

**MANUSCRIPT REVIEW HISTORY 001-1  
MANUSCRIPT (ROUND 1)**

Where Do People Diverge From Others?

Domains of Divergence, Identity-Signaling, and Consumer Choice

## ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that consumers are more likely to choose options that diverge from others in certain domains of social life (e.g., hairstyles and music versus notebooks and detergent). We propose that the different rates of divergence across domains is driven by identity-signaling: People use certain choice domains to infer others' identity but the identity they infer depends on who else makes the same choice. To ensure clear identity signals, people are more likely to choose options that diverge from a majority, or from out-group others, in these identity-related domains. Four studies provide substantial support for this perspective.

Kids often want to separate themselves from their parents and jocks often want to separate themselves from geeks. Individuals in a group of diners tend to order distinctive entrees (even though they end up liking their entrée less, Ariely and Levav 2000), Manhattanites wore mesh trucker hats until they were adopted by the bridge-and-tunnel crowd (Barker 2004), and Shanghai residents avoid purchasing Volkswagen Santanas because they “are a favorite first car among the nouveaux riches outside the big cities” (Wonacott 2004). People often diverge from others in their choices, adopting tastes that distinguish them from other people and abandoning tastes if too many people, or the “wrong” types of people, adopt them.

Researchers have typically explained this phenomenon by assuming that individuals have drives to be unique or differentiate themselves from others (Fromkin, 1970; Snyder and Fromkin 1980; see also Brewer, 1991; especially in Western cultural contexts, Aaker and Schmitt 2001). An important assumption shared by these differentiation approaches is that they have placed the drive for differentiation at the individual level—individuals have a drive to show that they are different and some individuals have it more than others. Placing the drive at an individual level implies a prediction that we label *idiosyncratic differentiation*—people shouldn’t care where they diverge (e.g. cars, toothpaste, or clothing) as long as it allows them to feel different.

We suggest, however, that divergence happens more in certain domains of social life. Adoption by the mainstream may lead people to stop listening to music artists they once liked, but it is less likely to cause people to change the brand of umbrella they carry. Indeed, the results of a pilot study confirm this. Fifty-one undergraduates were asked to choose options in 19 preference domains (e.g. power tools, stereos, hairstyles, favorite

CD). In each domain, they were told that 65% of other students owned Option A, 25% owned Option B and 10% owned Option C and they were asked which option they would choose. Clearly Option C is the choice that establishes the greatest divergence from others because it is shared by the fewest number of people. Yet a repeated-measures ANOVA found that preferences for Option C differed substantially across domains,  $F(18, 50) = 15.98, p = .001$ , see figure 1. People were more likely to diverge by selecting Option C in domains like favorite CD (67%) or hairstyle (27%) than in domains like dish soap (6%) or power tools (10%).

This poses a puzzle for individual drive theories that predict idiosyncratic differentiation. If people just want to satisfy a drive for difference, they could do so by diverging in any domain. Why, then, might people be more likely to diverge in certain domains of social life?

This paper proposes an alternative, more social, approach to understanding why people diverge and uses this approach to explain why divergence may vary by domain. Rather than suggesting people diverge to satisfy internal drives for personal difference, we propose that people often diverge to communicate or signal their identity to others. Shanghai residents may not score exceptionally high on need for uniqueness, but they certainly want to avoid being thought of as a suburbanite. Building on research about the symbolic function of attitudes (Shavitt 1990), we argue that there are some domains that people scan for clues about the identities of others. Our identity-signaling approach predicts people will be more likely to diverge in these identity-related domains to ensure that they are sending a clear signal of their identity. Shanghai residents should care more about distinguishing their identity in the brand of car they drive rather than the brand of

air-conditioner they purchase. In identity-relevant domains, people should be more likely to avoid tastes held by a majority and should also be more likely to diverge from tastes that are associated with other social groups.

Below, we review literature on drives for differentiation to show that while they explain individual differences in desires for unique products, they have less to say about why certain domains might elicit greater divergence. Building on research about symbolic products, we propose our identity-signaling approach and use it to predict why divergence might vary by domain. We then present four studies showing that divergence is moderated by domain. Previewing briefly, we show that people select more divergent tastes in domains that people use to communicate and infer identity, and are more likely to abandon tastes in identity-related domains when too many other people, or the wrong sorts of people (e.g. out-group members), adopt them. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for the use of products as identity signals, and highlight how they can help us understand not only divergence, but conformity as well.

### **IDIOSYNCRATIC DIFFERENTIATION**

Scholars from across the social sciences have argued that people have a drive to be different (Breakwell 1987; Brewer 1991; Leibenstein 1950; Veblen, 1899/1912, see Vignoles, Chrysochoou, and Breakwell 2000 for a review). The most well-cited drive approach in consumer behavior and psychology, the uniqueness literature (Fromkin 1970; Snyder and Fromkin 1980), contends that individuals experience a negative emotional reaction when they feel overly similar to others, and take steps to reduce the similarity. They may selectively focus on how they differ from others (Ganster, McCuddy, and

Fromkin 1977), misremember themselves as being less similar than they actually were (Byrne and Griffitt 1969), or generate more uses for unique objects (Fromkin 1970). These individual drive approaches are consistent with the prediction of idiosyncratic differentiation—if people just want to be unique, they can do so by diverging in any domain.

Most uniqueness research has focused on how the drive to be unique varies across individuals as a function of personality and interest. Research on Need for Uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin 1977) has shown, for example, that individuals with greater need for uniqueness prefer more unique products (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001; Tian and McKenzie 2001). Other research finds that individuals care more about being unique in domains that are personally important (Campbell 1986; Kernis 1984). A car enthusiast, for instance, should care more about having a unique roadster than a coin collector. These personality based theories are quite helpful in identifying particular consumers who are most likely to prefer unique products or particular places where certain consumers might prefer to be more unique. They are limited, however, in their ability to explain all aspects of divergence. Both approaches go even further in predicting idiosyncratic differentiation--individuals should diverge idiosyncratically based on their own personal level of need for uniqueness and in those domains that happen to be personally important.

One key aspect of divergence not explained by previous theories is that people diverge more in certain domains, an observation confirmed by the results of our pilot study. These findings are inconsistent with idiosyncratic differentiation at both the general drive level and the personality level. If individuals just have a general drive for showing they are different, they could do so in any domain. Even if some individuals

have a personality that leads them to prefer greater differentiation, this does not suggest why *across* individuals, certain domains produce greater divergence (indeed a great way of establishing difference might be to diverge in a domain where others aren't diverging). Certain domains may also be more personally important to certain individuals, but personal importance can't explain why sports and theater and cooking enthusiasts would all prefer more distinction in their hairstyles and music choices as opposed to their dish soap and power tools. The fact that divergence happens more often in certain domains—across individuals—suggests that something may be driving divergence in addition to idiosyncratic drives for differentiation.

### **CHOICES AS SIGNALS OF IDENTITY**

To explain why divergence would vary by domain, we focus on how cultural tastes (e.g. the products we buy, attitudes we profess, and preferences we hold) can signal social identities. In addition to having utilitarian or functional value, tastes also communicate information about their users (Shavitt 1989; Shavitt and Nelson 1990; see also Katz 1960; Prentice 1987), allowing them to create and express a desired identity (Ball and Tasaki 1992; Belk 1988; Chaplin and Roedder John 2005; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986; Richins 1994). Our car not only takes us to work, it also communicates something about us and the social groups to which we belong (e.g. soccer mom, business executive, weekend warrior).

Consistent with identity signaling, a great deal of research in marketing, psychology, and communication finds that people infer aspects about others (e.g. hobbies, preferences, etc.) based on their purchase decisions (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer

1982; Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Holman 1981). One might posit that a Harley Davidson driver likes leather jackets or that a Volvo driver supports liberal politics. But these guesses do not occur across all types of products equally (Belk 1981). When college students were asked to select cues that would aid in making inferences about other students, more than half of them selected either clothing or academic courses (Burroughs, Drews and Hallman 1991). Similarly, Shavitt and Nelson (1990) asked participants to describe the type of person who uses a given product and varied whether that product was predominantly utilitarian (e.g. air conditioner) or identity-related (e.g. team banner or class ring). Compared to more utilitarian products, identity-related products were more likely to elicit person impressions.

### **DIVERGENCE TO AVOID UNDESIREED IDENTITY INFERENCES**

We propose that people diverge not only to satisfy individual drives but also to ensure that others make desired inferences about them. Our approach is more social than traditional drive theories because we are focusing on the reception of meaning. Certain tastes can signal identity, but the specific signal associated with these tastes depends on the identity of the people who hold the taste. We argue that the number of people who hold a taste, and the social group to which they belong, will have a greater impact on divergence in identity-related domains. This approach has roots in sociological theories that suggest people make choices to distinguish themselves from members of other social groups (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1982; Hebdige 1987; Lieberman 2000; Simmel, 1904/1957) but we go further to suggest *where* people will diverge.

First, the identity-signaling approach to divergence predicts that individuals will care how many people hold a particular taste in domains that are identity-relevant. Tastes that are held by a majority will not provide clear signals of any one particular identity (i.e. any social group). Indeed, if such tastes do communicate an identity, they may signal that one is a “conformist.” Wearing an indie band t-shirt before the band makes it big may signal hipster status, but wearing the same shirt once everyone owns it may signal that the person just follows trends (Thornton, 1996) which may produce negative social impressions (see Pronin, Berger, and Molouki 2005). Overall then, the identity signaling approach predicts that people will show greater divergence from a majority in identity-relevant domains.

**H1:** Individuals will be more likely to diverge from a majority in domains that are identity-relevant.

Note this prediction separates identity-signaling from theories that postulate a drive for differentiation. In our view, individuals do not seek differentiation just because they are driven to be different, they do so to signal their identity to others. Consequently, individuals should be more likely to diverge in domains other people use to infer identity.

Second, the identity-signaling approach predicts that individuals will care more about the identity of others who share their tastes in identity related domains. If most Cadillac drivers tend to be grandparents and golfers, driving a Cadillac will become associated with those characteristics. But, if Cadillac introduces a new SUV that is bought by athletes and music artists, driving a Cadillac may start to signal something entirely different (Eldridge 2001). Consequently, people should care about the others who share their tastes, particularly in identity-related domains.

**H2:** The identity of the other people who share one's tastes will have a greater influence on divergence in identity related domains.

Next, we present four studies that test our hypotheses. Studies 1 and 2 test the first hypothesis. Study 1 documents that divergence varies by domain and shows that divergence is greater in domains that people use to express and infer identity. We also explore why certain domains are especially useful for identity inference-making. Study 2 examines taste abandonment, investigating whether people who learn that their preferences are shared with a majority of others will be more likely to abandon preferences in identity-related domains. This study also measures individual differences in need for uniqueness to examine the interplay of idiosyncratic drives for differentiation and domains. Studies 3 and 4 test the second hypothesis. Study 3 examines whether people care not only about the number of others who share their identity-related tastes, but also the particular social group to which those others belong. Finally, study 4 uses a priming manipulation to frame the same domain as more functional or more identity-related to see whether this influences divergence from dissimilar others.

### **STUDY 1: DIVERGENCE IN SELECTING TASTES**

Study 1 examined whether people are more likely to select tastes held by fewer others in domains that others use to infer people's identity. A national internet sample completed the choice task from the pilot study presented earlier. We also asked two separate groups of raters to rate each domain on how much it was used to express identity and how much it was used to infer identity. If signals are socially sent and received, then people should use the same domains to send signals (express identity) that others use to

receive them (infer identity). More importantly, we predicted that people would prefer more divergence from others in identity in domains that people use to express and infer identities.

We also tested whether domains of divergence could just be explained by whether or not products are consumed publicly. Some research, although it has not focused on divergence directly, has highlighted differences between private and public consumption. People to choose more variety in public settings than private ones (Ratner and Kahn 2002), and reference group influence is generally greater for products consumed publicly (e.g. cars and suits as opposed to mattresses, Bearden and Etzel 1982). Combined, these results might predict that divergence depends on whether or not the domain is publicly visible. Consequently, we had a separate set of respondents also rated how public one's choices are in a given domain.

We also examined *why* certain domains are especially useful for making identity-inferences. Work on the functional basis of attitudes finds that certain products may be more likely to engage social identity functions (Shavitt 1990) but outside of noting that visibility should matter, little research has suggested why certain objects are more likely to be seen as signals of identity (though see Belk 1981). We suggest that domains are more likely to be seen as identity-relevant when they are less functional. Based on standard theories of psychological discounting (Kelly 1973), it should be harder to interpret someone's choice as relevant for diagnosing their identity when that person could have made the choice for purely functional reasons. Backpacks and pens have an obvious functional component that is missing from music, so music is likely to be a stronger signal of identity. Identity inference making, then, should be more common in

domains where choice is afunctional (i.e. not based on function). To test this prediction, a separate set of raters also rated the domains on functionality.

## Method

*Participants.* A broad Internet sample from across the United States was contacted through a web survey database. Two-hundred and one respondents (Mean Age = 38, 75% Female) completed a “Preference Survey” in exchange for a five-dollar gift certificate.

*Option Choice.* Participants completed the same choice task used in the pilot study. They were shown the same 19 different preference domains and chose one of three options (the option preferred by 65% of others, the option preferred by 25% of others or the option preferred by 10% of others) in each domain. In the stereo domain, for example, participants could choose the stereo chosen by 65% of others, 25% of others, or 10% of others.

*Domain Ratings.* Separate sets of raters were given the same domains and rated each on either self-expression (how much choice in that domain contributes to self expression,  $N = 20$ ,  $\alpha = .93$ ) or identity inference-making (how much choice in that domain is used to make inferences about others,  $N = 20$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ). Consistent with our identity-signaling perspective, the two sets of ratings were highly correlated ( $r = .95$ ) and averaged to form an Identity Index. Separate groups also rated each domain on how public preferences in it are ( $N = 32$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ) and on functionality, how much choice in the domain is based on functional benefits, ( $N = 13$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ). All ratings were on 7-point scales.

## Results

As predicted, people were more likely to diverge in domains others use to infer identity. An OLS regression predicting average preference for the 10% option (Option C) based on domain identity relevance found that people were more likely to chose the option held by the fewest others when the domain was identity-related ( $\beta = .64$ ,  $t(18) = 3.47$ ,  $p = .003$ ). Respondents were more likely to select Option C in domains like hairstyle and favorite music artist than dish soap or bike light (figure 2). A repeated-measures ANOVA using a median split on the identity dimension puts this effect in more interpretable terms; 31% of participants preferred Option C in identity-relevant domains, but only 16% preferred it in domains that were less identity-relevant,  $F(1,201) = 88.00$ ,  $p < .001$ .

An OLS regression predicting preference for Option C found the effect of public visibility to be non-significant ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $t < 1$ , *ns*) but we also ran a multiple regression using both identity-relatedness and public visibility to predict preference for Option C. The percentage of people selecting Option C increased when the domain was identity-related ( $\beta = .88$ ,  $t(18) = 4.35$ ,  $p = .001$ ), but actually decreased in domains that were public ( $\beta = -.43$ ,  $t(18) = -2.12$ ,  $p = .05$ ), contrary to predictions derived from prior literature.<sup>1</sup> (A Multiple Discriminant Analysis found similar results while also helping to resolve this seeming contradiction with previous work. This analysis found that people were more likely to select the moderate sized group (25%, Option B) in public domains,

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<sup>1</sup> A hierarchical linear regression used the exact level of identity-relatedness to predict divergence and yielded identical results.

suggesting that publicness drives people towards options that are neither too popular nor too unique.)

*Identity-Related Domains.* Why do people choose certain domains to express and infer identity? Consistent with our discounting notion that identity is easier to infer when there are no functional reasons for making a particular choice, there was a high negative correlation ( $r = -.90$ ) between functionality and identity-relatedness. The less people saw others' choices as being determined by function, the more they used it to infer identity. Further, both functionality and domain publicness predict identity inference making in a simultaneous OLS regression (functionality,  $\beta = -.53$ ,  $t(18) = -4.66$ ,  $p = .001$ ; publicness,  $\beta = .37$ ,  $t(18) = 2.51$ ,  $p = .02$ ). This suggests domains are better suited for identity signaling to the degree that they are public and choice within them is not determined by function.<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion

This study suggests why certain domains produce divergence--people diverge in domains are more related to identity (supporting hypothesis 1). Consistent with our focus on the social nature of identity-signaling, participants exhibited strong agreement about which domains were identity-related. Even though our internet sample came from a range of demographic backgrounds, separate sets of raters converged in assessing which

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<sup>2</sup> We also considered another, potentially confounding, factor--how many product offerings are typically available in the domain. People will have trouble expressing identity if there are only two products in a given domain, so perhaps variance in offerings, rather than functionality, is the key distinction. To examine this account, twenty people rated each domain on how many options were available (1 = Very few, 7 = Very Many). A multiple regression on identity relatedness found a significant effect of all three predictors: functionality,  $\beta = -.60$ ,  $t(18) = -5.21$ ,  $p = .001$ ; number of options,  $\beta = .32$ ,  $t(18) = 2.91$ ,  $p = .01$ ; publicness,  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t(18) = 2.94$ ,  $p = .01$ . This suggests that it is easier to infer identity in domains where more options are available, but that even controlling for this factor, it is easier to infer identity in domains that are afunctional.

domains were used to express and infer identity. Drive theories of differentiation have difficulty explaining this widespread social agreement. Individuals do not seem to care about establishing their difference in every domain or any random domain—they do so more in domains where others are looking for signals about their identity.

Our results also suggest *why* certain domains may be used to express and infer identity; people are more likely to infer identity in domains where choice is both public and afunctional. When choices are public and people can see what others are choosing, they should find it easier to engage in social inference. When choices don't produce obvious functional benefits, people should find it easier to attribute those choices to characteristics of the individual.

We note that our argument about functionality can be applied not only to general domains such as clothing or power tools, but also to attributes of products within those domains such as color or style. Wearing clothing is functional, but color and style are less so. We don't typically infer anything about someone's identity from the fact they are wearing a jacket when it is cold, but we may infer a lot from the jacket's style or color.<sup>3</sup> Identity inference making, then, not only occurs in domains that are perceived as less functional, it is also more likely on aspects of domains (e.g., jacket color) that are less functional.

Study 1 suggests that when selecting tastes, people diverge more in identity-related domains, but it involves a questionnaire manipulation that might lack social

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, functionality differs from the luxury versus necessity distinction (Bearden and Etzel 1982) because it depends on the context. One may consider sunglasses a luxury (or at least not a necessity), but whether people infer something about another person based on their sunglasses may depend a lot on the context. We probably don't infer much about a person who wears sunglasses outside on a bright day, but are much more likely to make identity-related inferences if the same person was wearing sunglasses indoors (where they are afunctional).

immediacy. Study 2 places people in a social context where they anticipate revealing their preferences to others. Furthermore, it investigates a particularly strong form of divergence--whether people will *abandon* tastes they once preferred when they learn that a majority shares them. Finally, we measure need for uniqueness to examine the interplay between idiosyncratic differentiation and identity signaling.

### **STUDY 2: DIVERGENCE THROUGH TASTE ABANDONMENT**

Study 2 tests whether people who learn their preferences are shared with a majority are more likely to abandon preferences in identity-related domains. Abandoning a previously chosen taste is a particularly strong form of divergence because it requires us to switch away from a taste we once held. We measured people's preferences in a number of product domains and later, through an elaborate cover story, exposed some of them to data suggesting the signal value of their preference had been diluted by being shared with a majority of others (majority preference condition). We then re-measured their preferences to examine whether they would abandon prior preferences. Random taste change and idiosyncratic differentiation would both predict divergence should be equivalent across domains. Instead, we predict that abandonment would be greater in identity-related, as compared with less identity-related domains.

We also included a control condition where participants had their preferences re-measured without being exposed to information about others' preferences. Any taste change in this condition should be due to random preference change over time, and thus the comparison strengthens the conclusions we can draw from results in the majority shared condition. These participants' did not learn their preferences were shared with a

majority, and consequently, they should not show greater divergence in identity-related domains. In fact, if people generally have less strongly held attitudes towards non-identity-related options, participants in the control condition may even show greater taste change in non-identity-related domains.

To examine how abandonment is influenced by the drive for idiosyncratic differentiation, we also measured need for uniqueness. People high on need for uniqueness may be more willing to abandon their preferences when they discover their preferences are shared by a majority of others, but idiosyncratic differentiation makes no predictions about domains of divergence.

## Method

*Time 1 -- Taste elicitation.* In the first stage of the experiment, forty university students completed a “Preference Survey” as part of a larger testing session for which they were paid \$20. They were presented with 25 preference domains (e.g. car brand, musical artist, entree, toothpaste, etc.) each of which included five options, and were asked to “please circle the option you like the best from each of the choice sets.” In the music domain, for instance, participants chose their preferred artist from five options (Dave Mathews, Outkast, Usher, Cake, Alicia Keys). In the stereo domain, participants chose between five stereo brands (Aiwa, Kenwood, Pioneer, McIntosh, Alpine). Eight of the twenty-five taste domains were used as target domains in the next portion of the study.

*Time 2 – Manipulation.* Two to three weeks later, participants were contacted by a different experimenter and returned to the lab in small groups (N = 2 to 7) for an

ostensibly unrelated study about how people talk about their preferences. Participants expected to complete two short surveys and discuss their preferences on the second.

In the lab, participants entered a room full of cubicles where a research assistant was already seated, surrounded by stacks of paper and visibly entering data by marking a large sheet of paper. The experimenter started participants on an unrelated task, and before leaving, asked the RA how the data entry was going. She replied that it was slow and that there was a lot more data left to enter. The experimenter apologized, noting that another person was supposed to help but had canceled. He then left the room.

A minute later he returned, asking the RA if she had more copies of the main study packet. She replied that they might be out. The experimenter then left for a moment and returned to say he would need to go make copies. He apologized to the participants (who at this point had finished the unrelated survey) and asked the RA if there was anything else the participants could do while he made copies. After thinking, she replied that she could really use help entering data. The experimenter then asked the participants if they would be willing to enter data while he made copies: all said yes. He gave each participant a data entry sheet and a small stack of “previous surveys,” explained that the surveys explored what was popular among students, and asked participants to help tally the results. He thanked participants for their help, and left to make copies.

The data each participant tallied was carefully calibrated to suggest certain preferences of theirs were shared by others. Each participant received data from 10 previous subjects, each of whom had chosen among five options in 12 different taste domains (8 target domains plus 4 fillers). Responses suggested that a majority of “previous subjects” had chosen the option the participant chose at Time 1 (the percentage

was lower in filler domains to avoid suspicion). Degree of convergence varied across target domains (from 6/10 to 8/10) but was equivalent across domains that were more and less related to identity. Instances of convergence were interspersed so that no previous subject made all the same choices as the participant.

After allowing participants time to tally the data, the experimenter returned with the copies. He thanked the participants and asked them to total and circle the number of previous subjects who had chosen each alternative in each domain. He then collected the sheets and handed out the “actual survey” explaining that after completion, the group would get together to discuss their choices.

Participants were given a packet with each of the eight target domains on a separate sheet of paper (alternating identity and non-identity-related domains) and asked to “circle the option you like the best from each of the choice sets on the next few pages.” They then came together as a group and discussed their preferences. Finally, participants completed the Need for Uniqueness Scale (Snyder and Fromkin 1977) and were debriefed. No participants reported awareness of a link between the response tallies and the main survey.

*Control Condition.* A separate set of twenty respondents, drawn from the same population, went through the same procedure as participants in the main study, but they were not exposed to information regarding the choices of others at time 2.

## Results

*Effect of Sharing Preference with a Majority.* We argued in the introduction that people might diverge from tastes held by too many others in identity-related domains

because those tastes would not provide clear signals. Before turning to our main analyses, we first examined whether our manipulation does in fact change people's ability to signal their identity effectively. Twenty students were asked to imagine their preference was shared by either 8 (or 2) of 10 other students from their school and then asked to make a binary choice of whether or not they thought that preference was shared by people outside their social type. Indeed, students who were told that a majority of other students (8 of 10) shared their preference were more likely to believe the preference was shared by people with different identities ( $M_{\text{Majority}} = 70\%$  vs.  $M_{\text{Minority}} = 20\%$ ),  $\chi^2(20) = 5.05, p < .03$ .

*Divergence and Domains.* To explore how much divergence in this study was driven by personality factors and domains, we performed a median split on domain identity-relatedness and Need for Uniqueness. We then examined the number of times a participant diverged using a 2 (Domain Identity-Relatedness: High vs. Low) x 2 (Condition: Majority Preference vs. Control) x 2 (NFU: High vs. Low) Mixed ANOVA. .

We suspect that NFU will not be sufficient to predict *where* people will diverge. We predict a Domain x Condition interaction: participants in the majority preference condition, relative to the control condition, should be more likely to abandon their previous choices in domains that are more identity-relevant. Consistent with previous literature though, NFU should predict *who* is more likely to diverge from others. People high in NFU should be more likely to diverge when they learn their preferences are shared with a majority, but should be no more likely to diverge in the control condition, thus we expect a NFU x Condition interaction. Finally, we suspect that the tendency to

diverge in identity-relevant domains will not be influenced by NFU, thus there should be no Domain Identity-Relatedness x Condition x NFU interaction.

Consistent with our Hypothesis 1 that divergence will only occur in identity-related domains, the analysis revealed a significant Domain x Condition interaction,  $F(1, 56) = 10.23, p = .002$ , figure 3A. As predicted, participants in the majority preference condition abandoned more preferences in identity-related domains ( $M_{\text{identity-related}} = 1.11$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-identity-related}} = 0.72$ ),  $F(1, 56) = 6.71, p = .01$ . Comparing conditions, participants in the majority preference condition also abandoned a greater number of preferences in identity-related domains ( $M = 1.11$ ) than did control condition participants ( $M = 0.72$ ,  $F(1, 56) = 5.69, p = .02$ ). This suggests that learning one's preferences were shared by a majority of others led participants to abandon tastes in identity-related domains.

Consistent with an individual differences approach, there was also marginal NFU x Condition interaction,  $F(1, 56) = 2.80, p = .10$ , figure 3B. High NFU participants diverged more than low NFU participants in the majority preference condition ( $M_{\text{high NFU}} = 1.12$  vs.  $M_{\text{low NFU}} = 0.71$ ,  $F(1, 56) = 4.97, p = .03$ ) NFU did not influence divergence in the control condition where participants merely made the same choice at two points in time ( $M_{\text{high NFU}} = 0.67$  vs.  $M_{\text{low NFU}} = 0.82, F < 0.5$ ). There were no other significant main effects or interactions ( $p$ 's  $> .30$ ).<sup>4</sup>

*Alternative Explanations.* It is difficult to suggest that people diverged more in identity-related domains because divergence in these domains was less costly. A separate set of respondents ( $N = 20$ ) rated how much they liked each option. Ratings were analyzed in a 2 (Domain Identity-Relatedness: High vs. Low) x 2 (Option: Favorite vs. Second Favorite) Within-Subjects ANOVA. Underscoring the notion that switching away

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<sup>4</sup> Both a random effects logit model and a hierarchical linear regression found identical results.

from one's favorite option is costly, there was a main effect of Option: people liked their second favorite option ( $M = 5.20$ ) significantly less than their favorite ( $M = 5.70$ ),  $F(1, 19) = 39.48, p < .001$ . There was also a main effect of domain: people liked the items in identity-related items ( $M = 5.82$ ) significantly more than the non-identity-related domains items ( $M = 5.08$ ),  $F(1, 19) = 15.07, p < .001$ . There was no interaction ( $F < 0.5$ ) however, suggesting that switching was no less costly in identity-related domains.

## Discussion

Divergence again varied by domain; upon learning that their preferences were shared by a majority of others, people were more likely to abandon previously held preferences in identity-related domains (supporting hypothesis 1). This pattern cannot be explained by people forgetting their previous choices or some sort of random preference change over time. Participants in the control condition who were not exposed to the preferences of others did not show greater divergence in identity-related domains. Furthermore, compared to these control participants, majority preference participants showed greater divergence in identity-related domains.

This study also allowed us to examine the interplay of domains and idiosyncratic desires for differentiation. Consistent with prior research, NFU does a good job in identifying people who are more likely to diverge; upon learning their preferences were shared with a majority of others, people high in need for uniqueness abandoned more tastes. But to understand *where* people will diverge, we need to understand which domains are used to signal identities. Across levels of NFU, people were more likely to diverge in identity related domains, see figure 3C.

The first two studies demonstrate that individuals are more likely to diverge in domains people use to express and infer identity. But someone might accept that divergence varies by domain without accepting our explanation that identity concerns drive the process. Perhaps individuals just want to be more idiosyncratically distinctive in certain domains regardless of whether it signals that they possess a particular identity. If identity-signaling underlies domain differences in divergence, we ought to see stronger results when we make identities more explicit. Study 3 does this.

### **STUDY 3: MODERATING INFLUENCE OF GROUP ASSOCIATION**

Study 3 tests whether identity-signaling drives divergence by examining how divergence depends on the identity of the group associated with a taste. We asked participants to consider a group that they liked but who they considered either similar or different from themselves.<sup>5</sup> Participants were then given a modified version of the choice task from study 1. In addition to getting information about the overall distribution of preferences (i.e. 65/100 like Option A, 25/100 Option B, and 10/100 Option C), they were also given information about the distribution of preferences for people in the group they listed (see figure 4). This information suggested that while Option A received the largest absolute level of choice from the group they named, Option C was most diagnostic of the listed group.

If individuals just care about idiosyncratic differentiation in certain domains, regardless of whether divergence signals a particular identity, then choices should depend only on how many people hold the taste, and not who holds it. Instead, based on identity

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<sup>5</sup> We wanted to move beyond simply showing that people diverge from a taste if it is associated with a group they dislike. [0]Divergence from a disliked group is consistent with identity signaling but it is also consistent with many other theories (e.g., that we avoid things with negative associations).

signaling, we predict that people will be more likely to diverge and select Option C in identity-relevant domains, but this effect should be moderated by the identity associated with this taste; people should be more likely to select Option C when it is associated with others who have a similar, as opposed to dissimilar, social identity.<sup>6</sup>

## Method

One-hundred and twenty-three students and staff members (Mean age = 20, 57% Female) were randomly assigned to condition and completed a choice survey as part of a group of studies for which they received \$20.

Participants were given space to write in either an in-group or out-group depending on condition (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Specifically, participants in the in-group [out-group] condition were asked:

Please write in the name of a social group that you like and consider yourself *similar to/belong to* [*quite dissimilar to/different from*]. This group should be a tightly knit group, consisting of individuals who are very similar to one another. For the rest of the survey, this group was called Group Z.

Participants chose one of three options (A, B, or C) in various preference domains (e.g. dish soap, stereos, hairstyles, 19 in all). They were told that out of 100 people, 65 preferred Option A (15 of which were Group Z members), 25 preferred Option B (12 of which were Group Z members), and 10 preferred Option C (9 of which were Group Z members), see figure 4. Accordingly, Option A was most popular option and Option C

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<sup>6</sup> Traditional notions of reference group influence (Stafford 1966) would predict that people should prefer the option held by the greatest number of people in their reference group (i.e. Option A).

the least popular, both overall, and among Group Z members. But, while Option C was the most distinctive option, it was also the option most associated with Group Z.

Finally, participants completed a number of ancillary measures. They rated how much they would learn about a person (e.g. that person's preferences, beliefs, and attitudes) if they found out the person belonged to Group Z or did not belong to the group (1 = Nothing at all, 7 = A great deal). They also rated how much they liked the people in Group Z (-3 = Don't like at all, 7 = Like a great deal), their similarity to members of Group Z (1 = Extremely dissimilar, 7 = Extremely similar), and how much they identified with Group Z (1 = Very little, 7 = A great deal).

## Results

*Manipulation Checks.* Participants listed a variety of social groups ranging from athletes and choral groups to various fraternities/sororities. Comparing the conditions, participants in the in-group condition thought they were more similar to Group Z ( $M_{\text{In-Group}} = 4.85$  vs.  $M_{\text{Out-Group}} = 3.06$ ,  $t(101) = 7.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and were more identified with Group Z ( $M_{\text{In-Group}} = 4.98$  vs.  $M_{\text{Out-Group}} = 3.18$ ,  $t(101) = 6.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, however, there was no significant difference in liking of the group listed across conditions,  $t(101) = 1.60$ ,  $p > .11$ .

*Signal Based on Group Membership.* Consistent with our argument that tastes do not create a strong signal when they are held by too many people, people thought they knew more about a person's preferences, attitudes, and beliefs if that person was a member of a small group (here Group Z,  $M = 5.17$ ) rather than a member of the majority (not a Group Z member,  $M = 2.78$ ),  $t(102) = 5.28$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Main Analyses.* We have three predictions. First, consistent with hypothesis 1, people should prefer greater divergence (i.e. select Option C more frequently) in identity-related domains. Secondly, because Option C is heavily associated with Group Z, participants should be more likely to select Option C if Group Z is their in-group rather than out-group. Finally, consistent with hypothesis 2, we expect an interaction; the identity of Group Z should have a greater influence on selection of Option C in identity-related domains. People should be especially likely to select Option C when it is in a domain people use to signal identity *and* when the option is associated with their in-group so it is an identity signal that they want to send. (Note that this interaction prediction of identity-signaling is inconsistent with alternate accounts of the domains phenomenon: If people just wanted to be distinctive in certain domains, there should just be a main effect of domain identity-relatedness.) A median split was performed on domains and a 2 (Group: In-Group vs. Out-Group) x 2 (Domain Identity-Relatedness: High vs. Low) Mixed ANOVA examined choice likelihood of Option C compared to the two other options.

As predicted, there were main effects of both Domain Identity-Relatedness,  $F(1, 101) = 30.32, p = .001$  and of Group  $F(1, 101) = 11.50, p = .001$ , see figure 5. Participants were more likely to select Option C in identity-related domains ( $M = 31.8\%$  vs.  $17.7\%$ ) and when that option was associated with an in-group ( $M = 31.1\%$  vs.  $18.4\%$ ). Importantly, there was also a significant Domain Identity-Relatedness x Group interaction,  $F(1, 101) = 4.37, p = .04$ . People were more likely to select Option C when it was associated with the in-group even for domains that are less related to identity,  $F(1,$

101) = 4.01,  $p = .05$ , but this tendency was magnified in identity-related domains,  $F(1, 101) = 11.71, p < .001$ .<sup>7</sup>

## Discussion

Study 3 provides more evidence that divergence is indeed driven by identity. Consistent with hypothesis 2, the identity of the other taste holders had a greater influence on divergence in identity-related domains. In identity-relevant domains, people chose the minority option when it was shared by others who held their identity, but they avoided the minority option when it was shared by others with a different identity. People were less influenced by taste holder identity in non-identity related domains. Idiosyncratic differentiation cannot explain these results because it does not suggest why divergence should vary based on the identities of those who also hold a taste.

It is likely that these results were likely driven by two separate identity concerns: the desire to signal identity and the desire to avoid signaling that one is a conformist. Consistent with this interpretation, participants in the out-group condition showed increased selection of Option B in identity-related domains (see table 1); this allowed them to avoid both the conformist option (A) and the option associated with another social group (C).

To provide further evidence that concerns about identity are driving divergence, rather than some other factor, in our final study we take one product and use a priming task to make that product appear more identity-related or more functional. When people

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<sup>7</sup> Identical results were also found using hierarchical linear regression using identity-relatedness as a continuous within subjects variable and condition as the between subjects factor.

perceive a product as functional they should not care what identities are held by others who also use that product, but when they perceive the product as identity-related, they should care a great deal.

#### **STUDY 4: PRIMING DOMAIN TYPES**

If people diverge more in domains that are seen as identity-related, then divergence should differ depending on whether people see a particular domain as a good avenue to signal identity. Study 4 tests this possibility by considering one product and using a prime to encourage participants to frame the product as more functional or more identity-related. Participants first wrote about products they own that either express their identity or provide functional benefits. Then, in an ostensibly unrelated task, they were asked to evaluate a new digital music player after reading information which suggested the player was evaluated positively by either a dissimilar social group or just people in general.

Based on hypothesis 2, we predict that others identity will play a greater role in divergence when the product is framed as identity-related as opposed to functional. The identity of other potential users will not influence product evaluations when people are primed to think of products as serving a functional purpose, but will influence evaluation when people were primed to think of products as identity-related. Further, identity primed individuals should show decreased liking for the product when it is associated with dissimilar others.

## Method

Forty-four undergraduates were randomly assigned to condition and completed two surveys as part of a larger study for which they received \$8.

Participants first filled out a “Product Ownership” survey where they wrote a few sentences about something they owned. They were told the experimenters were “interested in the way people describe the products they own,” and in the functional [identity-related] condition, they read:

Sometimes people choose things based on how well *they perform a specific function [that thing expresses their identity]*. In the space below, please write 5-7 sentences about something or things you own that you bought for the functional benefits it provides [that expresses who you are to the people around you]. Also write about why you decided to purchase that particular type/brand. For instance, some people may buy a *specific toothpaste because it freshens breath and does a good job of fighting cavities [pair of sunglasses because they feel it expresses they type of person they are]*.

After writing 4-5 sentences, participants were asked to complete an ostensibly unrelated survey on “New Product Testing.” They were told that the experimenter was interested “your attitudes towards a new digital music player that Real Music Inc. is considering putting on the market” and that they would be given both product information (taken from company specifications)<sup>8</sup> as well as “results of some recent focus

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<sup>8</sup> eMuse uses the latest technology to let you take your music with you wherever you go. Traveling, working out, or just living life, eMuse lets you take your music with you. With 20 GB of storage space it can hold over 5,000 songs in the palm of your hand. That’s over two weeks worth of music, or probably your whole CD collection.

group testing.” Conditions differed only in the identity of focus group participants who liked the device. Specifically, people in the control [dissimilar] condition read that:

The device was recently tested among a group of *individuals* [35-44 year old *business executive*] and 77% of participants [business executives] reported that they could see themselves using the eMuse device. In addition, 69% of participants [business executives] suggested the device fit what they were looking for.

Business executives were chosen as the dissimilar out-group because pre-test data found that student participants did not dislike this group (average liking = .22 on a -3 = very negative, 3 = very positive scale) but saw them as dissimilar (average similarity = 2.4 on a 1 = not very similar, 7 = very similar scale).

Participants then completed a number of dependent measures regarding their attitudes towards the device. They were asked how much they liked the device (1 = Don't like at all, 10 = Like a great deal), and asked to rate their attitude towards the device on a number of dimensions (bad-good, negative- positive, unfavorable-favorable).

## Results

The four device evaluation items were highly correlated ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and averaged to form a Product Evaluation Index. Participants scores were analyzed using a 2 (Prime: Functional vs. Identity-Related) x 2 (Others' Identity: Control vs. Dissimilar) ANOVA.

The analysis revealed marginal main effects of both Prime  $F(1, 43) = 3.00, p = .09$  and Others' Identity  $F(1, 43) = 2.87, p = .10$ , see figure 6. More importantly, there was a predicted Prime x Others' Identity interaction,  $F(1, 43) = 4.26, p = .04$ .

Specifically, participants' evaluations were influenced by the identity of other potential users when they were primed to think of products as identity-related,  $F(1, 43) = 5.86, p < .02$ ; people evaluated the product less favorably when business executives ( $M = 5.72$ ), as opposed to people in general ( $M = 8.03$ ), could see themselves using it. The identity of other potential users had no effect when participants were primed to think about products serving a functional purpose ( $M = 8.13$  vs.  $7.82, F < 1$ ).

## Discussion

Results of study 4 reinforce the notion that identity signaling concerns are a plausible explanation of divergence across domains. Consistent with hypothesis 2, the identity of the people associated with the taste played a greater role in identity relevant domains. When people were primed to think about products that serve a functional purpose, product evaluations were not affected by the identity of other potential users. But, when people were primed to think of products as expressing identity, the identity of other potential users had an effect; participants liked the product less when it was associated with a liked but dissimilar group of others.

One puzzle in the current data is why people did not express less liking for the device in the identity-relevant condition when they found a majority of the focus group liked it. One key difference between this and earlier studies is that here the majority was expressing desire but not choice. Portable music players are currently highly desired, but they are also quite expensive, so people may have expected that even though the majority liked the product, they wouldn't own it any time soon. On the other hand, divergence was

produced merely by having the members of a known group with a dissimilar identity express liking for the product.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

In this article, we propose an alternative approach to divergence that attempts to explain where people diverge. Rather than focusing on individual drives, we take a more social approach, focusing on how choices can signal identity to the broader social world. People use certain domains to make identity inferences about others, but the particular identities that are inferred depend on who else holds the taste. Consequently, the number of people, and the social group to which those people belong, will have a greater influence on divergence in identity-related domains.

Four studies supported our identity-signaling perspective, illustrating that people are more likely to diverge in domains that others use to infer identity. Supporting hypothesis 1, people were more likely to diverge from majorities in identity-related domains (studies 1 and 2). Supporting hypothesis 2, the identity of the other people who share a taste had a greater impact on divergence in identity related domains (studies 3 and 4). These effects were shown both when divergence was measured through the taste people selected (studies 1 and 3) or whether people abandoned tastes they had already expressed a preference for (study 2). Greater divergence in identity-related domains was even shown using the same domain, but framing it either as more functional or more identity-related (study 4).

These findings also suggest why certain domains are better for inferring identity-- because choice in those domains is based less on function (study 1). In domains where

choice is not based on function it is easier to attribute others' choices to their identity. Domains will also be better for identity signaling to the degree that choice is publicly visible.

### Extensions and Directions for Future Research

Our approach suggests a number of implications for the use of products as identity signals. It implies that a particular cultural practice will act more effectively as an identity signal when people could easily choose other cultural practices that have the same functional value. A spike-laden motorcycle jacket is a good signal of identity because a plain brown one is equally warm. A Burberry raincoat is a fashion statement even on a rainy day because other coats serve the same function at less expense.

Our analysis also suggests that individual tastes can identify themselves as identity related by strategically reducing functionality. A cap is more of a fashion statement when the bill is turned backwards so it no longer serves its functional purpose. Sunglasses are more of a fashion statement indoors where they make it harder to see. Afunctional, senseless behaviors also make good signals. College fads such as goldfish-swallowing and phone-booth stuffing are obviously pointless. Baggy Zoot suits waste cloth, indeed World War II Production Boards banned them because of this. The idea that afunctional tastes are better signals helps us understand why Zoot suits are baggy, beehive hairdos high, and low-riders low.

Seeing certain domains as identity-related helps understand why fads and fashions fluctuate. While lay theories of fads and fashion suggest people abandon practices because they just "get tired of them" (some disciplinary theories suggest the same, see

Sproules, 1981) a signaling perspective provides more insight. Whenever tastes signal identity, people should be more likely to abandon tastes upon adoption by out-group members. Thus in identity-related domains, abandonment should happen when fewer others hold a given taste, and consequently fashion cycles should be shorter and more frequent.

This paper has identified a new, identity-based mechanism that drives divergence, but we don't want to claim that all divergence is driven by identity-signaling. Hipsters may all wear the same style of jacket, allowing them to signal their type (as we predict), but select different colors (as predicted by the uniqueness literature), allowing them to feel somewhat unique relative to others of their type. Furthermore, desires for idiosyncratic differentiation do predict some divergence; people may have greater desire to express their uniqueness on an issue of personal importance and individuals with high NFU show greater divergence overall (also see Aaker & Schmitt 2000 for cultural difference in preferences for uniqueness). The contribution of our studies is to suggest that *across* individuals certain domains are more identity-relevant and people are more likely to diverge in these domains.

Seeing certain tastes as signals of identity not only provides insight into where people will diverge, but also where they will conform. Conformity is one of the most basic principles underlying social behavior (Asch 1951; see also Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975), yet while individuals want to be both similar and different (Brewer, 1991), little research explains *when* conformity versus divergence will occur. Identity-signaling suggests attending to both the taste domain and the group membership of the other people engaging in the behavior. In identity-related domains, people should

converge with similar others to imbue tastes with meaning while diverging when adoption by other social types dilute a taste's signal value. In non-identity-related domains, group membership should play less of a role; people should be more likely to conform to the preferences of others, regardless of their social group. People can also use purchases to simultaneously achieve similarity and differentiation, conforming to the in-group on signal-relevant aspects (e.g. car brand) while diverging on signal-irrelevant aspects (e.g. car color). Understanding domains of divergence provides a window into important social processes of divergence, conformity, and identity.

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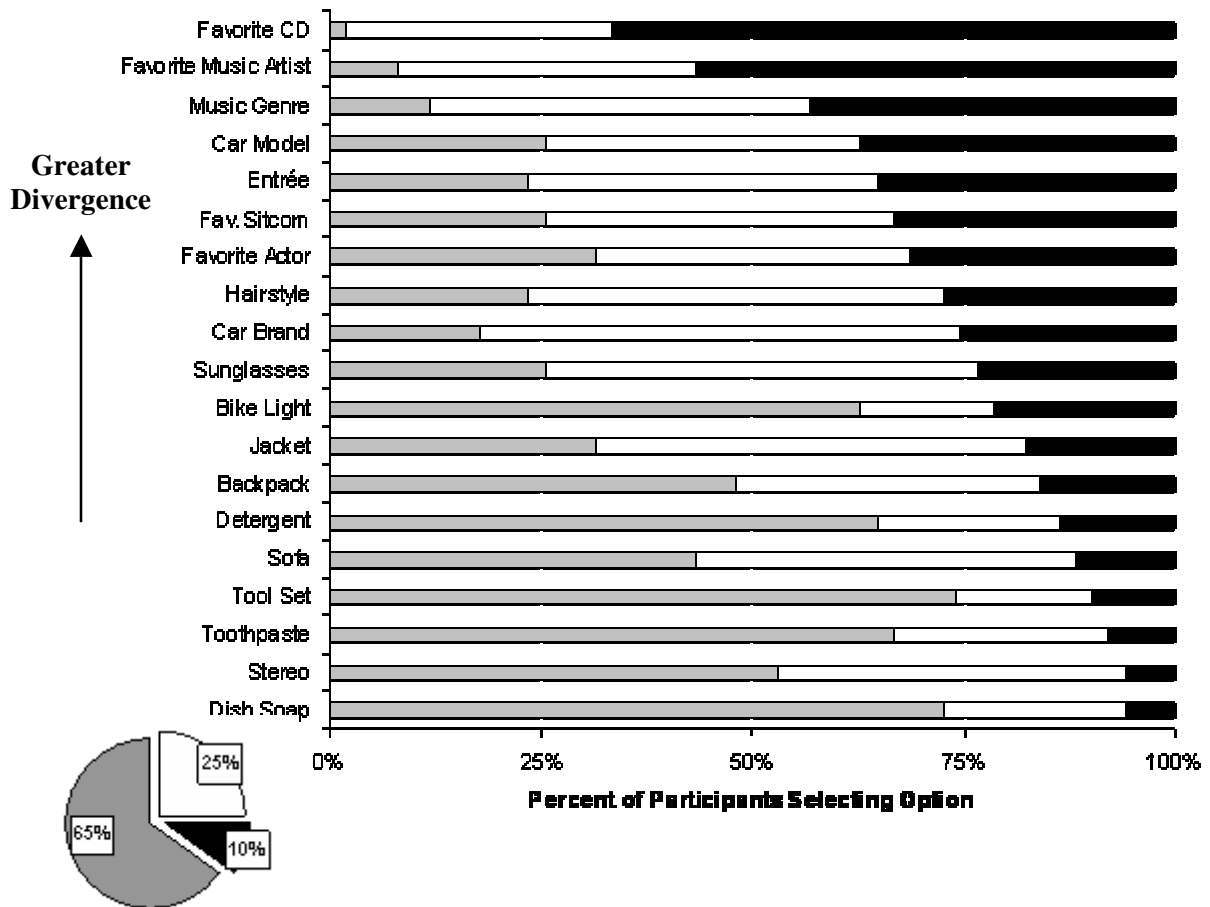
**Table 1**

Option selection by Domain and Group Condition (Study 3)

	<b>65</b>	<b>In-Group</b>			<b>65</b>	<b>Out-Group</b>	
	<b>(Option A)</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>(Option A)</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>(Option C)</b>
		<b>(Option B)</b>	<b>(Option C)</b>		<b>(Option B)</b>		
Less Identity-related	54.3%	25.0%	20.7%	66.7%	20.9%	12.5%	
More Identity-related	29.8%	31.3%	38.9%	44.9%	34.0%	21.1%	

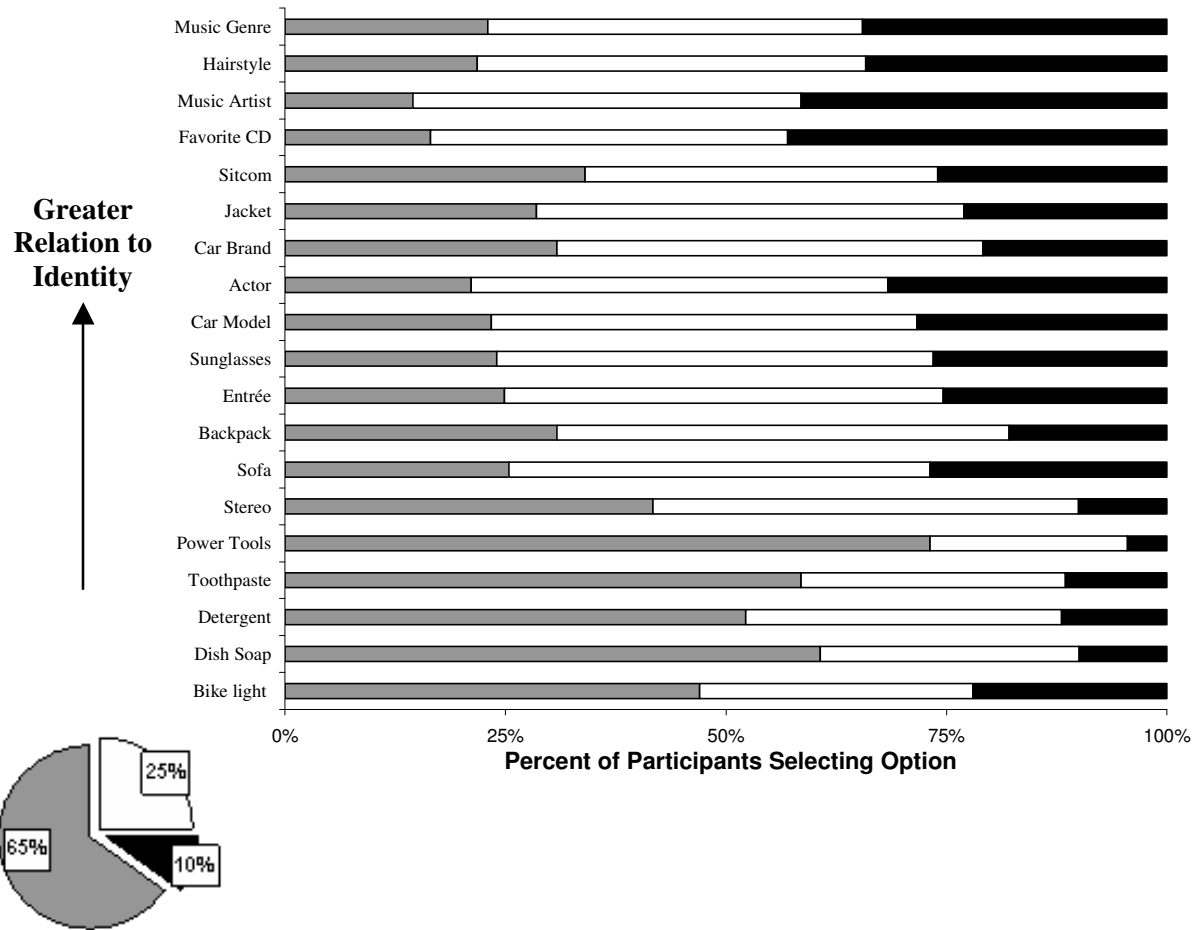
**Figure 1**

Divergence in Taste-Selection, Sorted by Greatest Divergence (Pilot Study)



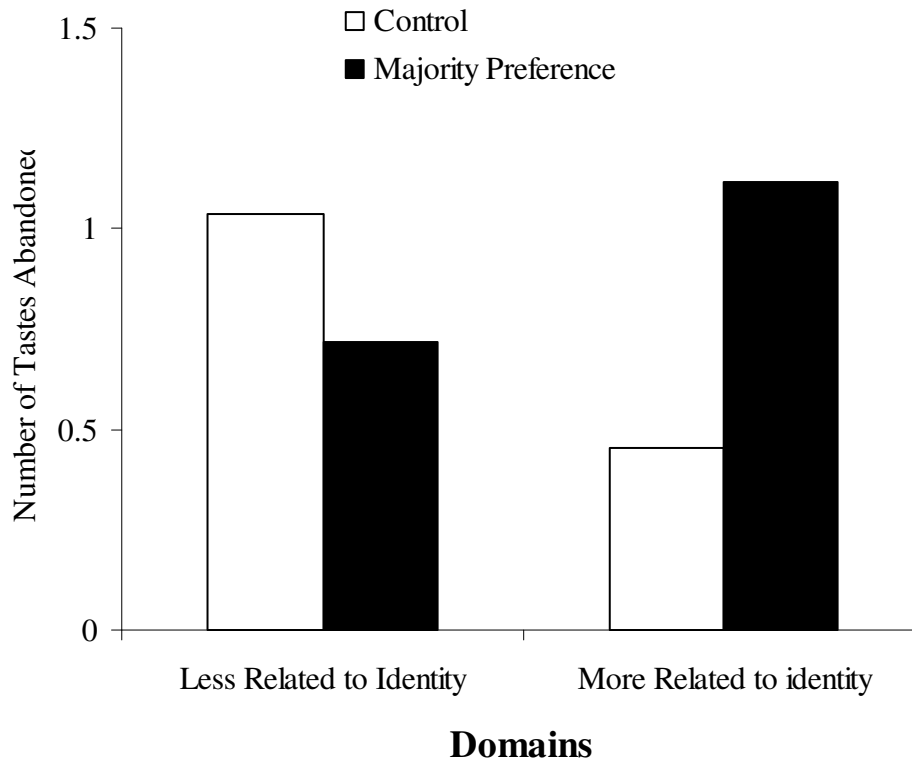
**Figure 2**

Divergence in Taste Selection, Sorted by Identity-Relatedness (Study 1)

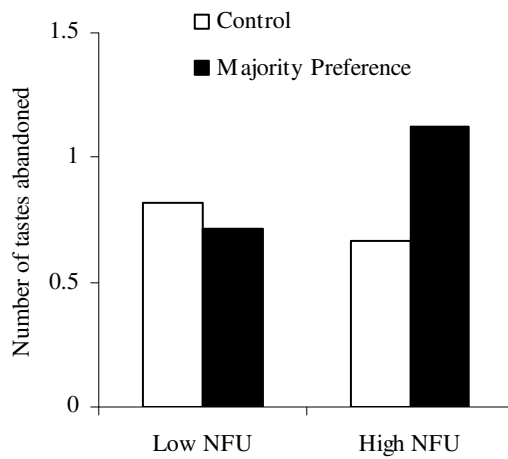


**Figure 3A**

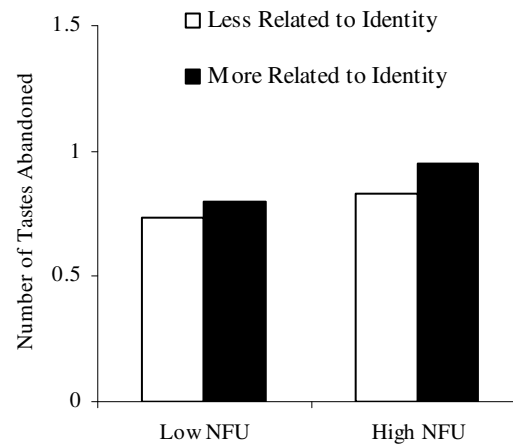
Effect of Condition and Domain Type on Divergence (Study 2)

**Figure 3B**

Effect of Condition and Need for Uniqueness on Divergence

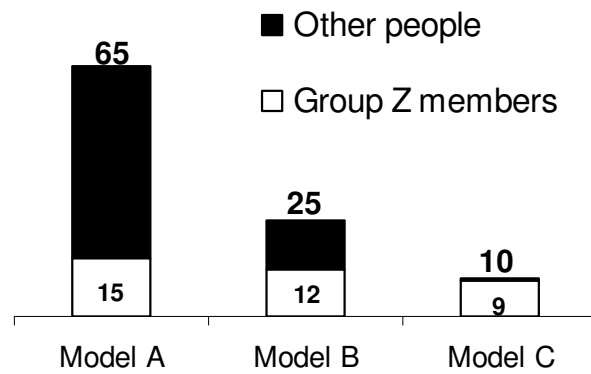
**Figure 3C**

Effect of Domain and Need for Uniqueness on Divergence



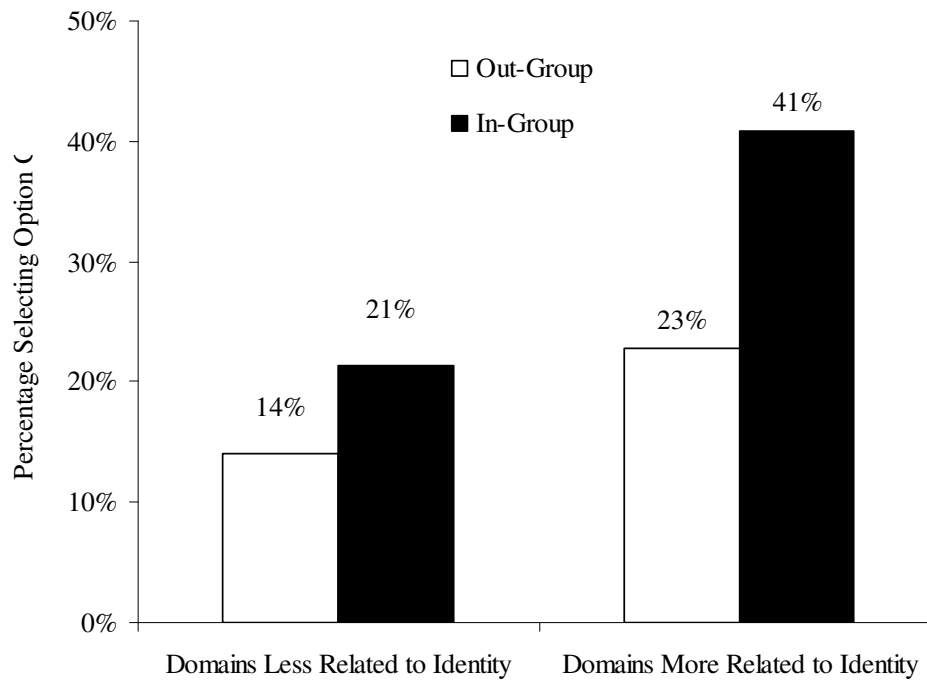
**Figure 4**

Diagram Given to Participants Illustrating Who Liked Different Options (Study 3)



**Figure 5**

Effect of Domain and Group Condition on Choice of Option Held by Fewest Others  
(Study 3)



**Figure 6**

Influence of Prime and Identity Association on Product Evaluation (Study 4)

