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Abstract

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Keywords

social influence, identity, conformity, divergence

Disciplines

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Comments

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When Does Social Influence Attract versus Repel?

Identity-Signaling, Conformity, and Divergence

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Abstract

Conformity is one of the most widely discussed principles in psychology, but while people often imitate others, sometimes they diverge and avoid what others are doing. When does social influence lead to conformity versus divergence, and why? The present research uses an identity-signaling approach to help explain when social influence attracts or repels. Two experiments demonstrate that while people conform to others in less identity-relevant choice domains, the social identity of others determines whether people conform or diverge in choice domains that are more symbolic of identity. People conform to in-group, or aspiration group, members to ensure desired signals of identity are communicated effectively, but diverge from out-groups, or others they want to avoid being confused with, to avoid sending undesired identity signals. These findings suggest that symbolic meaning plays an important role in responses to social influence.

Keywords: Social Influence, Identity, Conformity, and Divergence

Conformity is one of the most widely discussed principles in psychology and social influence often leads people to do the same thing as others (see Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004 for a recent review). Indeed, many classic studies have been dedicated to this topic (Asch, 1956; Festinger, 1950; Sherif, 1937). Whether comparing the length of lines (Asch, 1956), estimating the movement of light (Sherif, 1937), evaluating coffee (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975), or determining attitudes towards social policies (Cohen, 2003) and health behaviors (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006), people's choices and judgments often converge with those around them.

In other instances, however, social influence can have the opposite effect, leading people to diverge, or move away from the behavior of others (Cooper & Jones, 1969; also see Simmel, 1957). Professionals stopped appending Jr. to their children's names once the practice was adopted by the working class (Taylor, 1974) and blacks living in African American communities avoid giving their children names used by whites (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Similarly, participants ate less candy when they saw an obese looking confederate choose a lot of it (McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2009) and students abandoned wristbands when they were adopted by the geeks next door (Berger & Heath, 2008).

Taken together, these opposing findings present a puzzle: When does social influence lead people to converge to other's behavior versus diverge from it, and why?

Choices and Behaviors as Markers of Identity

We suggest that the social identity and meaning of consumption play an important role in determining whether social influence leads to conformity or divergence. Cultural

tastes (e.g., the choice people make, attitudes they hold, or behaviors they engage in) can act as signals or markers of identity (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Gosling, Ko, & Mannarelli, 2002; Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2008; Oyserman, Brickman, Bybee, & Celious, 2006; Solomon 1988). Driving a Volvo, for example, is associated with being liberal and drinking wine is more strongly associated with opera than Nascar.

The particular identity linked to a given choice or behavior, however, is socially constructed: it depends, in part, on the groups or types of people that engage in it (McCracken, 1988). If lots of outdoorsy people drive SUVs, then SUVs may come to signal a rugged identity. But this meaning can change if others start doing the same thing. If soccer-moms or weekend warriors start driving SUVs, for example, then driving an SUV may start to be associated with something entirely different.

These symbolic meanings are important because they can shape individual choice and behavior. People often choose things to construct or express desired identities (Belk 1988) but also avoid particular behaviors or abandon cultural tastes they liked previously to avoid being associated with undesired identities (Cooper & Jones, 1969). Female undergraduates were less interested in majoring in computer science when it was associated with stereotypically male environments (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, Steele 2009), for example, and minorities avoid certain health promotion behaviors or doing well in school because those behaviors are associated with Whites (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder 2007; Oyserman, et al. 2006).

Identity Signaling and Responses to Social Influence

Building on prior work, we suggest that whether social influence leads to conformity or divergence will depend on both the social identity of the people associated with a choice or behavior and the identity-relevance of the choice domain. Certain domains of social life (e.g., cars, clothes, and music) are more strongly associated with identity than others (e.g., bike lights and dish soap: Belk, 1981; Berger & Heath, 2007). Attitude function research, for example, suggests that while some domains serve more functional purposes (e.g., air conditioner) others are more symbolic (e.g. university sweatshirt, Shavitt, 1990).

The social identity linked to a given choice or behavior should have a greater effect on responses to social influence in these more symbolic domains. In less symbolic domains, people should tend to conform to the behavior of others, regardless of their social identity. Choice in these domains says relatively little about the self, and the fact that another person chose a certain dish soap or notebook should provide social proof and lead people to choose the same thing. In more identity-relevant domains, however, the effect of social influence should depend on the social identity of the people associated with the choice or behavior. People should conform to the behavior of in-group members, or others they want to be thought of as akin to, but diverge from dissociative out-group members (White & Dahl 2007), or others they want to avoid being confused with, to avoid being associated with undesired identities.

Two studies test this perspective, examining how the identity-relevance of the choice domain and the identity of the other taste holders, or taste adopters, influences whether people conform or diverge to others' behavior.

Experiment 1: Influence of Dissociative Outgroup Influence Across Domains

Experiment 1 used a real choice situation to investigate whether the identity-relevance of the choice domain would moderate whether participants conform to or diverge from the choices of a dissociative out-group member. Participants were asked to make choices in different preference domains (e.g., music, detergent, and paper towels) that varied in their identity-relevance. They were told that a peer would see their choices and form inferences about them. To examine the effects of social influence, half the participants were also exposed to choices ostensibly made by a dissociative out-group member.

We predict that the identity-relevance of the choice domain will moderate the effect of social influence on choice. People will conform to out-group members' choices in less identity-relevant domains, but will diverge and avoid options chosen by dissociative out-group members in more identity-relevant domains.

Domain Identity-Relevance Pretest

Before conducting the main study, it was important to first identify taste domains that are symbolic of identity. Separate sets of participants (N = 20 each, from the same population as the main study) rated 16 choice domains based on either identity inference making ("how much people it to make inferences about others") or self-expression ("how much it contributes to self-expression"). Consistent with the suggestion that signals are sent and received socially, there was a high degree of consensus across participants about

which domains were identity-relevant (self-expression and inference making αs > .90),

and the two sets of ratings were highly correlated (r = .95). Domains like clothing and

music were seen as more identity-relevant, domains like paper towels and bike lights

were seen as less identity-relevant. The ratings were averaged to form a Domain

Identity-Relevance Index which formed the basis for the analyses in the subsequent

studies.

Out-group Pretest

To select a dissociative out-group (i.e., one participants did not want to be

associated with), participants (N = 20, from the same population as the main study) rated

how much they wanted to avoid being seen as akin to various campus groups. They were

shown 18 campus groups (e.g., sorority members, faculty members, and graduate

students) and were asked: "For each of the groups below, how would you feel if people

thought you were a member of that group? For instance, if you were at a party or meeting

new people how much would you like or dislike people thinking you were a member of

that group?" (-3 = Wouldn't like it at all, 3 = Would like it a great deal). To ensure that

the group was liked, a second set of participants rated how much they liked each of the

groups ("how do you feel about each of the types of people below," -3 = very negative, 3

= very positive). Graduate students were chosen as the out-group because data suggested

that undergraduates liked graduate students [(M = 0.90), significantly above the midpoint

on the liking scale, t(33) = 4.96, $p < .001$] but did not want to be confused with them [(M

= -1.65), significantly below the midpoint on the reaction to being confused scale, t(19) =

6.49, $p < .001$].

Main Study Method

Fifty-five undergraduates completed an experiment in groups of 4 to 10.

Participants were randomly assigned to the control or social influence conditions. To

create a real-choice situation, they were told they would get to take home one of the

options they chose during the study (e.g., a CD from their chosen music artist).

To enhance the social influence manipulation's believability, participants were

split into two groups, led to different rooms, and told that they would start with a survey

while the other group completed a computer task. After completing the survey, each

group was led to a separate room to complete the computer task.

Once they arrived in the computer room, participants were told the experimenters

were interested in how people form inferences about others (e.g., what social groups they

were part of). They were seated in front of a spreadsheet with columns labeled for

different participants ("Subject 1," "Subject 2," etc.), and after completing the rows

labeled "age" and "year in school," they made choices in eight familiar preference

domains (e.g., popular music artists and paper towel brands). In the music domain, for

example, participants chose between three artists: Outkast, Dave Matthews Band, and

Alicia Keys. Importantly, participants were told that after making their choices, they

would switch seats with another participant who would use their choices to form

inferences about them, at which point the two of them would have the opportunity to interact.

   Social Influence Manipulation. The key manipulation involved whether the screen already contained choices ostensibly made by a member of an out-group (i.e., graduate students) that undergraduates did not want to be confused. For half the participants (control condition), the "Subject 1," column was blank and they just filled in their information and choices. But when the other half the participants (out-group influence condition) sat down to make their choices, "Subject 1" appeared to have already been completed by a prior participant who was a graduate student (31 years old, reporting "graduate student" for year in school). Thus while all participants knew that a peer would form inferences about them based on their choices, some participants (social influence condition) knew that the peer would make inferences about them after seeing their choices lined up next to a member of an out-group with whom they did not want to be confused.

Results

   A median split was performed on the identity-relevance of the choice domains and the percentage of times a participant selected the options chosen by the dissociative outgroup member student was computed in identity-relevant and less identity-relevant domains. These indices were examined in a 2 (Social Influence: Control vs. Out-Group) x 2 (Domain Identity-Relevance: High vs. Low) repeated-measures ANOVA.

Consistent with an identity-signaling perspective, domain identity-relevance moderated the effect of out-group social influence on behavior. In addition to a main effect of Domain Identity-Relevance, $F(1, 53) = 69.21$, $p < .001$, analysis revealed the predicted Social Influence x Domain Identity-Relevance interaction, $F(1, 53) = 9.25$, $p = .004$ (Figure 1). In less identity-relevant domains, consistent with decades of research on conformity, people converged with others' choices. Compared to the control condition, participants were 10% more likely to select a options if they had been chosen by an outgroup member, $F(1, 53) = 3.44$, $p = .07$. In identity-relevant domains, however, the opposite occurred. Compared to the control condition, participants diverged and were 15% *less* likely to select options if they had been chosen by an outgroup member, $F(1, 53) = 4.84$, $p = .03$.

Discussion

Experiment 1 demonstrates that whether social influence leads people to conform to, or diverge from, the choices of dissociative out-group members depends on the identity-relevance of the choice domain. In domains that are less symbolic of identity, participants conformed and were more likely to choose an option an outgroup member had selected. In more identity-relevant domains, however, the opposite occurred: participants' diverged and were less likely to choose options an outgroup member had selected.

It is worth noting that affect or consistency based explanations also have trouble explaining this pattern of results. Balance theory suggests that people might diverge from

others they dislike (Heider, 1946), but while negative affect may seem to underlie some examples of divergence (Wood, Pool, Leck, & Purvis, 1996), it cannot explain all of them. Teens like their parents, but abandon catchphrases they adopt, and recent graduates like college students just fine, they just don't want to dress like them. Such explanations also have difficulty explaining why people would converge to others' behavior in certain domains, but diverge in others. In Experiment 1, for example, participants choose the same paper towels as a member of a dissociate reference group, but preferred to select different music.

While the result of Experiment 1 support our perspective, one could argue that this study only found the predicted results because the methods explicitly mentioned inference-making. Such an argument would suggest that telling participants that others would make inferences about them might have heightened identity-signaling concerns, which drove the effects. This seems unlikely, however, given that people often consider what their choices will communicate about them to others, even without external suggestion. When buying a new car, for example, we often consider what it will signal about us to our co-workers or neighbors, and when deciding what to wear to an important interview or meeting, we often consider what message it will send to the other party. Nevertheless, to ensure that the results were not driven by heightened identity-signaling concerns, Experiment 2 omits such instructions.

Similarly, one could argue that divergence might be constrained to college students. After all, signaling identity may be particularly important for people who are searching to define themselves or meet relationship partners. Thus to examine the generalizability of the effects, the next study uses a national sample of participants of

varying ages. Further, while the first study used a social group selected by the experimenter, in Experiment 2, participants self-nominate groups. Using such a broad range of social groups avoids the possibility that the results of the prior study are due solely to the particular social group used. Finally, an even stronger test of the theory would examine whether the observed responses to social influence are driven by individual differences in the desire to signal membership in particular groups. Experiment 2 does this.

Experiment 2: Varying Group Identity

By focusing on out-groups, the first study tested the suggestion that people avoid undesired identity markers, but it did not provide the opportunity for participants to approach desired identity-signals. Our perspective suggests that people should converge with in-group members, or others they want to be thought of as akin to, in identity-relevant domains. Thus Experiment 2 examined how both domain identity-relevance and the identity of the people adopting one's choice influenced whether people conform or diverge.

Importantly, one could argue the results of Experiment 1 were just due to informational influence and perceived preference heterogeneity. If people are uncertain about what to choose, and believe that different social groups have heterogeneous preferences in identity-relevant domains, they might use others' choices as information, avoiding what out-group members choose in these domains because they think they will dislike those options. This seems unlikely given that most of the Experiment 1 options

should have been quite familiar to participants (e.g., popular music). In such situations of low preference uncertainty, it is unclear how others' choices provide additional information about personal preference. However, to provide even stronger support for the theory, the Experiment 2 uses a situation where people already hold a given preference and learn that others have adopted it. Here, preference uncertainty should be particularly low.

Participants listed a social group, and were then asked how they would respond if that group adopted their existing tastes in different domains. Half the participants listed a group they were part of (in-group condition) while the other half listed a group they were not a member of (out-group condition). Identity-signaling predicts that people will converge to both in-group and out-group members' behavior in less identity-relevant domains, but in identity-relevant domains, taste change will depend on the adopters' identity: people will tend to converge with in-group members but diverge from out-group members.

We also provide a more direct test of the underlying mechanism behind the effects. Identity signaling predicts that whether people conform to or diverge from others in identity-relevant domains depends on whether they want to signal, or avoid signaling, that identity. To test this prediction, participants rated whether or not they would want to avoid others thinking they were a member of the group they listed. If identity-signaling is driving the results, this measure should mediate the effect of adopting group identity on taste change in identity-relevant domains.

Method

One-hundred and ten participants (Mean age = 34) were recruited through a nationwide web-survey database.

Depending on condition, they were asked to list a social group that "you feel best represents your identity" (in-group condition) or that "you do not consider yourself a member of" (out-group condition). Participants were then asked how they would respond if members of the group they listed started adopting their preference in various taste domains. They were asked to imagine that they and their friends had a preference in each of 16 domains (e.g., favorite music artist or paper towels, all from Experiment 1), and that members of the group they listed had started copying it (e.g., listening to the same music artist or buying the same paper towels). In each domain, participants then rated "how their adoption of your preference would affect your behavior" (-3 = decrease, 0 = no change, 3 = increase). Finally, before completing demographic measures, participants rated whether they wanted to avoid others thinking they were a member of the group they listed (-3 = would not like it at all, 3 = would like it a great deal).

Results

Participants listed groups like "firefighters" and "yuppies". A median split was performed on domain identity-relevance and a 2 (Adopter Identity: In-Group vs. Out-

Group) x 2 (Domain Identity-Relevance: High vs. Low) repeated-measures ANOVA

examined how adoption by others would influence participants' behavior. [1]

In addition to a main effect of Adopter Identity, $F(1, 108) = 7.75$, $p = .01$, analysis

revealed the predicted Adopter Identity x Domain Identity-Relevance interaction, $F(1,$

$108) = 9.55$, $p = .003$ (Figure 2). Whether in-group or out-group members adopted a

participant's taste significantly influenced the direction of taste change in identity-

relevant domains, $F(1, 108) = 12.37$, $p = .001$, but not in less identity-relevant domains,

$F(1, 108) = 2.59$, $p > .11$.

Comparison with the baseline of no-change (scale rating of 0) confirmed the

predicted pattern of results. In less identity-relevant domains, people conformed (M =

0.21) when in-group members adopted their tastes, $t(48) = 1.93$, $p = .06$, and did not

change their behavior (M = -0.06) when out-group members adopted their tastes, $t(60) <$

0.5. In identity-relevant domains, however, the direction of taste change depended on

adopter identity; people conformed (M = 0.33) when in-group members adopted their

tastes, $t(48) = 2.56$, $p = .01$, but diverged (M = -0.33) when out-group members adopted

their tastes, $t(60) = 2.48$, $p = .02$.

Further, bolstering the notion that desire to communicate or avoid communicating

a particular identity drove the results, that measure fully mediated the relationship

between adopter identity and taste change in identity-relevant domains. Adopter identity

(in-group vs. out-group) predicted taste change (i.e., conformity or divergence, $B = .33$,

$S.E. = .09$, $p < .001$) and desire to be thought of as a group member ($B = 1.20$, $S.E. = .14$,

$p < .001$). But when both were included in a regression predicting taste change, desire to

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[1] Hierarchical linear regression using a continuous domain identity-relevance measure yielded identical results.

be thought of as a group member remained significant ($B = .31$, *S.E.* $= .06$, $p < .001$) while adopter identity did not ($B = -.04$, *S.E.* $= .11$, $p > .70$). A Sobel test indicated that the reduction in the direct path was significant ($z = 4.44$, p $< .001$).[2]

Discussion

Experiment 2 underscores the importance of symbolic meaning in responses to social influence. Whether people conformed to or diverged from the behavior of others depended on whether people use the domain to communicate identity and the social identity of the other taste holders. In less identity-relevant domains, people converged with others regardless of their identity. In identity-relevant domains, however, others' identity moderated the direction of taste change; people converged with in-group members but diverged from out-group members.

Mediational results bolster the notion that desires to communicate, or avoid communicating, certain identities drove the results. In symbolic domains, conformity or divergence was driven less by in-group or out-group status per se, and more by whether people wanted other people to treat them as members of that group. Indeed, while the few instances make it hard to generalize, in cases where people listed an out-group they wanted others to think they were a member of (i.e., rated above the midpoint on the scale), they actually reported that they would conform to that group in identity-relevant domains ($M = .62$, t(8) $= 3.32$, $p = .01$).

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[2] To test alternative explanations, participants also rated how much they liked the group they listed (using the measure from the Study 1 pretest). Though liking was marginally correlated with taste change ($B = .12$, *S.E.* $= .07$, $p = .09$), the mediational results persisted even controlling for this measure.

General Discussion

Results of two experiments demonstrate that an identity-signaling perspective helps explain when people conform to versus diverge from others. In less identity-relevant domains, people converged to others' behavior. In more identity-relevant domains, however, taste change depended on the identity of the other taste holders: People converged with in-groups, or groups they wanted to be confused with (i.e., aspiration groups), but diverged from out-groups, or groups they did not want to be confused with.

This research builds on existing principles of identity to make some novel predictions. The uniqueness literature (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980) suggests that individual, internal needs for distinction might lead people to diverge from similar others (because sharing tastes with them induces feelings of extreme similarity), but as shown here, people also diverge from others that are less similar (i.e., out-group members). Identity-signaling differs from uniqueness because it focuses on the desire to signal a specific identity, not just a unique one. Feelings towards an out-group (Wood, et al., 1996) or notions of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) suggest that people might diverge from groups they dislike or at times when intergroup distinctiveness is threatened, but they provide less indication about why people should conform to out-groups in certain domains but diverge in others. Thus these findings underscore the notion that people not only care about internal feelings of uniqueness or optimal distinctiveness, but also external communication of specific social identities (Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002).

Though this manuscript has used the language of conscious intent when describing responses to social influence, these reactions may not always be conscious. Social influence often occurs nonconsciously (Pronin, Berger, & Molouki, 2007) and even without awareness, people may avoid tastes associated with out-group members because those tastes just don't seem "right" for them. Understanding when such responses are conscious versus nonconscious would be a useful direction for future research.

Identity-signaling also provides insight into the interplay between individual-level psychological processes and macro-level phenomena such as the spread of culture (Kashima, 2000; 2008; Schaller & Crandall, 2004). Identity-signaling is a dynamic process. If people want to look like members of another group, they may poach the identity-relevant tastes of that group in an attempt to signal that identity. But when outsiders adopt the taste, they shift the identity it signals (e.g., from true group member to poseur). Original taste holders may then diverge and abandon the taste to avoid sending undesired identity signals. This will lead the taste to become even less associated with its original signal, and consequently, it will become less desirable to the outsiders. They too may abandon it, until eventually the taste loses all popularity. Thus while group-members make individual decisions to adopt or abandon tastes, aggregated over time, these individual decisions result in macro-level outcomes such as social contagion, divergence between groups, and fluctuation in popularity of cultural items (Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006).

In conclusion, while most psychological research has found conformity, this may be, in part, due to the type of domains that have been studied. Psychologists have tended

to study areas where choice is functional or has a right answer (e.g., line lengths), in part to demonstrate the power of conformity. It is more interesting to show that even when an answer is evident, people still follow social information. These more functional domains, however, are only a narrow slice of the social world, and given their nature (i.e., looking for a right answer) it is not surprising that we find conformity here. By also studying more symbolic domains, psychologists can gain insight into both when people conform and when they diverge.
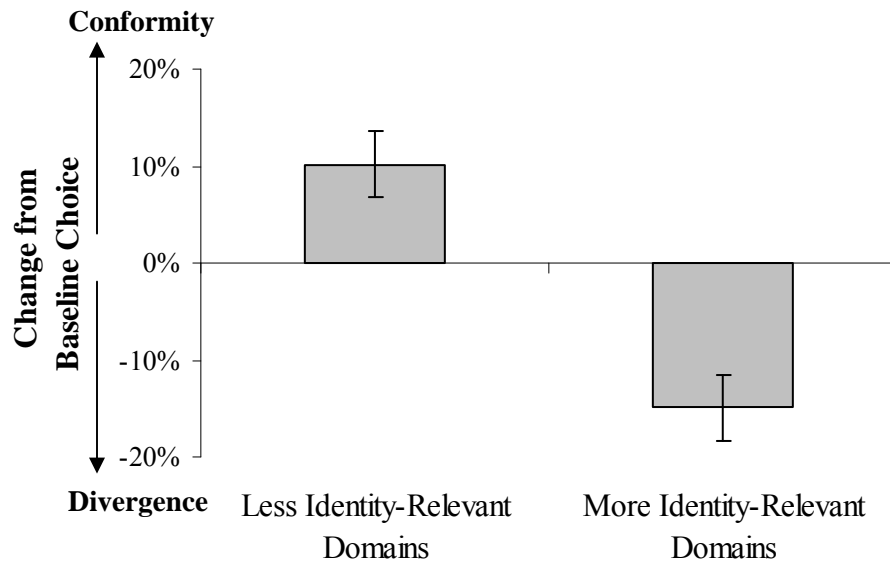
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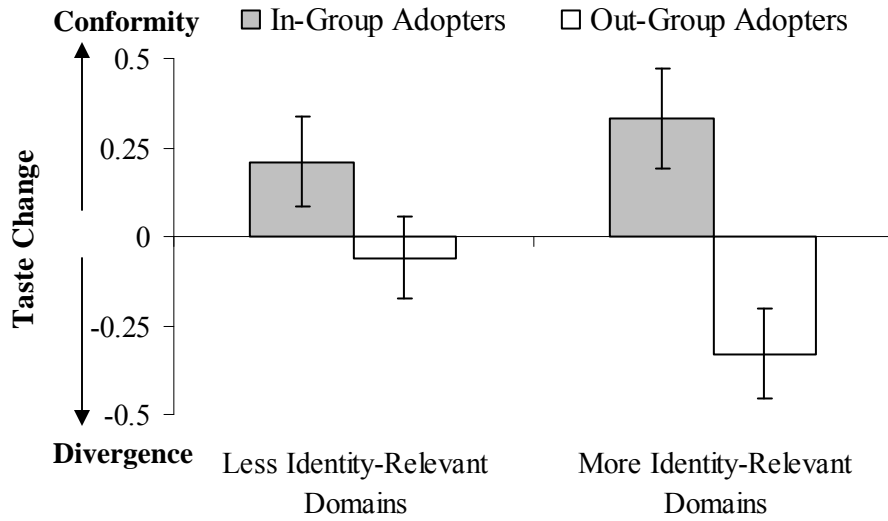
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Figure 1. Effects of Social Influence (Dissociative Out-Group Member's Choices) on Choice Based on Domain Identity-Relevance (Experiment 1)

Error bars indicate ±1 standard error of the mean

Figure 2. Effect of Social Influence on Preferences Based on the Domain Identity-Relevance and Whether Adopters are In-Group or Out-Group Members (Experiment 2)

Error bars indicate ±1 standard error of the mean