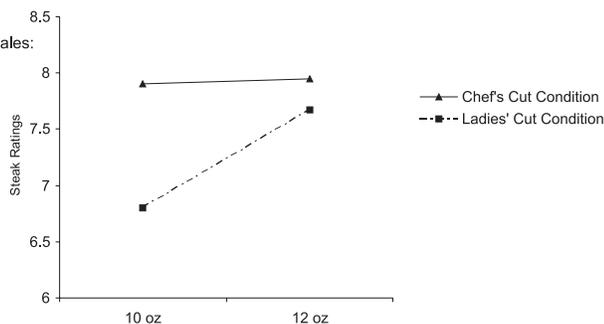


FIGURE 1 Steak Ratings Among Females and Males as a Function of Reference Group Condition.

than both the house cut steak, $t(51) = 6.07, p < .001$, and the chef's cut steak, $t(51) = 5.24, p < .001$.

The results of Study 1 provide evidence that dissociative reference groups do indeed have implications for consumer evaluations and choice. Males who were offered a steak called "the ladies' cut" gave less favorable evaluations of and were less inclined to choose that steak, than when the same steak was called "the chef's cut." An examination of the mean evaluation ratings demonstrates that it is avoidance motivation and not approach motivation that is driving our effect. In the ladies' cut condition, males' evaluations of the 12-oz steak (house cut) did not increase; rather, their evaluations of the 10-oz steak (ladies' cut) decreased. Stated differently, although males in the ladies' cut condition were more likely to choose the 12-oz steak than the 10-oz steak, this was due to decreased liking for the 10-oz steak. Interestingly, females did not show a preference for the "ladies' cut" option, which would represent a membership reference group for them. Thus, in this study, we found evidence that a dissociative reference group exerted a more reliable effect on consumer preferences than did a membership reference group. In the following studies, we test whether dissociative influence is due to self-presentational concerns.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we wished to experimentally test whether the findings in our first study might be due to self-presentational concerns (i.e., Schlenker, 1980). Recent research has demonstrated that consumers adjust their coupon usage decisions (Ashworth, Darke, & Schaller, 2005), demonstrate implicit attitudes (Czellar, 2006), misrepresent their purchases (Sengupta et al., 2002), allow store image to influence their product judgments (Lee & Shavitt, forthcoming), and alter their responses in focus groups (Wooten & Reed, 2000) for reasons of self-presentation. Because the desire to present a positive self-image to others is heightened in public rather than in private (e.g., Wooten & Reed, 2004), we anticipated that the tendency to avoid dissociative groups would be more pronounced when consumption was to occur in the presence of others. Although self-report research suggests that reference groups may have greater influence when the product is publicly rather than privately consumed (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992), we wished to experimentally test whether dissociative reference groups might be more influential when consumption was to occur in public rather than private. Because self-presentational concerns should be reduced when consumption takes place in the absence of others, we predicted that the effect of dissociative reference groups on consumer preferences would be diminished when consuming in private:

H2: Males will have more negative evaluations of, and will be less inclined to choose, a product that is associated with a dissociative reference group than a neutral product when the product is to be consumed in public. Males will not be as influenced by a dissociative label when the product is to be consumed in private.

Method

Participants. This study recruited 190 paid male participants from a large North American university.

Procedure. Participants completed a questionnaire asking them to imagine that they had been sent on a training course by their employer. They read that they had been in workshops all day and were planning on purchasing something from the room service menu for dinner. In this study, participants once again viewed multiple menu options. In order to encourage choice of steak, and in particular the smaller steak, participants read: "You aren't feeling too hungry because you had a late lunch; however, you are tempted to select steak for dinner." They were asked to select the specific menu item they would choose and to evaluate each menu option.

Independent variables. This study used a 2 (reference group label: ladies' cut vs. chef's cut) \times 2 (setting: public vs. private) \times 2 (steak size: 10 oz vs. 12 oz) mixed model design. As in Study 1, we used people's ratings of the 10-oz and 12-oz steaks as the within-subjects factor. In order to manipulate setting, participants read that they would either be "hanging out alone in your hotel room" (private condition) or "hanging out with some of the other trainees in your hotel room" (public condition).

Dependent variables. The same two dependent variables described in Study 1 were used.

Pretest. To confirm the effectiveness of our setting manipulation, a pretest was conducted. Forty-seven participants were asked to read either the public or private manipulation. They then responded to four items, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*): "Will you be eating in the presence of others?" "To what degree will your dinner be public?" "Will you be eating alone?" and "To what degree will your dinner be in private?" The items were scored such that higher numbers indicated more public consumption and were averaged to create a public consumption index ($\alpha = .92$). A *t* test revealed that participants in the public condition perceived their consumption to be more public ($M = 4.98$) than did those in the private condition ($M = 3.03$), $t(45) = 4.65, p < .001$. Thus, our setting manipulation was shown to be effective.

Results and Discussion

Steak choice. First, we examined the specific selections of those who chose steak (105 people; 50 in the private condition and 55 in the public condition). When selecting for those who believed they would be consuming in public, males in the chef's cut condition were equally likely to choose the 10-oz (chef's cut, 50%) and the 12-oz (house cut, 50%) steaks. Males in the ladies' cut condition, however, were significantly less likely to choose the 10-oz (ladies' cut, 15%) than the 12-oz (house cut, 85%) steak, $\chi^2(1) = 7.73, p < .01$. When selecting for those who believed they would be consuming in private, participants in the chef's cut condition were similarly likely to choose the 10 oz (46%) and the 12 oz (54%). Participants in the ladies' cut condition were not significantly more likely to choose the 12 oz (65%) than the 10 oz, 35%; $\chi^2(1) = .65, p > .4$. The percentage of people who opted to choose steak did not vary across the ladies' cut (50%) or the chef's cut (50%) conditions.

Steak evaluations. A 2 (reference group label: ladies' cut vs. chef's cut) \times 2 (setting: public vs. private) \times 2 (steak size: 10 oz vs. 12 oz) mixed model ANOVA, using steak size as a within-subjects variable, was conducted. The results revealed a significant three-way interaction between reference group, setting, and steak size, $F(1, 186) = 4.14, p < .05$. When

selecting for those who believed they would be consuming in public, the interaction between reference group label and steak size was significant, $F(1, 95) = 13.21, p < .001$. Planned contrasts revealed that, among participants who believed they would be consuming in public, those in the chef's cut condition rated the 10-oz (i.e., chef's cut) and 12-oz (i.e., house cut) steaks similarly, $M = 7.18$ and 7.08 , respectively, $t(95) = .53, p < .6$. However, among participants who believed they would be consuming in public, those in the ladies' cut condition rated the 10-oz (i.e., ladies' cut) steak more negatively ($M = 6.65$) than the 12-oz (i.e., house cut) steak, $M = 7.51, t(95) = 4.54, p < .0001$. There was also a qualified main effect for steak size, $F(1, 95) = 7.95, p < .01$ ($M_{10\text{ oz}} = 6.92$ and $M_{12\text{ oz}} = 7.29$). When selecting for those who believed they would be consuming in private, the interaction between reference group label and steak size did not reach significance, $F(1, 91) = 1.95, p < .17$ (refer to Figure 2). In addition, there was a nonsignificant trend for the main effect of steak size, $F(1, 91) = 3.03, p < .09$ ($M_{10\text{ oz}} = 7.23$ and $M_{12\text{ oz}} = 7.40$).

Study 2 once again demonstrated that consumer preferences can be influenced by a dissociative reference group. Our results indicated that a product associated with a dissociative reference group was evaluated more negatively when making evaluations and consumption choices. Importantly, we

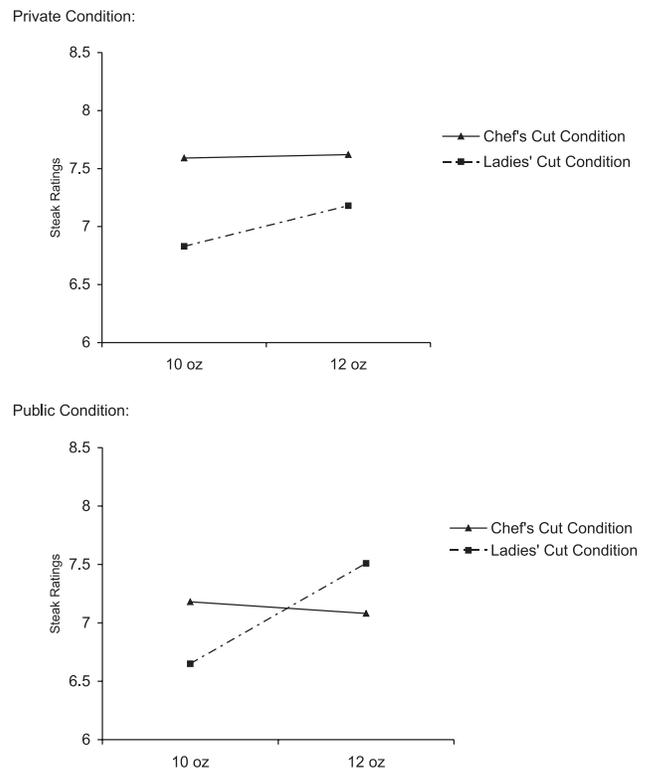


FIGURE 2 Steak Ratings Among Males as a Function of Reference Group Condition and Setting.

showed this effect was more pronounced when consumption was to take place in public rather than in private, and suggest that this is due to greater concern for self-presentation when consumption occurs in public. This finding establishes the important role that self-presentation concerns play in determining dissociative group influence. In addition, this study adds to past research suggesting that situational factors do indeed have an important influence on consumer behavior (e.g., Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005; Johar, Moreau, & Schwarz, 2003; Luo, 2005).

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we sought to further delineate the mechanism underlying our findings by suggesting that individual differences in the tendency to be concerned with self-presentation (for example, public self-consciousness [Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; Scheier & Carver, 1985] or self-monitoring [Snyder, 1974]) will moderate the impact of dissociative influence. We propose that, because self-presentation concerns underlie dissociative influence, those who have a heightened concern for self-presentation will have a heightened motivation to avoid products associated with a dissociative reference group. We assessed individual differences in self-presentation concerns by using a measure of public self-consciousness (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

According to Scheier and Carver (1985), public self-consciousness refers to “the tendency to think about those self-aspects that are matters of public display” as well as concern with the “qualities of the self from which impressions are formed in other people’s eyes” (p. 687). Past research finds that public self-consciousness is related to the use of self-presentation tactics (such as self-handicapping; Sheppard & Arkin, 1989), is positively correlated with favoring national brand labels over bargain brand labels (Bushman, 1993), is associated with observed and self-reported cosmetic use (Miller & Cox, 1982), and is related to the use of clothing to present a particular self-image to others (Solomon & Schopler, 1982). Thus, we predicted that, under conditions of public consumption, those high in public self-consciousness would demonstrate a more pronounced tendency to avoid association with a dissociative reference group. More specifically:

H3: Males will have more negative evaluations of, and will be less inclined to choose, a product that is associated with a dissociative reference group than a neutral product when they are high in public self-consciousness. Those low in public self-consciousness will not be as influenced by the reference group label.

Method

Participants. This study recruited 84 male participants.

Procedure. Because we utilized the continuous measure of public self-consciousness, this study used a reference group label (ladies’ cut vs. chef’s cut) \times public self-consciousness design. Participants once again completed a questionnaire asking them to imagine that they had been sent to a training course by their employer. All participants took part in the “public” condition as described in Study 2. The same two dependent variables described in Studies 1 and 2 were used.

In addition, participants completed a seven-item measure of public self-consciousness (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Sample items from the scale include “I usually worry about making a good impression” and “I’m concerned about what other people think of me.”

Results and Discussion

Steak choice. First, we examined the specific selections of those who chose steak (55 people; 28 in the ladies’ cut condition and 27 in the chef’s cut condition). A median split was performed on the public self-consciousness index. When selecting for males high in public self-consciousness, those in the chef’s cut condition were equally likely to choose the 10-oz (chef’s cut = 43%) and the 12-oz (house cut = 57%) steaks. Males high in public self-consciousness in the ladies’ cut condition, however, were significantly less likely to choose the 10-oz (ladies’ cut = 7%) than the 12-oz (house cut = 93%) steak, $\chi^2(1) = 4.76, p < .03$. When selecting for those low in public self-consciousness, participants in the chef’s cut condition were somewhat less likely to choose the 10 oz (33%) than the 12 oz (67%). Low in self-consciousness participants in the ladies’ cut condition showed a similar tendency (10 oz = 29% and 12 oz = 71%), but this was not significantly different than what was found in the chef’s cut condition, $\chi^2(1) = .07, p < .80$.

Steak evaluations. In order to utilize the continuous measure of public self-consciousness, a regression analysis was used. When predicting the difference score between the 12-oz and 10-oz steak ratings, the interaction between the centered public self-consciousness index and condition (including the main effects for condition and public self-consciousness in the analysis) was significant, $F(3, 81) = 6.85, p < .02, \beta = .38$.

For ease of presentation, the means based on a median split on the public self-consciousness index are displayed in Table 3. In the ladies’ cut condition, those low in public self-consciousness evaluated the 10-oz steak more negatively ($M = 7.35$) than the 12-oz ($M = 8.16$) steak, $t(81) = 2.79, p < .01$. However, those high in public self-consciousness in the ladies cut condition showed a greater tendency to evaluate the 10 oz more negatively ($M = 6.32$) than the 12 oz ($M = 7.83$), $t(81) = 5.43, p < .001$. Importantly, in the ladies’ cut condition, those high in public self-consciousness had significantly more negative evaluations of the 10-oz (ladies’ cut) steak than those low in public self-consciousness, $t(81) = 3.61, p < .001$. Although both those low and high in public

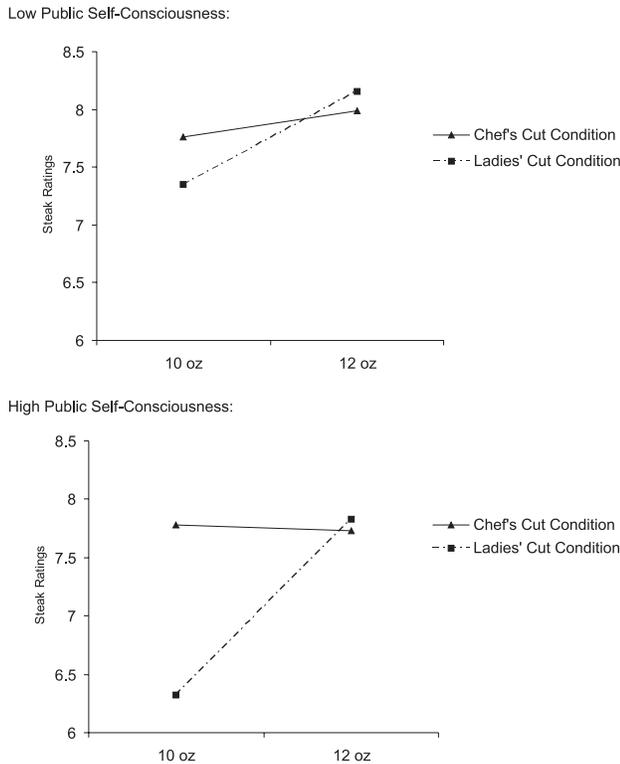


FIGURE 3 Steak Ratings Among Males as a Function of Reference Group Condition and Public Self-Consciousness.

self-consciousness rated the 10-oz steak more negatively than the 12-oz steak in the ladies cut condition, the effect size was larger for those high ($d = 1.21$) rather than low ($d = .62$) in public self-consciousness. Among those in the chef's cut condition, those low in public self-consciousness rated the 10-oz and the 12-oz steaks as being similar ($M = 7.76$ and 7.99 , respectively). In addition, among those in the chef's cut condition who were high in public self-consciousness, the 10-oz and 12-oz steaks were evaluated similarly ($M = 7.78$ and 7.73 , respectively).

The results of Study 3 indicated that participants high in public self-consciousness demonstrated a stronger desire to avoid a product associated with a dissociative reference group than those low in public self-consciousness. We suggest that those high in public self-consciousness showed a stronger tendency to avoid a product associated with a dissociative reference group in a public setting because they have a heightened concern for publicly displayed aspects of the self. Further, we propose that self-presentation concerns motivate the influence of dissociative reference groups on consumers' evaluations and choice in our studies.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across three studies, consumers were less inclined to choose and evaluated a product more negatively when it was associ-

ated with a dissociative reference group than when it was neutral. The current studies extend classic reference group research by examining the influence of dissociative associations on consumer evaluations and choice. Importantly we build on previous work that has focused on self-reports of (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992) and reactions to (Sengupta et al., 2002) actual reference group influence, by demonstrating that the simple association of a product with a dissociative group leads people to evaluate the product less favorably and to avoid choosing that product. We contend that the tendency to avoid a product associated with a dissociative reference group is largely driven by self-presentational concerns. Consumers were more likely to negatively evaluate and avoid choosing a product associated with a dissociative group when consumption was to occur in public rather than private (Study 2), and demonstrated greater susceptibility to reference group influence when they were high rather than low in private self-consciousness (Study 3). Thus, the consumption preferences demonstrated in the current studies reflected a desire to present a positive self-image to others.

The current research also complements and expands upon social identity research that has examined when out-group differentiation effects are likely to occur (e.g., Brown, 2000). We do so by examining the specific role of dissociative reference groups in determining consumer preferences, which has not been explicitly investigated in the social identity literature. As noted earlier, a dissociative group is a unique and influential type of out-group that the individual is specifically motivated to avoid. Further, we highlight the novel finding that reference group influence and, in particular, dissociative reference group influence is heightened when self-presentation concerns are relevant.

Implications of the Research

The results have several substantive implications. First, it may be valuable to utilize dissociative reference groups in general marketing communications. The use of dissociative reference groups in advertising campaigns, for example, represents a novel and underutilized method of influencing consumer preferences. Such strategies include highlighting the dissociative associations of not using a particular brand or highlighting the dissociative consequences of using a competitor's brand. Pepsi has used such a strategy against Coke in the past. In one example, a party of Pepsi drinkers is juxtaposed against a group of nursing home residents drinking Coke. Presumably nursing home patients represent a dissociative group for Pepsi's target market, and Pepsi hopes that consumers will be motivated to choose the alternative, nondissociative option—Pepsi.

Second, the use of dissociative reference groups may be particularly effective in health and social marketing campaigns, because the goal is often to discourage undesirable behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking and driving). Although

research has yet to test this possibility, dissociative reference groups may be more effective than other types of reference groups in influencing prevention-focused behaviors (i.e., those that focus on the avoidance of negative outcomes; Higgins, 2002), because dissociative reference groups involve a desire to *avoid* being associated with an undesired group. When an individual's motivational state (e.g., a prevention focus) is consistent with the way an individual engages in an activity (e.g., in this case, avoiding particular behaviors) "regulatory fit" occurs (Higgins, 2005).

Finally, dissociative reference groups have implications for consumer brand relationships, brand loyalty, and choice. Recent research suggests that consumers form relationships with brands in ways very similar to how they form relationships with other people (e.g., Fournier, 1998). Given the similarities between human-to-human and human-to-brand interactions, it is noteworthy that consumers can be motivated to avoid dissociative product associations in much the same way as they are motivated to avoid associations with other people they view negatively. Future research might extend the current findings to examine whether consumers' evaluations of the same brand can be altered by manipulating the salience of a positive referent versus a dissociative referent. It is also interesting to note that consumers may not only be brand loyal because of positive associations to brands, but also because they wish to avoid the implications of other dissociative brands. Research could profitably examine the antecedents and consequences of brand loyalty that are driven by the desire to avoid association with a dissociative referent. Similarly, research indicates that consumers can choose a brand by either selecting appropriate brands or by rejecting inappropriate brands (Meloy & Russo, 2004). Depending on the strategy used, this may lead to preference reversals (e.g., Shafir, 1993). It would be interesting to examine how the presence of a brand associated with a dissociative reference group might influence this process.

Directions for Future Research

As noted earlier, we propose that the consumption preferences demonstrated in the current studies reflected a desire to present a positive self-image to others. However, we do not believe that this is the only possible mechanism underlying these effects. It seems likely that although concerns about public self-image motivate the avoidance of products associated with dissociative reference groups, private self-image might also be an important factor. Indeed, past research finds that consumers' concerns for private as well as public self-image relate to the degree to which they engage in self-enhancement strategies (Argo, White, & Dahl, forthcoming). Further, research finds that people consume products in ways that are congruent with the self (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Sirgy, 1982), and it seems likely that they will similarly avoid consuming products in ways

that are congruent with who they do not wish to be. It may be the case that for consumers who strongly identify with their membership group (e.g., being male in the current context), these dissociative effects might be more pronounced. Research demonstrates that an individual's attitudes and intentions are particularly influenced by in-group members when he or she strongly identify with the membership group (Terry & Hogg, 1996; Whittler & Spira, 2002). It seems likely that membership group identification will similarly heighten dissociative influence. In addition, for consumers who have their own identity temporarily activated in memory (i.e., primed; Forehand & Deshpandé, 2001), the desire to avoid products associated with dissociative groups might be facilitated. Although our effects were more pronounced when self-presentation concerns were most relevant, when presentation concerns were not salient consumers still demonstrated a tendency towards avoiding products associated with dissociative reference groups. It seems likely that conditions that highlight the importance of self-identity might also enhance dissociative effects. Our current research is examining these possibilities (White & Dahl, 2006).

Future research could also profitably examine dissociative influence using different product categories. In the current studies, our dissociative effects could be enhanced by the specific product category chosen. For example, if steak is viewed as a particularly masculine product, this may have heightened dissociative influence. In addition, research might examine other types of dissociative reference groups based on age subcultures (e.g., the baby boomer who avoids products associated with being elderly), status (e.g., the teenager who avoids products that are associated with being uncool), as well as health and social consequences (e.g., the person who wants to avoid smelling like a smoker or being classified as a drunk driver). Finally, although we examined chronic tendencies to avoid particular groups, research could also examine whether situational shifts in preferences for particular groups can influence consumer preferences (e.g., White & Argo, 2006).

One word of caution regarding the use of dissociative reference groups in marketing communications: We do not mean to imply that dissociative reference groups should be used to propagate negative stereotypes about particular groups. Our manipulation of the ladies' cut steak did not involve communicating negative or disparaging information about that group. Instead, the studies demonstrated that the simple presence of a group that an individual has a predisposed motivation to avoid is enough to lead to the avoidance of particular products. We do not believe that it is necessary to present particular groups in a negative light for dissociative influence to be effective, and, indeed, that using such a strategy may backfire and have adverse effects. The current research is a first step toward demonstrating that dissociative reference groups can influence consumer preferences. This area of inquiry represents a relatively untapped, yet important, direction for consumer research.

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