

Influence of Social Group via Consumer Conformity Framework - A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

In Current era, psychological and behavioral elements of an individual's behavior are important for marketing professionals in order to understand consumer mindset in an effective manner. In the country like India, there is strong influence of the interpersonal relationships on the purchase behavior of the customers. In addition to the product usage, reference group influence also creates a positive or negative impact of the consumption pattern of an individual. Various marketers and companies are keen to understand the influence of societal component on the consumer behavior. Therefore, it is very important to study the impact of the reference group on the consumer conformity (susceptibility to social influence or norms) which provides important insights to study the consumer behavior. The main purpose of the study is to identify the important variables that affect the consumer product usage and opinion which is influenced by the reference group. In the present study, extensive literature review was done to purpose the conceptual framework related to consumer conformity.

Keywords: Conformity, Group Influence, Product Usage, Consumer Behavior

Introduction

In current era, Consumer socialization process is eye-catching phenomenon for academic researchers and marketing professionals (Allen, Vernon L. 1965; Bass, Bernard M. 1961). Being a human, an individual life within a society requires social satisfaction for his survival whether this satisfaction is originated either by his own

conscious or unconscious efforts. Moschis and Churchill, (1978) had proposed a first theoretical model for social influences with the help of experiment conducted on young individuals for their purchase decision. The consumer socialization framework suggested by the previous researchers facilitates them to understand the social influences on an individual but as psychology and sociology experts continuously putting their efforts to understand the dynamic nature of Consumer behavior and how his behavior get influenced in social setup respectively.

Like social influence, persuasion, and conformity are normally used by marketing professionals' interchangeably in their professional setup. However, the meaning of these terms differs from each other. Allen, (1965) stated that as an individual's views are opposed by group members results into manifestation to social influences is called conformity. Additional persuasion came into force when an individual posse's argument for a position on a particular issue or matter but in conformity, an individual neither tries to defend his views on this debatable issue nor force other to shows agreement on his point of views (McGuire, 1968).

Marketing experts assumes Consumer Conformity as ability in a particular group to formulate effective group norms or opinions which can be accepted to all group members and further tendency of a group member to comply with the group norms (Bumkrant and Cousineau, 1975). Considering this explanation in consumption, conformity can be defined as an alteration in thoughts by Consumer during information processing, formulation

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of purchase intention for final purchase because of exposure to information transmitted by his referred group (Dana-Nicoleta Lascu; George Zinkhan, 1999). These different dimensions regarding social influence creates an interesting fact that how reference group members especially friends, family members, and peer group shape an individual psychology for his purchase decision as they are the dominant contributor (as opinion giver) for affecting buying decision of an individual.

Previous literature revealed various variables which can be used to develop a conceptual framework of consumer conformity. The main purpose of the study is to identify the important variables that affect the consumer product usage and opinion which is influenced by the reference group. In the present study, extensive literature review was done to purpose the conceptual framework related to consumer conformity. As consumer buying process suggested by marketing experts like Engel, Blackwell and Kollat (1968) reveals that during stages of buying process, “information search” stage requires that consumer need appropriate sources to collect information before his final purchase. Therefore, social group members or reference group members like family members, friends and peer members etc. facilitates customer to explore maximum information. Current proposed model is an attempt to develop a conceptual model of consumer conformity which may help the marketing professional’s manner for making any marketing strategy. As model depicts the psychological and social system hidden attributes of an individual personality which are normally used by an individual during his any final purchase of products and services.

Background of Study

Evolution and Development of Consumer Conformity: As Tool for Socialization

Consumer Socialization may be defined as the process where personal, environmental and situational elements are acting as significant contributors for shaping an individual’s behavior (Moschis and Churchill, 1978). Social learning theory and cognitive development theory are the backbone for socialization process where cognitive development theory focuses how an individual’s overall development is linked with his/her cognitive

development whereas social learning theory explains the socialization agents are equally contributing factors along with individual influences to shape the behavior of an individual or person (Moschis, 1987).

Conformity can be viewed as public compliance and private acceptance (Allen, 1965). Festinger, (1953) propounded that public compliance is that influence of social system normally active when an individual interacts with his referred group member on face to face basis and seeks appreciation or chastisement. Further (Kelman,1961) proposed that public compliance came in to force under surveillance by referred group whereas Private conformity means to confidentially – approved principles related to deliberate acceptance of the influencer’s moral beliefs, value system, and prospects. (Dana-Nicoleta Lascu & George Zinkhan, 1999). Private and Public Conformity works in the same direction only when individual wishes to be the part of a group. But once an individual no longer wishes to be the part of a group, the intensity of private conformity is less (Allen, 1965).

Moreover Deutsch and Gerard, (1955) had explored further insights about social influence and explained that conformity is the resultant of informational influence (that social influence in group because of excellent knowledge of any group member about a particular reality), normative influence (that social influence in group because of ability of an individual to set excellent group norms acceptable to all group members or any other person) and Value-expressive (Value-expressive influences is mainly the influence which is demonstrated by need for psychological association by an individual with group via positive approach towards group norms, values and behavior). Formulation of Group is a very important element for social influences because it was found that normative social influence upon individual decisions was more for those who become the part of a group than an individual who doesn’t become the part of a group (Morton Deutsch and Harold B. Gerard 1955). Cooley (1962) The intensity of normative influence is usually high within primary reference group for individual (i.e family members). Taking into consideration the importance of normative element of group influence in various buying decision circumstances Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) introduced “Subjective norms of group “as key element in their popular model (Theory of Reasoned Action) which is used for measurement of purchase intention.

Based on the various studies, it was found that consumer conformity is multidimensional domain; hence in order to identify the various aspects of consumer conformity following propositions can be drafted:

- P1: Individual’s personal traits are significant contributors for consumer conformity.
- P2: Group Characteristics are significant contributors for consumer conformity.
- P3: Situational Attributes are significant contributors for consumer conformity.

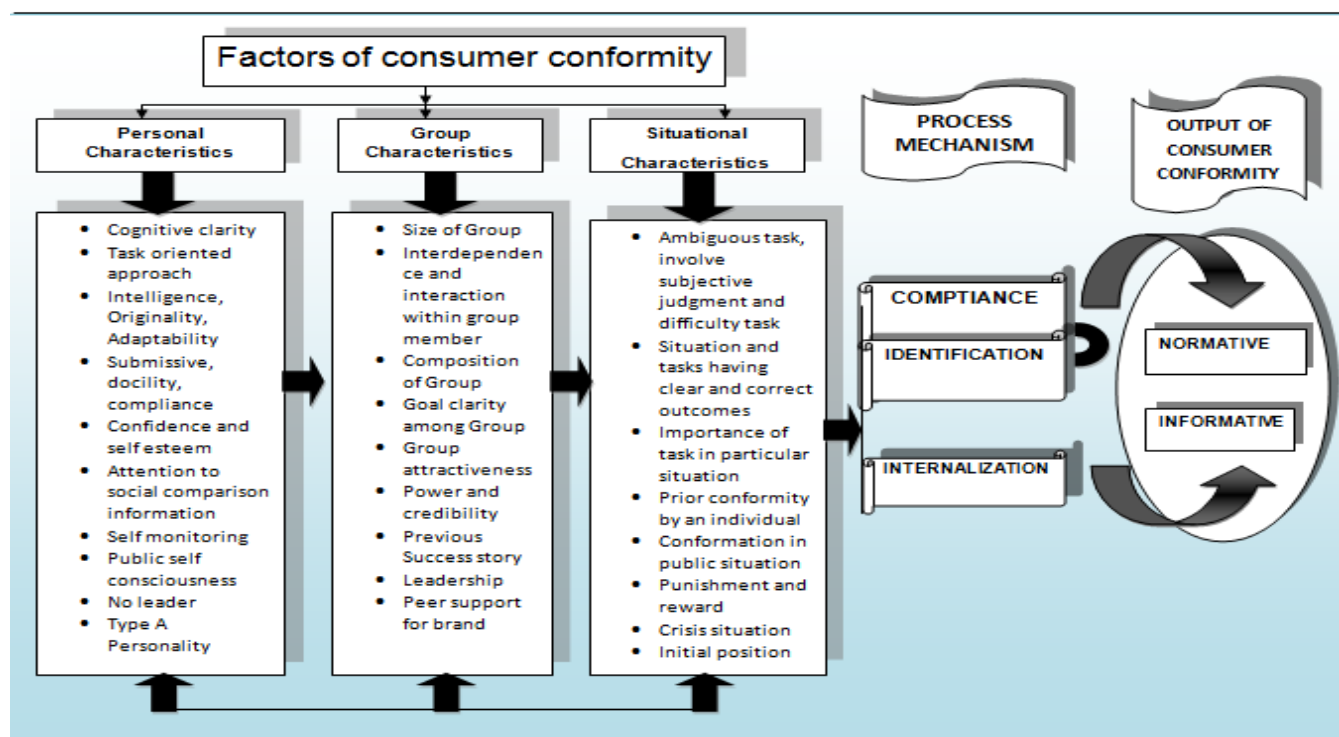
Research Methodology of Study

The methodology used to formulate the conceptual framework of consumer conformity in the present study is identification of relevant previous research articles related to social influence from published national or international journals, online research sources, magazines like Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and Journal of Consumer Research etc. Hence it facilitates to draft a roadmap for deeper understanding of conformity. Further, after reading the various experimental studies by various researchers, few variables related to personal

traits, group characteristics and situational characteristics are explored, and then first rough draft for conceptual framework was drafted. Then after discussing with experts from sociology discipline or area, the linkage of identified variables was drafted to develop the final conceptual framework. The current study gives relevant recommendations to researchers. Sociology science policy makers and academics for further improvement in this related area.

Conceptual Framework of Consumer Conformity

Consumer Conformity is complex and interrelated behavioral outcome of human behavior. Basically, the main contributors of consumer conformity can be classified into four main categories such as personality traits of an individual (Kelman and Cohler 1959; Helson et al. 1956), group Characteristics (Asch 1956; Allen 1965; Kelman 1961), Product Brand features and Situational / task characteristics (Ross et al. 1976; London and Lim 1964) which are explored after extensive reviews of previous research articles of researchers



Source: Authors own purposed model based on previous literature

Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework for Consumer Conformity

Personal Traits

Conformity as social influence is strongly related to need for cognitive clarity. It was measured in one of the studies that cognitive need and cognitive style among the students normally worked at controversial level for information regarding education system of USA (Kelman & Cohler, 1959). Results revealed that individuals with high need for cognitive clarity are more interested to manifest attitude change in induced direction while those individuals who showed ambiguity by just creating relaxing environment are more interested to oppose for change as per others opinions.

Bass (1961) explained the *task*-oriented behavior of the individuals; it was found that personal traits of individual related to his approach towards performing a particular task in a group are also an important component of conformity. Task-oriented individuals, Interaction-oriented individual and self-oriented individuals are the three categories of individuals normally found in the social system (Bass, 1961). Task-oriented individuals normally tend to conform to group norms or principles because they assumed reference group is more attractive (for task execution process) and the group is rewarded for its effectiveness. Interaction-oriented individuals, on the other hand, showed susceptibility to social influence because they assumed group members are more attractive and normally conformed to social influence in order to avoid mistakes and risks while dealing with others in group (Bass, 1961). Self-oriented individuals showed conformity with group norms to satisfy their own self-needs (Bass, 1961). Helson et al. (1956) found that individuals who are more Submissive, docile and having compliant behavior are more influenced by social pressure as compared to individuals who are ascendant, aggressive or dominant by nature.

The confidence level of an individual is another determinant of conformity as it will provide an ability to execute a particular task (Vesta, 1959). The capability or ability of an individual to perform particular task better than rest of the group members within a group will boost his morale results renders that individual less to conformity. The Self-confidence of an individual may be related to self-esteem as it is a personal trait of a person (Allen, 1965). Individuals possess high self-esteem is less concerned about responses of others thus less likely to

possess conformity (Bearden & Rose, 1990). Feelings of self-confidence within an individual represent the slanted equivalent element of objective evidence of task competence of an individual. This objective competency is consummated by subjective confidence about a relevant task, there is a probability that an individual posses high confidence level without having proper justification to execute a particular line of action (Allen, 1965). Chances to posses conformity for self-esteemed or self- confident person are less (Allen 1965; Kelley and Lamb, 1957). Another type of persons can be who possess self -doubt and they possess high level of conformity (Campbell and Tesser, 1989).

Especially in context to the consumer, there is a negative association between ATSCI (Attention-to-Social-Comparison Information; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984) and self-esteem. (Bearden & Rose, 1990) ATSCI is assessment tool used to assess social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation by society (Bearden & Rose, 1990). For consumer perspective, there should be positive relationship ATSCI and Conformity (Bearden and Rose, 1990). Another attribute of normally found in social sensitivity analysis via conformity is self-monitoring (Nantel & Strahle, 1986). Self-monitoring is the broader concept of ATSCI. High self-monitored individuals have the ability to identify certain cues for a particular acceptable behavior in society (Snyder, 1974) and they modify their self-presentation according to the existing situation in society (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). The influence of social norms is high for high self-monitoring individuals and vice versa (Nantel & Strahle, 1986).

(Bearden & Rose, 1990) Social sensitivity analysis via conformity is also influenced by Public self-consciousness, the constant ability of an individual to fetch attention towards him as social objects (Feningstein, Scheier & Buss, 1975). (Bearden & Rose, 1990) Individuals possess a high public self-consciousness are aware of the fact that people around them develop an impressive approach for them because of unique product choice and consumption behavior.

Assertiveness approach of an individual is also related in the context of conformity as highly assertive subjects matters are not affected by the status of influencing the style of members of a group (Williams, 1984). Social Status is directly related to conformity as previous studies

by various researchers agreed that high-status value of an individual provide the greatest amount of security in society or refereed group via virtue high prestige within a referred group (Bourne, 1957). Thus it will boost an individual's probability to get acceptance with high frequency and his status finally facilitates to enjoy initiator to setting group norms (Bourne, 1957). Similarly, another study by Kelley & Shapiro (1954) revealed that, if an individual assumes that he is accepted by his group members because of his status and he is highly appreciated by other members of the group, then he feels secured to give his opinions relevant or irrelevant in the group setup. Finally, he is less interested to conform, than if he feel less accepted or rejected by his group members (Kelley & Shapiro, 1954). Presence of effective and char-mastic personality is mandatory to overcome the problem of ingratiation as a strategy normally adopted by group members which finally play a significant role in conformity. Individuals usually made more conforming statements in absence of an effective leader in a group (Huertas & Powell, 1986). More importantly, such type of conforming comments encourage those individuals to highly correlated with group members dynamics and they try to control others, such behavior of individuals without effective leadership results into high conformity (Huertas & Powell, 1986).

Personality traits of individuals are the significant contributor of conformity as "A type personalities", individuals are more antagonistic, viable and be likely to time-urgent (Yarnold, Grimm, and Mueser, 1986). They know about their antagonistic nature and tries to face negatives comments in an adverse situation. Further, Type A personalities are less likely to conform than Type B personalities (Yarnold, Grimm, and Mueser, 1986). Adolescents' age group is the most influencing demographic factor affecting conformity as it is the age group which tends to have more social contacts than any other age group (Huertas & Powell et. al, 1986). (Park & Lessig, 1977) Additionally, the group having adolescents are more involved to impose different rules and norms than any other social structural group.

Group Characteristics

Consumer conformity is significantly affected by Size of the group, as number of group members lies from one

to three within group (it will increased) & at this level conformity reached at a plateau. Further, if fourth member will be added in group, the intensity of conformity decreases (Asch 1956; Rosenberg 1961; Allen, 1965). Interdependence among group members was established and it was concluded that more interdependence leads to higher conformity (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Moreover, normative element of conformity will be more when group members are more interdependent. Intensity of normative and informational conformity varies in different group pressure situations (Allen, 1965). Additionally, apart from interdependence, the amount of interaction among group members may perhaps influences the conformity level (Bass, 1961). Effective Composition of the group members (means similarity of person's traits with group's traits in terms of certain unique attributes) plays significant role for consumer conformity (Festinger, 1953).

In view of the fact that other reference- group members generate social pressure among group members which leads to consumer conformity. Hence characteristics of other reference-group members are very significant elements of consumer conformity. Clarity of group's goal to group members makes the group attractive and hence increases conformity (Marple 1933; Bass, 1961). If individuals occupy a strong attractive position in an group, it will creates attractive group and in this situation conformity comes in to picture via identification (Kelman, 1961). Power execution (actual & potential control of means) within group by an individual if is based on his or her personal interest; this influence of an individual in group is termed as compliance or finally if power is executed based on referent credibility, such influence is termed as internalization (Kelman, 1961). If power is based on actual or potential control of means needed by the individual to achieve his or her goals, influence will take the form of compliance. Lastly, if power is based on referent credibility, influence will take the form of internalization (Kelman, 1961).

Previous accomplishment of group as success is the another contributor of consumer conformity. Moreover, it is also found in some of the previous studies that because of deviation from group norms results into failure of group accomplishment. Mutual influence among group members if considered as useful or helpful, then outputs of group's accomplishment will be constructive (Thelen, 1954). Bass (1961) explained that mutual likeness of

group members for each other increases the probability of convergence of opinions which results into more conformity via high self esteem of group.

Moral Support of peer group members acting as catalyst to influences the conformity as if anyone seeks opinion from peer group members for his purchase and positive peer support for product assortment will increases reinforcement of positive thoughts to seeker for his final purchase and seeker can consider his opinions for product evaluation and results into increases conformity as normative influence (Midgley & Morrison, 1989). Although this practice normally found in group but in exceptional case if individuals perceive peer group members suggest negative opinions only for their humor or fun, they will not consider peer members opinions as vague (Bearden et. al, 1994).

As consumer conformity is the “multi influenced component” of consumer purchase decision where it has explored from various previous literature support such as personality characteristics and group characteristics affecting consumer conformity, now one question arises apart studying these attributes now an attempt should be made to explore the hidden psychological indicators of other person as members of group who contributes their opinions (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). For exploration of this element, an attempt has made in from of ability of any product or services offered by companies and it was found that Product knowledge by group members which can be best understood as branded product (Kassarjian & Robertson, 1981). (Fisher & Price, 1992) Social Visibility of the product or brand directly or indirectly influences the opinions of group members which can be used by them to shape purchase decision of information seeker in group. Another element for this dimension (group member’s opinion influencer) is luxury nature. Bearden and Etzel (1982) found that “luxury products influence” is stronger than “necessities product category” items.

Situational Attributes for Consumer Conformity

Situational aspects are very significant for understanding human behavior as various situations in social system acting as catalyst for human psychology which is the governing force for consumer conformity.

Conformity level is high as there is probability of execution of Ambiguous tasks, Subjective judgment, and difficult tasks in particular situation by group members (Allen 1965; Ross et al, 1976). In general, conformity fallout from two different conflicting domains as “pressure to be with group norms “and “restrictive pressure to be independent individual not affected by others”. The intensity to be independent decreases as Ambiguous tasks, Subjective judgment, and difficult tasks in particular situation came in to picture (Ross et. al, 1976). (Walker & Heyns, 1962). Situations and tasks having Clear and Correct Outcomes are the identified element of conformity found by creating two situations (i.e where relationships are determined and relationships are underdetermined) (Insko et. al, 1983). For determined relationship, situations and tasks have clear and correct outcomes. In this situation, more conformity was found which is the evidence for importance of concerns of individuals with choosing a appropriate and right position and vice versa (Insko et, al, 1983).

Consumer conformity is also affected by Importance of task in particular situation. (Snyder et. al, 1960). Indeed, Conformity is even less if a particular task is more relevant to a person but not to the group members. Though, importance of task does not unavoidably lead to non consumer conformity. (Crowne & Liverant, 1963) As the task is evenly significant to individual as well as other group members, conformity level increases. Conformity for an individual to one origin on one aspect is the indication that the individual has also conformed to another origin on another aspect (Abelson and lesser 1959). (McGuire 1968) However, this thing is only valid if, in each circumstance, the concern subject assumes and perceives the issues in similar fashion.

Various previous studies (e.g Deutsch and Gerard 1955; Olmstead and Blake, 1955) revealed the fact that if public responses and private responses are compared, normally, issues strives to conform significantly towards public situation than in private situation. Further, few studies (Wiener and Doescher 1994; Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren, 1990) concluded that an individual’s behavior should be noticeable for consumer conformity to execute.

Effectiveness of conformity can be assessed by considering punishment and rewards as outcomes of such susceptibility to group norms (Allen, 1965;

Festinger, 1953). If compliance is attained in group by inducing punishment and rewards, then punishment and rewards are equally likely to generate public compliance, although vary to generate private acceptance (Festinger, 1953). Further, more use of rewards to induce compliance will surely amplify magnetism of group and finally generate private acceptance along with public compliance. Excessive use punishment to generate public compliance will less facilitates to private acceptance (Allen, 1965). Crisis situation or emergency increases the level of group cohesiveness and results increase in conformity (Huertas & Powell, 1986). Individuals strives to attain leading position within group to which he/she belongs in critical situation (Bass, 1961).

Commitment of an individual to the initial position is also a significant contributor of conformity. Usually, it is found that an individual who capitulate to the group at premature situation continue to be in same manner (Allen, 1965; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). (Brehm & Cohen, 1962) Dedication to be with taken decision is the mandatory precondition for generating cognitive dissonance. (Allen, 1965) When an individual stick on his decision, the attractiveness of the option selected increases and vice versa.

Uniformity of opinions among group members is also important. Pincus and Waters (1977) found that others' product evaluations affected quality ratings of that product especially when their evaluations were more uniform. Evaluations made about an object were informative to the extent that these evaluations were in agreement (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). Thus, more information is conveyed about a product when prior evaluations are uniform than when they are not. In addition, variations in the uniformity of prior product evaluations provides subjects with information about how others expect them to behave regarding the product (Bumkran & Cousineau, 1975), i.e., conform to the group or express their own opinions.

Outputs of Consumer Conformity: Normative Conformity and Informational Conformity

Reference group influences or social group influences normally operated via internalization, identification, and

compliance (Kelman 1961; Hoffman et.al, 1976). Kelman (1961) suggested that internalization component of Social Influence came in to picture when an individual feels and accepts that his own and expert group's value system are convergent in same the direction. Identification is that means of group influence where an individual perform mandatory behavior as decided by group members to be associated with a group (Kelman, 1961) which is termed as refereed power within the group. Compliance is that normative influence where an individual accepts the influence in order to get favorable rewards or avoid penalties (Ross, Bierbrauer and Hoffman, 1976). Such kind of behavior only came into force when a group has the ability to execute rewards or punishment (Kelman, 1961).

Discussion

From the above mentioned explanation about consumer conformity, the researchers identified the various dimensions of social influences on human behavior especially during his purchase process. Now days, increased disposable income of an individual motivates him to modernize his life style. Hence every time in order to purchase any item for consumption, he used to take opinion from others which is the central theme of discussion in current study. Consumer conformity is complex psychological element of consumer behavior. Hence, researchers have drafted a conceptual framework of conformity by considering personal, group and situational prospective.

As far personal characteristics are concern, Individuals having low "need for cognitive clarity" are assumed to be less motivated to deal with ambiguity generated by the information shared by social group members (Kelman and Cohler, 1959). Intelligence level of an individual, originality of personal traits and adaptable nature of an individual are also the contributing factors of conformity as it was found that individuals who are less intelligent, less original in personality traits and less adaptable in nature are more interested to have social influence (Toboski, Juliano, and Kern, 1956; Nakamura, 1958).

Further for group character ties, it was found that elements like Coordination among group members to accomplish a particular task, relevance of effective communication between group members, availability of time for interaction, and boredom are contributing

to increase interaction potential and, finally consumer conformity (Bass 1961). Luo (2005) found that group cohesiveness affects consumer conformity. Finally, for situational aspect of consumer conformity, it was found that Task Difficulty and level of ambiguity increases as if an individual possess little information in related context or situation in an group.

These constructs gives the idea to formulate the framework and as outputs of consumer conformity informational, normative elements are explored by the researchers via compliance, internalization and identifications On the basis of above explanation, it can be found that consumer Conformity theory has numerous probable applications in marketing. As marketing is application of various tactics to satisfy the identified needs of targeted marketing. Even after investigating various psychological aspects of consumer behavior, experts from industries strives to cope with dynamic consumer psychology. Propositions drafted in the initial stage of current study are validated with the help of making appropriate linkage of personal traits, group characteristics and situational factors. Proposed conceptual model tries to creates the roadmap for further researchers.

In current study an attempt has made to link the influence of reference group on consumer purchase behavior. Consumer during “searching of information” phase of consumer buying process normally uses various sources to explore information so reference group like friends, family members, peer group etc are main facilitators for information. Even as current era is techno driven where social media via social networking sites or virtual communities are leading source of social influence so consumer conformity via social media is called e-formity (Park & Feinberg, 2010).

Managerial Implications and Future Research Directions

All the conceptual discussions are only constructive if managerial applications of concept are fruitful for business and organization’s growth. Current study will help to the marketing professionals for following activities:

Effective Advertising Program: Consumer Conformity may be considered as innovative means for designing effective communication and promotional mix strategies

for their organizations. Conformity theme via emotional appeals can be used by marketers especially in case of advertising targeting young segment of consumers.

Personal Selling: Sales personals can apply consumer conformity as significant tool for their presentations. In situation where only one sale has to be closed, sales personal should show his ability to execute compliance response whereas in case of long term relationships with clients, or internalization or identification should be preferred by sales. For example, for executing compliance for conformity, sales personal may claim to have competitive edge and higher in rank than its company’s competitors in front of potential customers. Whereas for executing internalization, the salesperson may focus on quality of products so that potential customers can have positive influence.

Point of Purchase: Consumer conformity in the form of group characteristics is also visible normally in shopping malls. Pont of purchase at various shops on shopping malls are keen to have group shopping where all group members usually took opinions of each other so at final purchase can be done easily. An even E-commerce site also tries to have special blogs or space to get opinions of their customers so that when other will see the sites they get influenced. Therefore, applications of consumer conformity is not only restricted to information stage of buying process but also if collectively people visited in SNS and e commerce sites the facilitates to each other in the form of group buying (Yun Jung Lee & Jung Kun Park, 2008).

As current study have some limitations in context of empirical investigations of identified variables for assessment of consumer conformity. Future research can be carried out to assess whether manipulations on group size affect conformity or others directions for future research can be assessment of conformity for branded and non branded products as it was identified during review that high status conscious people show different pattern for conformity as compared to low status conscious.

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