



JCR MANUSCRIPT REVIEW HISTORY 001-1 (REVIEWS)

Thank you for submitting "Where Do People Diverge from Others" (06-0006) to the Journal of Consumer Research. The manuscript has been read by three reviewers, an associate editor, and by me. The reviewers made arguments on the merits of the paper and the associate editor integrated the arguments and developed a recommendation. Their reports are attached to this letter. This letter gives you my decision and reasoning.

I am pleased to extend an invitation to revise. The manuscript has done relatively well in the review process and, while I think there is merit in the suggestions of some of the reviewers that you do more empirical work, I am not going to set that as a requirement for the revision. I'd rather see a shorter paper. I agree very well with the associate editor overall, and I think we are aligned in believing that it is conceptual crispness, not exhaustive empirical testing of alternative processes, that this paper needs.

In particular I agree with the associate editor that you don't want to overstate the novelty of your position or its contrast with past work. I think you'll find that some of your work is anticipated in Wernerfelt, Birger (1990), "Advertising Content When Brand Choice is a Signal", Journal of Business, 63, no. 1. That paper has no empirical component, but analyzes the use of brand choice to coordinate behavior and send social signals for products that are consumed in public. The power of your manuscript is in the data. I rather like Reviewer B's notion of getting to the data quickly, which would help with the problem that most of the readers thought that the introduction was repetitive. It appeals to me that you put some intriguing product differences in front of the reader quickly and then build out the conceptual explanation. However this choice is yours.

There is definitely a need for more thinking about the distinction between choice by the criterion of fitness for function and choice made to express identity. It does not feel like a mutually exclusive partition to me. Can I not express my identity in the fineness of the discriminations I make with respect to function? Dish soap for the guest bathroom can get quite expressive. The associate editor's thoughts here and with respect to the information in others' choices should be considered carefully.

While the writing is lucid and mercifully free of jargon, it could be quite substantially tighter. I would like if possible to see the paper shortened, but only by better organization, not by the elimination of any of the studies. Because you will have to add text to meet the reviewer concerns for more detail on the experiments, it is not assured that you can reduce the length. How about a tighter title?

Congratulations on a good first round. If you resubmit, the manuscript will go to the same reviewing team. If you would like clarification on any points in the reports or this letter, let me know.

Sincerely,



John Deighton

AE comments to the author(s)

The reviewers (and I) liked this paper quite a bit. The topic is great and the central idea that people use (some) products to signal their identities is a good one. The empirical evidence lends support to the broad hypotheses. Nevertheless, the reviewers saw weaknesses in the positioning and conceptual development, the latter of which led to some concerns about the existing set of studies. These weaknesses appear to be fixable so the task going forward is one of deepening and refining the present ideas, focusing in particular on the following issues:

Positioning. The positioning of the paper as being in opposition to prior work, particularly on need for uniqueness, seems inaccurate and likely to put off some readers unnecessarily. The positioning overstates the novelty and contribution of the present work and unfairly criticizes the previous. The two approaches are clearly complementary and would be better presented as such. Your work is adding to what we know, not correcting what we know. Also, the ideas, while appealing, are actually so intuitive that one of the reviewers in the note to the editor wondered if the findings really were all that interesting or unexpected. I confess to a similar first reaction that was muted somewhat as I got deeper into the manuscript. Other readers will react similarly so it is best not to over trumpet the uniqueness/startling nature of the work. As the ideas are highly intuitive, the full contribution will rest on the execution around deeper conceptual issues as discussed below.

Conceptual development. The reviewers raised several interrelated questions and concerns about the conceptual development:

- a) What is divergence? The manuscript would be improved, in the words of reviewer A, by addressing “the what and why” of divergence. In addressing these questions, please consider related constructs in the literature. For example, how does divergence differ from nonconformity? How does it relate to decisions to become expert/connoisseurs in seemingly mundane (or functional) categories. Also, prior work on reference groups is relevant and should be considered in greater detail as should work on diffusion and decline of social trends (see especially comments by reviewer A). Reviewer A offers the useful suggestion for coming at a deeper understanding of divergence by exploring the relative meaning and advantages of convergence. (These concerns are related to the issues raised in points c and d below.)
- b) A sharper distinction needs to be made between social identity and personal importance and a test pitting these two explanations against each other should be conducted. See reviewer B’s comments for more direction in this regard.
- c) The paper’s primary contribution is in asserting that people will diverge from the choices of others in some domains but not others. Hence, the paper needs to be very precise in its treatment of the domain construct. However, I found the paper to be rather thin in its conceptual development in this regard, relying more on intuition than formal definitions. Functionality, while simple to understand on one level, may well be confounded with the true underlying factor that influences degree of divergence. Care in defining this construct and separating it from others should mitigate such concerns. Deeper exploration of the meaning and influence of domain should also consider your finding that in the public domain, people may be more likely to choose the moderately popular product. This exploration should also allow you to address reviewer C’s observation that the functional product categories that you used in your studies are mostly related to health. Is people’s sense that we are much alike in our health needs driving the results? (An issue related to point d below.) More generally, clear definition of what functionality is and how it might be confounded with other factors would allow theory as opposed to intuition and “pre-test” to guide your category choices.
- d) The paper seems to omit discussion of an important issue, specifically, the amount of information contained in other people’s choices about the quality and suitability of the product for the buyer. Buyers may well use others’ choices to answer the question: Will I like it? In some domains, one might sense that going with the majority is a good idea while in other cases one might go with the minority, depending on one’s beliefs about the distribution of tastes across the population (homogeneous or heterogeneous) and about how similar the other

people's tastes are likely to be to one's own. While I have not fully developed this view, an informational approach might well account for many of your results. Exploration of this alternative view may benefit from understanding the circumstances that lead to different kinds of differentiation in the market place, specifically, vertical (quality level) versus horizontal (taste level) differentiation. This differentiation at the firm or product level should track how tastes are distributed in the population. The book Discrete Choice Theory of Product Differentiation by Anderson et al. has a good discussion of this differentiation, especially pages 305-6 and 312-316.

Other issues. Your writing is generally clear but the front end has a fair bit of redundancy. You should be able to deepen your conceptual development without increasing the length of the paper. Reviewers called for more detail on your studies chiefly in the materials and statistical comparisons. The reviewers disagreed about whether to lead with the pilot study in the intro. Reviewer A didn't like the flow while reviewer B liked it very much and suggested going even further with a similar treatment of study 1. I am agnostic on the issue and think the ultimate choice will depend on how the introduction develops after you have tackled the deeper conceptual issues. Reviewers also disagreed on the value of study 4 and again I think the inclusion and positioning of that study will depend on the changes to the front end of the paper. The reviewers raised a number of other good points that I have not summarized here but should be helpful to you in pondering how best to revise the document.

Best of luck to you in the revision. You have a good topic here and a great start. Pushing deeper on the key constructs will enhance the conceptual development and suggest more refined tests, which will greatly enhance the work.

Reviewer A
Comments to Authors

This paper addresses the tendency to choose options that diverge from the choices of others. You argue that identity signaling is the motivation for this pattern, and demonstrate across four studies that products differ in the degree to which they signal identity and, hence, trigger a tendency to diverge. Rather than examining choice as a function of perceptions of the product's qualities, this framework spotlights perceptions of the distribution of others' choices. This perspective alone represents a meaningful advance. However, it would be useful to deepen your theoretical framework, use that framework to anticipate and integrate the diverse empirical findings, and try to connect the effects to other phenomena of interest. Doing these things will enable you to make a broader and clearer contribution to the literature.

You could start by addressing in greater depth the basic effect (divergence). The current framing is somewhat narrower than it should be. The paper appears to pick up in the middle of the story, focusing on moderators for an interesting effect that we do not yet fully understand. Predicting the *when* and contrasting the conditions with predictions of other theories is something to do later. At this stage, the paper could devote more attention to the *what* and *why* of divergence. What is the definition of divergence and what sorts of behaviors mark it? What are the purposes of such preference shifts in taste or fashion? Is preference for divergence a linear function of degree of overlap with others? For instance, one might not want to be one of the *only* one with a given hairstyle (Option C). It may be better to be one of a significant minority (B) if not in the clear majority (A). Is C always preferred to B for identity-signaling products, or does it depend (and on what)? A post hoc analysis of Study 1 results suggests that B is preferred in domains that are more public. It may be interesting to address this point more systematically. If you could anticipate for the reader what B vs. C were selected to represent, and discuss the conditions under which each might be preferred, this would be helpful.

You could also broaden the literature base to incorporate other approaches that deal with social trends and their diffusion. For instance, why do people become connoisseurs for mundane and omnipresent products, such as bottled water, rejecting the options that are generally acceptable to others? Interpretive research has addressed such trends as “oxygen bars” in NYC and what they signal (i.e., only the most discerning connoisseur could have a preference in such categories). This seems to me to be relevant to your present arguments about divergence. Popular authors (e.g., Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point*) have also addressed the phenomenon of divergence in the diffusion of fashion trends: Brands such as Hush Puppies or Airwalk that were cooler than cool in their own highly specific subcultures until they started to catch on in the broader market, causing their core consumers to diverge abruptly. For the notion that some choices signal identity by signaling other choices (e.g., people who eat at KFC are more likely to buy nail polish), you might also refer to work by Solomon and Englis on *consumption constellations*.

Relatedly, you could discuss *convergence* in greater detail. Why do people pick the consensus product when it comes to dish soap, toothpaste, and the like? If it was just that they did not care about the distribution of selections in the population, because the products do not signal identity, you would expect a random pattern, not a consistent tendency to choose the majority option. What is the role of risk perceptions in such choices? Perhaps when there is no other information provided, people choose majority options to reduce functional risk?

The studies are presented in an unorthodox way. Generally speaking, pilot data should be presented at the start of a main study, rather than in the introduction (p. 4-5) or discussion (p. 23). There are exceptions to this guideline, such as when the results deal with a tangential issue or explanation. However, in your

case this does not appear to be relevant. Discuss these data in the results sections and provide means, etc.

Also, whenever data are presented, there should be complete information provided about the questionnaire items that comprised the DVs. This information is missing in a number of your studies. For study 1, describe the response rate of your Internet sample.

There were a few other places where it was not clear in advance what data were being presented or what patterns were anticipated. These are listed below.

Pp 10-11: The set up for H2 was hard to follow. It is not clear which DV is being compared in which cells.

P. 15: Which data showed that participants exhibited strong agreement about which domains were identity-related?

P. 21, top: Is this a separate pilot sample? If so, this should be made clear and more information on the rating task provided.

P. 22: The manipulation and cover story of Study 2 were very clever. However, the prediction was not clearly presented. I think what you meant to say is that NFU will not moderate the Domain X Condition interaction. The 2 X 2 interaction, later on same page, is also not expressed clearly. The complete results need to be provided: discuss what happens in non-identity domains across conditions, and show the 2 X 2 X 2 means. Also, perhaps I missed something, but it was hard to follow the alternative explanation on this page. How would it explain the results, and how do these data eliminate it?

For study 3, I wonder what your participants made of this thought experiment? It also is not clear that Option C was most diagnostic – only 25% of Group Z chose it. Some foreshadowing of the logic underlying the stimulus set would have been helpful here. Also I did not follow where the data presented at bottom of p. 26 came from.

Other Issues:

The writing is rather repetitive, particularly in the introduction where the main thesis (drive theories don't predict the domain-specificity of divergence) was restated several times. This repetition adds to the impression that you are making a limited point. As noted earlier, your theoretical domain is interesting and there is more that could be done to develop and deepen it.

Footnotes dealing with conceptual material were distracting. If the point is an important one, it should be incorporated into the text. Otherwise it should be deleted.

Some additional suggestions, not necessarily important to address in this paper:
1) It would be worthwhile distinguishing between the signal value of choices at the product level (e.g., whether to buy a U.S. flag) and choices at the brand level (whether to buy the expensive and durable brand or a cheaper one). The identity implications may vary greatly across levels and will depend on the distribution of functionality across choices at each level. 2) Another way to demonstrate that identity signaling motives drive your effects would be to put participants in a context that enhances such signaling needs. If the tendency to diverge increases in this context, this would offer strong support for your account.

Overall, this is an interesting line of inquiry that has the potential to make a novel contribution. Addressing the issues outlined here may help to deepen the theoretical framework and enhance your contribution. Best of luck with your work in this area.

Reviewer B Comments to Authors

This paper was a pleasure to read. It is clearly written, and jargon is kept at a minimum. The paper examines a key theoretical issue of consumer research: Why do consumers choose options that diverge from others in certain social life domains? The author(s) propose that the effect does not occur because of an individual drive to be different; rather, individuals seek differentiation to signal their identity to others.

In addition, the author(s) identify additional factors and boundary conditions that affect the phenomenon (similarity to a group, for example, as well as product framing in terms of functionality or identity). They also show that in general consumers are more likely to display the effect for certain product categories. Finally, in the discussion section, they offer, almost in passing, a quite interesting explanation for the fluctuations of fads and fashions: people are not abandoning a fad because they get tired of it; they abandon it because others adopt it. Thus, empirically and conceptually, the paper is not just academic hot air let off from the Ivory Tower but in fact theory-guided research with practical applications.

All that is great, and strongly predisposed me to make sure this paper gets into the next round.

However, I also have plenty of issues that I feel need to be addressed. In addition, I have suggestions to the authors that they may take up in one way or another to improve the paper.

First, while I love the positioning of the paper against an established canon of research, I don't think the authors are fully correct in the sharp way in which they critique prior theory. Basically, the authors argue that prior research, following the "idiosyncratic differentiation" paradigm, cannot explain that differentiation occurs in some domains and not others. Idiosyncratic differentiation would predict divergence across all sorts of domains, they argue – from hairstyles and music choices to dish soap and power tools (see page 8).

Is that true? One of the findings that the authors discuss as part of the paradigm they criticize shows that "individuals care more about being unique in domains that are personally important"(page 7). It seems to me that that argument is very close to the authors'; clearly, in a social context, domains may be important precisely because they affect one's self identity. In other words, while work on "idiosyncratic differentiation" may not have explicitly referred to social identity, it was certainly implicit. In fact, the social identity idea most certainly guided stimulus selection; researchers may not have used dish soap and power tools in prior research because they felt they would not get any effects with those domains and categories.

"Alright, alright, but they did not do those category comparisons! And because they did not look closely, they did not get to the social theory," you might argue. "Sure," I'd reply, "but that sounds like an academic defense from the Ivory Tower." What I am saying here is simply that the story is not as counter-theory sexy as you make it. I still think the paper makes a theoretical contribution, but it is more limited that you might think. Therefore, to turn this into a dynamite paper, I feel the experiments, and the way they are being presented, must be really, really sexy.

In that respect, I love your cool beginning! Right on the first page of the actual paper (page 4), you start with presenting data – namely, the results of a pilot study. I would go even further. Instead of the pilot, I suggest you give a brief one-paragraph description of your (largely correlational) study 1. Study 1 has problems (see below), and yet it has value and is similar to the pilot study. So, I suggest you use it here. Before that study, you just have one short paragraph. Something like this:

"Consumers like to differentiate themselves in their choices from others (Refs, refs, refs ...). Individual drive theories say this is because of personality – e.g., a search for uniqueness (more refs, refs, refs ...). But people diverge mostly in certain domains. Consider the following study we conducted."

That will get your JCR readers to pay attention! (Editor, please let them do that!) Following that, you present prior research and your alternative theory (in the

more complex way as suggested above), followed by 3-4 blockbuster experiments.

Study 2, which is an experiment, will be one of those studies. It is the one study that cleanly gets into your idea of “reception of meaning” and thus the process of identity formation. It also is more complex than the other studies because it includes an individual-differences scale that is part of the paradigm you criticize – namely “need for uniqueness.” I am not sure the study really needed all the complicated cover stories (page 19), but they were fun to read, and seemed procedurally okay.

This study should be followed by a new study that I believe is absolutely necessary: a direct competitive theory test of personal importance vs. personal identity. This will be a tough one to pull off; it will be difficult to get results you'd like to see in support of your theory but I believe it is not impossible. If you get the right results, then you really have a story. I am thinking along a 2x2 of high/low importance and high/low social identity -- the works --, augmented by one or two additional factors that help you sort out whether personal importance or social identity produced the effects. The key cells are of course the high importance/low identity and low importance/high identity cells. I did some introspection. At least for me there are some product categories that are highly important to me but others probably don't use them to define my identity (e.g., opera and hair gel) and vice versa (cars and briefcase). So, I do believe you can get separate effects for personal importance and social identity.

After that, either study 3 or study 4 (they may both be viewed as “boundary condition studies”) would be a nice addition. My preference is study 3. The effects of study 4 are almost definitional and not empirical (“functional” clearly implies “non-image/non-identity,” and indeed the correlation between the two concepts in your study 1 on page 15 is a massive minus .9). So, showing that the effect does not work for functional products is not exactly -- sexy, and sexy is what we are after. (Yet-another-priming/framing-study-in-JCR isn't a sexy concept either.)

Let me address a few other minor issues.

Examples. Throughout the introduction, you use examples that do not adhere to your theory or are not based on empirical data provided by you. Two quick examples: You state that people are more likely to stop listening to certain music when others like it than change their brand of umbrella. That should depend on what is more identity-defining for a person, right? I can imagine a group for which umbrellas are highly identity-defining (e.g., English gentlemen on Saville Road?). Similarly, you state that Shanghainese care more about distinguishing themselves through their cars rather than their air conditioner. You are wrong! My few friends in Shanghai that own a car (N=5) drive the same model; many of my friends cannot afford one. But they all brag about the latest high-tech air cons

that they own by Haier, Mitsubishi and other brands. So, please revise so that these examples relate closer to your theory and data.

Hypotheses. I find H1 and H2 too general to be formulated as hypotheses. Hypotheses should be formulated specifically before each study, which would sharpen your micro-theorizing as well. H1 and H2 are really just a general statement of the broad-based theory. I suggest you delete them.

The four studies. I have commented already on studies 1, 3 and 4. Study 1, as suggested above, should be shortened to a flashy one-paragraph right on top of the paper. The method section is not particularly detailed and thus it is difficult to judge the study in detail. To find all 19 categories, I had to go to Figure 2, which by the way like all Figures was not indexed in the manuscript. In the results section, I actually found footnote 2 the most interesting. You find that in some domains, there are more perceived choice options! In other words, people may not use – what was it again? – power tools *not because* of lack of identity-formation potential but simply because there are fewer brands of power tools than music bands. You do not present this as an alternative explanation for your identity explanation but only as one for your “functionality” determinant/drivers, so to speak. But it is in fact a serious counter-explanation in this study, a bit abstruse, to be sure, a bit Ivory Towerish, but nonetheless possible. Therefore I suggest you drop the study but still use some of the data to motivate the paper.

Transitions between studies. You need more detailed conceptual analyses between the studies to discuss the findings of a study more appropriately and to motivate the next study better. For example, before study 3 you need some sort of sociological/social-psychological group theory (e.g., something on group attractiveness or reference groups). Before study 4, you need to refer to prior priming and framing studies. (Also, note these terms are not identical; priming is associated with specific temporal procedures; so, make sure you use the right term, which I believe is “framing” or “cuing”). This will help to sketch a short process theory on how the cue or frame will exhibit its influence.

The beginning and the end. I find the title too long. How about “Why do people diverge from others?” That question is the crux of your paper. That’s the question your theory and studies must answer unambiguously. The conceptual parts of the abstract could be drastically shortened. For example, you could simply say “we propose that people diverge in their choices from others not because of an internal drive toward differentiation but to signal their identity to others.” After that, just describe the findings of the studies. The General Discussion is generally okay. However, in the “Extensions and Directions for Future Research” I could not find specific ideas about future research. What could be done to test and extend the theory further?

Reviewer C
Comments to Authors

Elaborating understanding of how individuals respond to social similarity feedback, you have asserted not only that individuals seek to differentiate themselves from others in a consumer domain (as has been previously studied), but also that individuals do so in preferred consumer domains. I think you've identified an interesting and important research question-how do individuals seeking to socially differentiate themselves choose to do so? Here are some thoughts I have regarding the conceptualization and method designs of your studies.

With respect to the conceptualization and theoretical framing of your research question, is it important and beneficial to place your signaling theory and hypotheses as being in opposition to the body of literature on need for uniqueness? It strikes me that uniqueness theory posits a process in which individuals faced with similarity feedback will seek out a nonconforming choice. One body of literature suggests trait motivations as a potential moderator of this process- high NFU individuals are more sensitive to similarity feedback than are low NFU individuals. Your work would seem to be compatible rather than competing. It stands to refine understanding of the process of seeking social differentiation, once this motivation has been evoked, by suggesting more specifically the form of response. Drawing from your identity-signaling theory, "consumers' evaluation of products' signaling potential" would seem to be a mediator explaining why similarity feedback leads to nonconformity choices in specific domains rather than any available domain.

If you do come to view uniqueness theory and your identity-signaling proposition as compatible rather than at odds, then you could use theoretical constructs that show how your work builds and extends existing work. Presently, it's not clear why "divergence" is chosen in lieu of "nonconformity" or "counterformity" and what the conceptual difference might be with these existing concepts. It's also not clear why NFU (which confounds counterformity with independence) is used in lieu of CNFU in Study 2, nor why prior work on reference group influence is not recognized, given in-group/out-group manipulation in Study 3. As a related point, the number of constructs you introduce in the paper is quite large, and some seemingly unnecessary. You could limit these to those that are relevant to your hypotheses. In illustration, the introduction of "idiosyncratic differentiation" (p. 4) seems unnecessary, and in any event is defined in a way that seems at odds with the concept label. "Cultural tastes," which you introduced on p. 8, also seems unnecessary.

In addressing your research questions-how do individuals seeking to socially differentiate themselves choose to do so? Do they do so without preference as to product domain? – you might propose additional tests beyond the present ones in which the outcome variable is "identity-related" products conceived

primarily in terms of a combination of expressive/publicly visible goods as opposed to functional/private ones. Though, even in looking at these you might seek to explain exceptions – the conditions under which people are prompted to diverge in their selections of functional goods as a means of self expressions. Your study 4 seems to be a good start here. Also, you might consider designing the method, with measured mediators that can be empirically tested as support for the social process you hypothesize.

In study 1, you find that “divergence” increased when the domain was identity-related, but (counter to your expectation) decreased in domains that were public. A reason for this could be that several product categories in the “private” domain have elements of health risk as a function of bodily contact (e.g., dish soap, detergent, toothpaste). In domains tied to bodily contact people usually do prefer “majority” or commonplace choices (as I think has been tested in some of the health-related social psychology literature). The potentially “inflated” preference for convergence here would manifest as a decrease in divergence for your “identity/public” goods. In study 3, it seems the outcome measure and the inclusion of more risk-related products in the low-identity group might account for your pattern of findings. Specifically, divergent choices of the low-identity products when the “rare choice population” (Group C) was dominated by in-group members, might reflect that preferences of the in-group reduce risk whereas preferences of the out-group would not do so.

It would be helpful to know the items used to rate functionality and public visibility of the 19 goods. Also, it would be useful to see the ratings of public visibility. The portability of once private goods into the public domains via technologies like MP3 players, laptops, etc. makes this ambiguous or at least not obvious.