*Original Paper*

# The Impacts of Consumers' Need for Uniqueness (CNFU) and Brand Personality on Brand Switching Intentions

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*Abstract*

*This research attempts to apply the CNFU and brand personality to examine consumers' brand switching intentions. Specifically, this research will explore the moderating role of brand personality in the impact of CNFU on brand switching intentions. Research results indicate that high-CNFU individuals tend to express higher brand switching intentions than low-CNFU individuals, whereas low-CNFU individuals tend to express lower brand switching intentions. Moreover, high-CNFU individuals tend to express lower brand switching intentions toward products with strong brand personality than those with weak brand personality, whereas low-CNFU individuals tend to express higher brand switching intentions toward products with strong brand personality than those with low brand personality.*

*Keywords*

*consumers' need for uniqueness (CNFU), brand personality, brand switching intentions*

## 1. Introduction

Advertising research aims to enable marketers to effectively communicate with their targeted markets. To get a holistic view of the role that advertising messages may act in the product evaluation process, it is critical to understand how brand attitude formation may interact with other concurrent stimuli.

To some extent, people tend to seek uniqueness (Fromkin, 1972; Snyder, 1992; Snyder and Fromkin, 1977, 1980), making need for uniqueness (NFU) a universal personality trait (Burns and Brady, 1992). Consumer research has indicated that NFU affects consumers' need for uniqueness (CNFU), exhibited through their acquisition and display of distinctive products (Lynn and Harris, 1997a, b; Tian et al., 2001). That is, CNFU drives individuals to pursue dissimilarity through consumption to exhibit a distinctive self and social image (Tian et al., 2001). Hence, the inherent personality traits of potential consumers may affect how they evaluate the current brand and whether they have intentions to switch to other competitor brands.

Tianet al. (2001) have addressed a 31-item scale to measure CNFU; however, little research has utilized this scale to measure CNFU (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006; Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Goldsmith et al., 2006), which can be attributed to the scale length problem (Ruvio et al., 2008).

Thisarticleattempts to apply the CNFU and brand personality to examine consumers' brand switching intentions. Specifically, this research explores the moderating role of brand personality in the impact of CNFU on brand switching intentions.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Development

### 2.1 Consumers' Need for Uniqueness (CNFU)

Uniqueness theory addressed by Snyder and Fromkin (1980) argues that people are motivated to maintain a sense of specialness as they define themselves on various important self related dimensions relative to others, which is called need for uniqueness (NFU). However, NFU varies across different situations and different persons (Zimmer, Little and Griffiths, 1999). Some psychologists have indicated that high NFU people tend to desire higher levels of dissimilarity from others (Snyder 1992; Lynn and Harris 1997a).

Similarly, prior marketing research has depicted NFU as a personality trait in marketing contexts. For example, Lynn and Harris (1997b) indicate that some consumers can possess a dispositional tendency to pursue uniqueness through consumption. Also, consumer psychologists (Burns and Krampf 1991; Snyder 1992; Lynn 1991; Tepper 1994) have observed that as compared with low NFU individuals, high NFU individuals are more apt to adopt new products and brands (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005), seek non-traditional and self-differentiating products (Burns and Homer 1995), such as scarce or limited versions of products, or even niche products, which are deemed as superior tools for demonstrating self image.

CNFU is grounded in Snyder and Fromkin's (1980) uniqueness theory and is defined as "the trait of pursuing differences relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's self-image and social image" (Tian et al., 2001, p.52). Consumers can recognize symbolic meanings in products they use and their image can be enhanced internally and externally (Tianet al., 2001; Tian and Mckenzie, 2001).

CNFU is consisted of three dimensions: creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity and avoidance of similarity (Tianet al., 2001; Tian and McKenzie, 2001). Creative choice counter-conformity refers to individuals' ability to choose products in an attempt to craft personal styles and self-image for social acceptance (Lynn and Harris, 1997a; Tianet al., 2001). Creative choices are manifested by selecting consumption, which is likely to be deemed as unique and approved by others in one's social contexts (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977, 1980). Unpopular choice counter-conformity refers to consumers' choice of products, which deviate from social norms to some extent. Such choices may incur a risk of social disapproval but could still enhance one's self- and social

image (Tianet al., 2001). Finally, avoidance of similarity implies an effort to avoid choosing good-selling products, implying that consumers to avoid purchasing or using popular products (Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

## 2.2 Brand Personality

Brand personality refers to the human characteristics associated with a specific brand (Aaker, 1997). It is typically regarded as one of marketing tools to build an overall image appealing to targeted audiences (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999). Keller (1993) argues that brand personality possesses symbolic values rather than utilitarian functions. In other words, while purchasing a brand, consumers are purchasing the symbolic meaning associated with the brand in addition to the utilitarian functions (Guthrie, Kim and Jung, 2008). Brand personality offers consumers the means of constructing and maintaining social identity (Fiske, 1989), and provides a mechanism for expressing his/her actual self, ideal self, or social self (Belk, 1988; Malhotra, 1988). Guthrie et al. (2008) contend that brand personality can be applied to convey one's ideal self or different versions of the self. Specifically, brand personality can be applied to reflect one's own personality. Products with symbolic brand personality are primarily consumed for self-expressive and affective purposes (Ang and Lim, 2006). Khalil (2000) also stresses that brand personality with symbolic meanings allows consumers to express their actual or ideal self-image.

Prior research has developed the measurement of brand personality. For example, Aaker (1997) proposes a 42-item brand personality scale (BPS) (see Table below) to assess any brand across five key dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Aaker's (1997) original scale, developed in the USA, was found to have some international applicability in subsequent work (Aakeret al., 2001) in extensions conducted with Spanish and Japanese brands. Fournier's (1998) framework for understanding and extending brand personality utilizes a brand relationship quality model comprising six central factors, namely partners' quality, intimacy, interdependence, self-connection and love.

Freling and Forbes (2005) argue that consumers are also likely to rely on information about a brand's personality as a surrogate for intrinsic product attributes, implying that brand personality may affect product perceptions, especially when it is difficult to evaluate intrinsic product attributes.

Due to the difficulties in discerning intrinsic product attributes of competitor brands, brand personality may provide the means for making a given brand stand out in a clutter. In other words, when intrinsic cues for competitor brands are very similar, brand personality creates a basis for differentiation(Freling and Forbes, 2005). For competitor brands, the claims communicating a strong, positive brand personality (i.e. providing extrinsic and intrinsic cues) should be more prominent than the claims merely informing consumers about the product's features and benefits (i.e. provide intrinsic cues only).

## 3. Hypotheses

Researchers have concluded that high CNFU consumers are more likely to adopt new products or brands more quickly than low CNFU consumers (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005), implying that high CNFU consumers have lower brand loyalty or higher intentions to switch brands.

$H_1$: *As compared with low CNFU consumers, high CNFU consumers will have higher brand switching intentions.*

As noted above, brand personality offers a mechanism for expressing one's actual self, ideal self, or social self (Belk, 1988; Malhotra, 1988), and reflects one's own personality. A brand with strong personality tends to contain exclusive styles in product design, functions or attributes, which may differ itself from other competitor brands. Through purchasing a brand with strong personality, high CNFU consumers can demonstrate their self images and uniqueness. Therefore, high CNFU consumers will have lower brand switching intentions of brands with strong personality than those with weak personality.

In sharp contrast, low CNFU consumers tend to seek conformity and thus prefer traditional products to self-differentiating products. A brand with strong personality is inconsistent with the personality traits of low CNFU consumers, who desire to seek commonality and conformity in a social group. To avoid prominence, low CNFU consumers tend to prefer brands with weak personality to those with strong personality. Hence, it is hypothesized that low CNFU consumers will have higher brand switching intentions of strong personality brands than weak personality brands.

$H_2$: *For high CNFU consumers, brands with strong personality will elicit lower brand switching intentions than brands with weak personality. However, for low CNFU consumers, brands with strong personality will elicit higher brand switching intentions than brands with weak personality.*

## 4. Study 1: Methodology

### 4.1 Selection of Stimulus Material

Wristwatches are chosen as the stimulus material for this research. Many factors are considered for selecting the experimental stimulus. First, it is important that the subjects are able to evaluate and process brand attributes of the advocated product in the ad. That is, subjects should be familiar with the stimulus material (Edell and Staelin, 1983). EMBA students, who work in the daytime and attend school at night, are a major target market for wristwatches. A pretest has been conducted to obtain the important brand personality and benefits typically considered in the brand selection. The second reason for choosing wristwatches as the experimental stimulus is their potential personal relevance (Hayes et al., 2008). Aaker (1996) suggests that fashion objects are intrinsically linked to the self-concept and, therefore, lend themselves particularly well to personality expression. Although wristwatches perform a utilitarian function, the wristwatch design is undoubtedly an important consideration for many purchasers. Finally, Berger and Mitchell (1989) note that it is important that the selected experimental stimulus can be easily differentiated in the experimental setting. Moreover, the need to use fictitious

brands to control for preexisting brand knowledge, preference, or usage experience has frequently been noted in the literature (e.g., Keller and Aaker 1992).

20 EMBA students were asked to create a list of complex products. Next, 32 subjects rated the four most frequently mentioned products from stage one on five, seven-point scales (e.g., unimportant/important) for involvement, from which an average score is derived. The result indicates that wristwatches are among the highest involvement score, all subjects previously or currently own at least one wristwatch, suggesting a high frequency of use. Thus, wristwatches are selected as the experimental stimulus.

*Subjects, Research Design and Procedure*

Study 1 aims to examine whether high CNFU consumers have higher brand switching intentions than low CNFU consumers. Students are commonly used as subjects in experimental research (Yi, 1993), and there is evidence that they can produce externally valid results when they "resemble" the populations they are to portray" (Zikmund, 2003). For the selected product category (wristwatches in this study), student subjects' consumption behavior and perceptions are thought to resemble those of typical users, and this has been confirmed by the industry sources (Heyes et al., 2008).

60EMBA students were invited to participate in a (CNFU: low vs. high) between-subjects factorial design, where CNFU acts as the independent variable, and brand switching intentions act as the dependent variable.

Each subject was given a premixed folder containing a description of the research purpose, the print ad message, and the questionnaire. The coordinator informed subjects that they were invited to join an ad survey for a wristwatch brand. To avoid the potential external effects on the brand switching intentions, the ad copy contained no specific brand attributes or features, and focused on the general functions for wristwatches. To avoid the preexisted brand preference or prejudice, this study invented a fictitious brand name (Chevot). Subjects were asked to rate their brand switching intentions after viewing the print ad for the advocated brand.

*Measurement for CNFU*

As mentioned above, Tianet al. (2001) conceptualize CNFU as a three-dimensional consumption tendency through which individuals express their NFU, and operationalize CNFU with a 31-item scale. However, the existing scale might be lengthy in some research contexts and there could be some redundancy across closely related items. Hence, this research decides to adopt a culture-based version of CNFU scale developed by Ruvio, Shoham and Brencic (2008).

The CNFU level for each subject was measured by the 17-item, 5-point CNFU scale devised by Ruvio, Shoham and Brencic (2008) (see above). 60 subjects were dichotomized into high and low CNFU groups based on a median split (median = 50). The independent samples t-test revealed that the scores of low-CNFU and high-CNFU differed significantly ($M_{lowCNFU}$ = 31.80, $M_{highCNFU}$ = 69.20, $t$ (58)= -40.35, $p$ = .000) Cronbach's alpha for CNFU was .973, indicating that the reliability of the CNFU was

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effective.

*Ad Copy*

To avoid the potential external effects on the brand switching intentions, the ad copy did not contain any specific brand attributes or features, and focused on the general functions for wristwatches. Subjects were asked to read a statement about the feature of a fictitious wristwatch brand. The following excerpt shows the main ad copy of the advocated brand in the ad:

*~According to the Classic Wristwatch Almanac, Chovet is rated as the most reliable brand in its price range in the wristwatch category, and is designed for meeting your daily needs of time accuracy.*

*Dependent Variable*

The subjects' brand switching intentions were measured by having them indicate the probability that they would switch to another brand for future purchases on a single-item, five-point scale anchored by 1 = will definitely buy other brands, 5 = will definitely keep on buying this brand (Rossiter, 2002; Sloot and Verhoef, 2008).

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Hypothesis Testing

The independent-samples t-test revealed that as compared with high CNFU consumers, low CNFU consumers tend to express lower brand switching intentions ($M_{lowCNFU}$ = 4.10, $M_{highCNFU}$ = 2.23, $t$ (58)= 11.22, $p$ = .000). Therefore, $H_1$ was supported.

## 6. Study-2 Methodology

*Subjects, Research Design and Procedure*

Study 2 aims to investigate the moderating role of brand personality in the impact of CNFU on brand switching intentions. 122 EMBA students were invited to participate in a 2(CNFU: low vs. high) × 2 (brand personality: strong vs. weak) between-subjects factorial design, where CNFU acted as the measured independent variable, brand personality fulfilled as the manipulated moderator and brand switching intentions acted as the dependent variable.

Each subject was given a premixed folder containing a description of the research purpose, the print ad message (2 versions: featuring weak vs. strong brand personality), and the questionnaire. The coordinator informed subjects that they were invited to join an ad survey for a wristwatch brand, and were asked to rate their brand switching intentions after viewing the print ad for the advocated brand.

*Measurement for CNFU*

The measurement of CNFU was identical to Study 1.

*Manipulation of Brand Personality*

As stated above, the claims communicating a strong, positive brand personality (i.e. providing extrinsic and intrinsic cues) should be more prominent than the claims merely informing consumers about the

product's features and benefits (i.e. provide intrinsic cues only). Specifically, the ad messages for a brand with strong personality provide both extrinsic and intrinsic cues, whereas the ad messages for a brand with weak personality provide merely intrinsic cues. Hence, this research manipulates brand personality by presenting either both extrinsic and intrinsic cues for strong brand personality or merely intrinsic cues for weak brand personality in the ad copy. To avoid potential preference or prejudices to the candidate brand, this research utilizes a fictitious brand name in the experiment.

For the brand personality manipulation, the ad copy was clearly stated in either a weak personality (merely intrinsic cues) or a strong personality (both extrinsic and intrinsic) appeal. Subjects were asked to read a statement about the features of the advocated wristwatch brand. The following excerpt shows the main ad copy of the strong brand personality appeal:

*According to the Classic Wristwatch Almanac, Chovet is rated as the most unique brand for its stylish design, as well as its state-of-the-art manufacturing quality, in its price range in the wristwatch category, and is exclusively designed for those who desire to seek their self-differential and self-expressive styles.*

In contrast, the main ad copy of the weak brand personality appeal is as follows:

*~According to the Classic Wristwatch Almanac, Chovet is rated as the most popular brand for its practical functions, as well as its state-of-the-art manufacturing quality, in its price range in the wristwatch category, and is generally designed for those who desire to seek the essence of time accuracy.*

### *Dependent Variable*

The subjects' brand switching intentions was identical to Study 1.

## 7. Results

### 7.1 Manipulation Check

The brand personality manipulation was assessed by having respondents rate whether the ad message contains both extrinsic and intrinsic cues on a five-point scale anchored by 1 = extremely disagree and 5 = extremely agree. The independent-samples t-test indicated that, as expected, the valence for the watches with strong brand personality was significantly higher than the valence for the watches with weak brand personality ($M_{\text{weak-personality}} = 1.93, M_{\text{strong-personality}} = 3.93, t(120) = -15.69, p<.001$), implying that the ads for the watches with strong brand personality and weak brand personality were regarded as being different. Therefore, the manipulation of brand personality was effective.

### 7.2 Hypothesis Testing

The simple interaction effect of CNFU × brand personality on brand switching intentions ($F(1, 118)= 247.89, p=.000, \eta_p^2 = .678$) reached the significance level, implying that the CNFU effect on brand switching intentions was subject to brand personality. The follow-up independent samples t-test revealed that, high CNFU individuals express lower brand switching intentions toward wristwatches

with strong brand personality than those with weak brand personality ($M_{\text{weak-personality}}$ = 2.23, $M_{\text{strong-personality}}$ = 4.27, $t(59)$ = -12.68, $p$=.000, see Figure 1); in contrast, low CNFU individuals express higher brand switching intentions toward wristwatches with strong brand personality than those with weak brand personality ($M_{\text{weak-personality}}$ = 4.00, $M_{\text{strong-personality}}$ = 1.94, $t(59)$ = 10.06, $p$=.000). Therefore, $H_2$ was supported.

**Table 1. Univariate analysis of the effects of CNFU and brand personality on brand switching intentions**

| Sources | $F$ | $p$ | $\eta_p^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| CNFU | 4.56 | .035 | .037 |
| Brand Personality | .008 | .928 | .000 |
| CNFU× Brand Personality | 247.89 | .000 | .678 |

**Table 2. Dependent measure across CNFU × brand personality conditions**

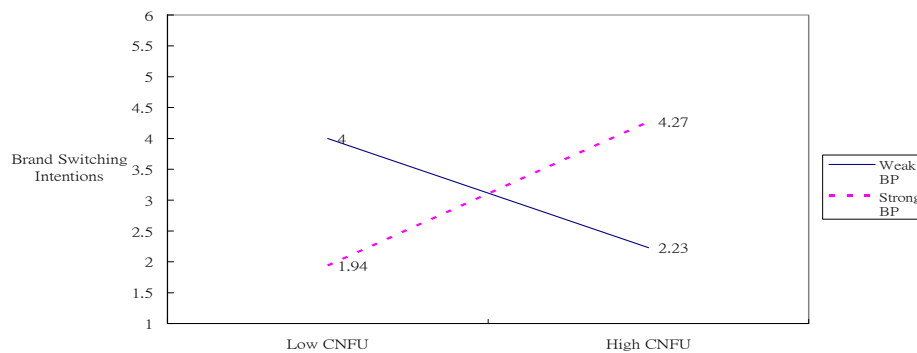| Brand Switching | Low CNFU | | High CNFU | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Weak BP | Strong BP | Weak BP | Strong BP |
| **Mean** | 4.00 | 1.94 | 2.23 | 4.27 |
| **S.D.** | .83 | .77 | .56 | .69 |
| $t$ | 10.06 | | -12.68 | |
| $p$ | .000 | | .000 | |



**Figure 1. Interaction effects of CNFU × brand personality on brand switching intentions**

## 8. Discussion

### 8.1 Practical Implications

The results of $H_1$ support the notion that high-CNFU individuals tend to express higher brand switching intentions than low-CNFU individuals, whereas low-CNFU individuals tend to express lower brand switching intentions. Therefore, advertisers are advised to adopt a positioning strategy and choose

adequate market segments for their advocated products. For those who are high in CNFU, products with fewer varieties are more attractive than those with more variety; on the contrary, for those who are low in CNFU, products with more varieties are more convincing than those with fewer varieties. For example, firms are advised to launch the so-called "limited version" goods to attract high-CNFU consumers.

The results of $H_2$ support the notion that high-CNFU individuals tend to express lower brand switching intentions toward products with strong brand personality than those with weak brand personality, whereas low-CNFU individuals tend to express higher brand switching intentions toward products with strong brand personality than those with low brand personality. For firms whose target segments consisting of high-CNFU consumers, they are advised to launch goods with strong brand personality to mitigate brand switching intentions. In contrast, for firms whose target segments consisting of low-CNFU consumers, they are suggested to launch goods with low brand personality to minimize brand switching intentions.

*8.2 Theoretical Contributions*

Previous research has indicated that high-CNFU individuals are more like to have higher brand switching intentions than low-CNFU individuals, which is consistent with the results in $H_1$ in this research. However, the results of $H_2$ further indicate that the relationship between CNFU and brand switching intentions can be reversed when the brand personality is high. This conclusion implies that brand personality acts as a moderating role in the impact of CNFU on brand switching intentions, which has not been explored in the previous literature and thus is expected to broaden the research horizon.

*8.3 Limitations and Future Research*

As stated above, this research is expected to contribute to the marketing psychology literature and the branding practices. However, some limitations still need to be mentioned for further refinement. For example, this research concludes that firms can launch consumer goods with varied extents of brand personality to attract potential customers varying in CNFU. Nonetheless, it is a tough task for firms to distinguish the potential consumers' CNFU levels (low-CNFU vs. high-CNFU) before their branding strategy is outlined.

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