Consumer conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence

Abstract

Previous studies have shown that an individual's conformity and susceptibility to social influences with regards to consumption may depend on personal characteristics and specific social factors. We analyze the influence that individual values have on a person's susceptibility to interpersonal influence and desire to conform to the expectations, attitudes, consumption patterns and behavior of others. Our empirical analysis shows that consumer conformity is influenced by Schwartz’ (1992, 2006) ten universal basic human values. Results also show that two other key individual and consumer values, post-materialism and a person’s level of autonomy, also influence consumers’ conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Introduction

Consumer for conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influences includes the necessity to identify with different reference groups through the purchase and use of products and brands (Ismail, 2011; Kropp et al., 2005). Social group influence and pressure has been found as a significant factor in individuals’ behavior and their tendency to conform to the norms of the group (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). Given their significant importance in individual behavior and especially in consumer behavior, research should focus not only on their effects, but also on their antecedents.

Using the Universal Values Theory formulated by Schwartz (1992, 2006) and the Cultural Values Theory formulated by Inglehart (1977), we attempt to study whether universal basic human values affect individuals’ conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influences, leading this way to an impact of these basic values on the consumption process.

Conceptual framework

Researchers in social sciences have noted that interpersonal influence is an important determinant of an individual's behavior, affecting purchase decisions and creating individual differences in the decision making process (Abrams, 1994; Kropp et al., 2005; Moschis, 1987). Traditionally, the groups with the most significant influence upon individuals have been considered the family, peers and school (Ismail, 2011; Moschis, 1987). Through the process of socialization, individuals acquire skills and attitudes compatible with their social roles, gradually changing their social identity to fit this role (Benmoyal-Bouzaglo and Moschis, 2009). Social structural factors such as social class and gender are also considered to affect consumer behavior and learning. The key socialization processes through which the socialization agents influence socialization outcomes are modeling, reinforcement, and social interaction. Sometimes complementary, these processes influence the outcomes, which can be behaviors and cognitions such as attitudes, values, or beliefs.

Social groups have both an informational and a normative social influence on group members, affecting the information obtained by individuals and the way they interpret it, as well as their behaviors and opinions (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Girard 2010). In the Internet era, the online and social media influences are giving even more importance to the
influence of reference groups on consumer decisions and behavior. Consumer conformity and susceptibility to peer influence can impact various consumption decisions and relate to different components of marketing (Lascu and Zinkhan, 1999).

Studies have shown that an individual’s susceptibility to social influences may depend on personal characteristics and specific social factors, including the environment in which the person resides (Girard, 2010). Consumer susceptibility to social influence includes the tendency to learn about products and services by seeking information from others or observing the consumption patterns of others. It also includes the willingness to conform to others’ expectations in order to receive rewards and avoid punishments or disagreements with the social group. Moreover, individuals need to identify their image with that of their social group members through different products used as symbols (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel, 1989; Netemeyer et al., 1992). In this context, researchers have used values to explain and predict attitudes and behaviors, since they reflect the most basic adaptation characteristics and serve to guide and shape attitudes and behaviors (Kropp et al., 2005).

Other authors found that a higher collectivist orientation results in high levels of social influence, especially across nations, suggesting that marketers from an individualist country should give overt consideration to parental and sales related forces that could influence buying decisions (Kongsompong et al., 2009). Including assimilation into a new culture is related to an immigrant consumer's susceptibility to interpersonal influence (D'Rozario & Choudhury, 2000).

In a study using data from four countries (Australia, English-speaking Canada, Korea, and Norway), Kropp et al. (2005) found that external and interpersonal values are related to the consumers’ susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Mourali et al. (2005) found differences in susceptibility to normative social influence between French and English Canadians, partly driven by cultural differences in individualistic orientation. At the same time, Netemeyer et al. (1992) noted that consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence is moderated by the level of attributional sensitivity.

In this context, our study focuses on analyzing the influence that universal basic individual values have on a person’s susceptibility to interpersonal influence and desire to conform to the expectations, attitudes, consumption patterns and behavior of others. The objective of this study is to assess whether individual values impact the conformism and susceptibility to interpersonal influence of consumers.

**RQ: Consumer conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence depends on universal basic individual values.**

**Individual values**

**Schwartz’ universal values**

Schwartz (1992, 2006) developed an instrument to measure ten universal basic human values, including power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security. Each individual holds these values in a specific degree of importance (Schwartz, 2006).

Self-direction refers to independent thought and action, while stimulation relates to the need for excitement, novelty, and challenge in life. The hedonism value relates to seeking pleasure, gratification and enjoying life. Achievement refers to seeking personal success, self-respect and social recognition, while power focuses on authority, wealth, prestige, control or dominance over people and resources. Security values are related to safety, harmony, and stability, including social order and a sense of belonging (Schwartz, 1992, 2006).

Conformity deals with restraint of actions and impulses likely to upset others or violate social expectations or norms and applies to individuals who possess self-discipline,
Responsibility and politeness, while tradition focuses on commitment and acceptance of the ideas that one's culture or religion provide. The benevolence value focuses on concern for maintaining and improving the welfare of the social group, while universalism refers to understanding and protecting the welfare of all people and for nature (Schwartz, 1992, 1996, 2006).

Schwartz’s value theory states that there are six major features related to values present in contemporary research. First, values are beliefs linked to affect and become related to feelings when activated. Second, values mean desirable goals that motivate action in order to pursue these goals. Values are also more complex than norms and attitudes that usually refer to specific actions, objects, or situations, and they also serve as standards or criteria for evaluation of actions, policies, people, and events. Finally, values are ordered by importance relative to one another, importance that guides actions. The tradeoff among relevant, competing values is what guides attitudes and behaviors (Schwartz, 1992, 1996, 2006).

In this context, research found that openness to change values (self-direction and stimulation) encourage independence of thought, feeling, and action. Conservation values (conformity, tradition and security) are more likely to underline submissive self-restriction and preserving traditional practices. Self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence) emphasize accepting others as equals, while self-enhancement values (power and achievement) encourage pursuing personal success. Hedonism values share elements of both openness and self-enhancement (Caprara et al., 2006).

**Inglehart’s cultural values**

*Postmaterialism*

Following Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1954), Inglehart (1977) writes that cultural values are organized on a unidimensional scale from material to postmaterial values. In this context, research has noted an increase of postmaterial values in post-modern societies. Individuals exhibiting high postmaterialism values are focused on self-actualization, put the accent on social and intellectual values, as well as self-esteem. At the same time, materialistic values underline physiological needs and economic security. Value change is a unidimensional continuum, ranging from materialism to postmaterialism (Held et al., 2009).

New forms of consumption no longer function primarily to indicate people’s economic class, given the increasing important placed on individual self-expression, uses to express personal taste and life-style. Inglehart and Abramson (1999) note that this emphasis on self-expression is a key feature of postmaterialism.

*Autonomy*

Autonomy as a value is an essential element of individualism and self-expression (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). In this context, high levels of individualism go with high levels of autonomy and high levels of self-expression values. In autonomy cultures, people are viewed as autonomous, bounded entities, and are able to express their own preferences, feelings, ideas, and abilities. From this point of view, intellectual autonomy encourages individuals to pursue their own ideas and intellectual directions independently, while affective autonomy encourages individuals to pursue affectively positive experience for themselves. The opposite of autonomy, embeddedness, expresses a focus on social relationships, identifying with the group, participating in its shared way of life, and striving toward its shared goals, security and obedience (Inglehart and Oyserman, 2004).

The Autonomy-Index provided in the World Values Survey is derived from four goals of education. Points are awarded for independence or determination/perseverance, and subtracted for religious faith and obedience.
Methodology

The European Value Survey (EVS) and the World Value Survey (WVS) are two large-scale, cross-national and longitudinal survey research programs. They include a large number of questions, which have been replicated since 1981. About 102 countries/regions with altogether 423,084 respondents participated in the six waves conducted up to now from 1981 to 2010. In order to test the relationship between our variables, we used the World Values Survey wave from 2005-2009.

Abramson and Inglehart (1995) used WVS to develop the international "postmaterialism" scale. The Autonomy-Index is also provided in the World Values Survey and derived from four goals of education. More recently, ten items were introduced in order to measure Schwartz’ ten universal human values. Studies have used and compared the fit of these indices in different papers. For example, Held et al. (2009) compared three major value concepts: Inglehart’s concept of materialism/postmaterialism, Inglehart & Welzel’s concept of secular-rational and self-expression values and, the value circle by Schwartz. Spini (2003) also tested the equivalence of measurement across cultures of the Schwartz Value Survey questionnaire and found that it is possible for most value types to reach acceptable levels of configural and metric equivalence.

The ten Schwartz values are measured each through one item in the World Values Survey, wave 2005-2008, as it can be seen in the Appendix (Welzel, 2009). The so-called Autonomy-Index in WVS is derived from four goals of education, all of which obtain 1 point. The point is added to or subtracted from the index, if the respective goal is mentioned by the respondent as important. Points are added for independence or determination/perseverance, and subtracted for religious faith and obedience. The 12-item Postmaterialism Index included three separate batteries of questions, each with four responses, including two materialist and two postmaterialist items (Inglehart, 1997).

Similar to previously used items, we measured consumer conformity using secondary data from WVS, through 3 items available in the WVS:

- I seek to be myself rather than to follow others,
- Live up to what my friends expect, and
- I decide my goals in life by myself”.

The three items significantly loaded on the same factor following a factor analysis procedure in SPSS and we calculated the regression factor scores in order to be used to represent consumer conformity in further analyses. In order to test our key research question, we performed a multiple regression procedure with Consumer conformity as the dependent variable and the ten Schwartz values, the Autonomy index and the Postmaterialism index as independent variables, as it can be seen in the Appendix. The multiple regression procedure was performed by eliminating missing cases listwise from the WVS sample.

Results and discussion

Looking over the results in Appendix, the multiple regression procedure was significant. All independent variables in the analysis were significant, showing that our dependent variable, consumers’ conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence, is subject to significant impact from different types of individual values.

Previous studies have shown that an individual’s conformity and susceptibility to social influences with regards to consumption may depend on personal characteristics and specific social factors. Researchers have used values to explain and predict attitudes and behaviors, since they reflect the most basic adaptation characteristics and serve to guide and shape attitudes and behaviors.
In this context, our study analyzes the influence that individual values have on a person’s susceptibility to interpersonal influence and desire to conform to the expectations, attitudes, consumption patterns and behavior of others. Our empirical analysis shows that consumer conformity is influenced by Schwartz’ (1992, 2006) ten universal basic human values (power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security). Our results also note that two other key individual and consumer values, post-materialism and a person’s level of autonomy, also influence consumers’ conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Our results confirm and bring new information to previous research focusing on consumer conformity and social influences on consumption. For example, we confirm studies that have shown that an individual’s susceptibility to social influences may depend on personal characteristics and specific social factors (Girard, 2010) and bring further clarifications. Among the personal characteristics that make an individual more prone to conform and listen to its social circle are included universal human values.

For the ten individual values formulated by Schwartz, the direction of the relationship with individual conformity is not clear from the results obtained in our multiple regression analysis, which might be due to their measurement by using a single-item. However, our study notes that, as seen in the results in the Appendix, postmaterialism values and autonomy values have a negative effect on consumer conformity. This confirms the fact that consumers who score high on postmaterialism values are more independent and self-thinking, focused on self-actualization and put the accent on self-esteem and ads lower conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence to their characteristics. Also, it confirms the characteristics of the autonomy index, showing a negative relationship with conformity, due to specific autonomous traits such as expression of individual preferences and feelings.

Conclusions and future research

The results of this study represent a first step in establishing the antecedents of consumer conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence, a concept of high importance, especially in the context of online consumer influencers. The analysis represents a point forward in understanding the factors that impact consumers’ psychology and reasoning in relation to social influencers and pressures. The conclusion notes that universal individual human values, basic for any consumer, including autonomy and postmaterialism, have an impact on how much consumers try to conform to those around them and how much they listen to their social influencers. The paper also ads more information to the literature related to individual values, by showing that individuals with high autonomy and postmaterialism values are more likely to express their individuality and think independently.

Of course, this study represents just a starting point of studying the relationship between universal human values and consumption behavior and patterns. Future studies should use this first step as the basis for more in depth analyses of the relationship between individual values and consumer behavior or preferences in different circumstances. Nevertheless, additional analyses using primary data can better focus on Schwartz’ ten values and the direction of their relationships with consumer conformity and susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Given the widespread use of the Internet and social media, studies should also focus on consumer behavior within these specific platforms.
References


### Appendix

#### Model Summary

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*a. Dependent Variable: Regression factor score for Consumer conformity*