

PERCEIVED SOCIAL APPROVAL AS A COMPARISON STANDARD IN PRODUCT EVALUATION AND DETERMINATION OF SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

Customer satisfaction is vitally important to business success. Satisfaction/dissatisfaction has been shown to be directly related to the comparison standard(s) against which the customer judges his or her experience, typically factors such as expectations, desires, or ideals, to name a few. This article presents evidence for a new comparison standard, perceived social approval, which reflects a consumer's consideration of other persons' reactions to a purchase. Numerous research studies suggest that social approval and interpersonal influence have considerable influence in the pre-purchase situation, but no studies to date have examined this social influence as a comparison standard. This study found that consumers often seek social approval when evaluating and determining satisfaction with public products, but not necessarily with private products. An additional factor, a person's susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SUSCEP), was tested as a moderator in the use of perceived social approval. Results revealed that for persons high in susceptibility to interpersonal influence, public products prompt a magnification of the attention to other people's opinions that may not be seen with private products or with persons low in susceptibility.

INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is vitally important to business success, since it is often assumed that satisfaction is related to repurchase, loyalty, and ultimately profitability (Bearden and Teel 1983). Customers who are satisfied with their purchases are believed to be more likely to purchase the same products again. Those customers who are dissatisfied may harbor resentment toward the business, complain, demand redress, and even

negatively influence the purchase of other customers. This satisfaction or dissatisfaction has been shown to be directly related to the comparison standard(s) against which the customer judges his or her experience. There is significant literature in the customer satisfaction arena that examines the various types of comparison standards (for a helpful summary, please see Halstead and Ward 1996; Woodruff, et al. 1991). However, to date, there has not been a designation of a comparison standard in which the customer thoughtfully considers how others would react to a purchase.

One of the factors which has been posited to have a strong influence on consumer behavior in the pre-purchase situation is the extent to which a person is keenly aware of, concerned with, and influenced by the opinions and attitudes of others. Perhaps the fact that we care how others view us (e.g., Burnkrant and Page 1982; Grubb and Stern 1971; Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1990; Childers and Rao 1992) suggests that there may be a unique, external way in which we inherently judge products. Not only product selection decisions, but also post-purchase satisfaction may, in part, result from how individuals perceive that other people will ultimately judge their product selections and usage.

This paper presents evidence for a comparison standard based on a customer's perception of others' social approval, discusses the contexts in which the standard is likely to occur in relation to other comparison standards, and considers future research that might enhance our knowledge of the standard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Comparison Standards in Satisfaction Determination

Satisfaction is defined as "the customer's reaction to, or feeling about, what he or she receives -- reaction to the value received from the offering" (Woodruff and Gardial 1996). When a customer achieves satisfaction from his or her experience with the product, learning takes place, and the customer is likely to remember this experience the next time the same need arises, and make product choices accordingly (Oliver 1980).

The basis for comparison is one of the most important factors involved in the determination of customer satisfaction. According to the predominant framework of customer satisfaction, the Disconfirmation Model (Oliver 1977, 1980), comparison standards are used as the benchmark against which actual performance is measured, and satisfaction is determined (Clemons 1994; LaTour and Peat 1980; Miller 1979; Prakash 1984; Swan 1988; Swan and Trawick 1981; Westbrook and Reilly 1983).

Since the advent of the Disconfirmation Model, researchers have suggested the existence of many different standards that factor into the determination of satisfaction. The most widely held comparison standard has been *expectations* (Bearden and Teel 1983; Day 1982; Miller 1979; Oliver 1980; Olson and Dover 1976; Summers and Granbois 1977; Swan 1988; Westbrook 1987). However, other standards have been suggested in addition to, or in place of expectations: *desires* (Olshavsky and Spreng 1989; O'Shaughnessy 1987; Spreng and Olshavsky 1993; Suh, Kim and Lee 1994; Westbrook and Reilly 1983), *ideals* (Sirgy 1984), *experience* and *performance-based norms* (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins 1982, 1987; LaTour and Peat 1980; Tse and Wilton 1988; Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins 1983), to name a few.

Social Approval and Interpersonal Influence

Numerous studies validate the argument that consumers tend to be keenly aware of, concerned with, and influenced by the opinions and attitudes of others, and that marketers should be concerned with this influence (Bearden and Rose 1990; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Midgley 1983; Reingen, Foster, Brown and Seidman 1984). The belief that humans acknowledge the opinions and attitudes of others is founded in social psychological theories which assert humans as innate social beings, and "self" as the product of social interaction (Cooley 1922; Mead 1934; Asch 1958; Gergen 1970). Since human conception of self is socially created, and man is a social being who seeks interaction with others, the conception of "self" is constantly being presented, influenced by, and refined through social interaction (Blumer 1962; Goffman 1959).

Because a person's conception of "self" is in constant refinement, most humans seek out other individuals whom they aspire to be like, seek validation of their own self images by comparing themselves to others, and often attempt to modify self presentation and image by modeling their behavior on the behavior of others. Festinger (1954) labeled this phenomenon as "social comparison," and suggested that humans learn their standing within the environment by comparing themselves to others within the same environment.

From a consumer behavior perspective, there are two ways social comparison helps explain the motivation some people may have to purchase and use certain goods and services. First, individuals seek social approval by searching for, and consuming, goods that are consistent with a perceived self-image or the image the individual wishes to construct or present in a public context (Burnkrant and Page 1982; Grubb and Stern 1971; Webster 1975). A person's concern about reactions from others may moderate his or her behavior with regard to product choices and usage, even to the extent that the consumer may chose or use a product solely for its symbolic

value to others in the desired reference group (Bourne 1957; Bearden and Etzel 1982; Bearden and Rose 1990; Childers and Rao, 1992; Grubb and Stern 1971).

Burnkrant and Page's (1982) study of the meals that married women indicated they would prepare if their husband's boss came for dinner, found that the women were sensitive to the expected impression called for in various situations, and would choose consumer products to create an impression consistent with that expectation. The women were more likely to create meals that were congruent with an impression (e.g., sophisticated), if they knew that the impression would be rewarded. The authors also found that women who scored higher on a scale of public self-consciousness were more sensitive to the expected impression and more sensitive to past behaviors of the influencing person (e.g., a past meal served by the boss). However, increased sensitivity to impression expectations did not necessarily translate to behaviors that would gain approval. The high public self-consciousness subjects were more concerned with past behaviors than with the reward contingencies of the current situation.

Grubb and Stern (1971) examined the perceived self-images, brand images, and other-owner images of Ford Mustang and Volkswagen owners. These researchers found that owners had self-perceptions similar to the image of their own brand, but different from owners of competing brands. Additionally, Volkswagen owners perceived themselves to be somewhat different from the stereotyped owner, but Mustang owners' self-perceptions were consistent with the stereotyped image.

Second, social comparison theories provide explanation for how consumers allow the interpersonal influence of others to affect normative beliefs (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Calder and Burnkrant 1977). A consumer may be aware of, seek out, and accept the influence of others' attitudes and opinions in the shaping of his or her own attitudes and behavior towards consumption decisions, and accept the possible rewards or

sanctions from the conformity or non-conformity of these decisions.

In a series of studies, Bone (1995) found that subjects relied heavily on word-of-mouth information given in a product pre-usage situation. A word of mouth information main effect led to the conclusion that positive word of mouth leads to positive product evaluation. Bone further found that positive information was more influential than negative information in both initial and long-term product judgments. In one of the studies, she hypothesized that a person's susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989) would moderate the effects of word of mouth information. However, results of the study did not support this hypothesis. Given the word of mouth information was provided prior to usage of the product, it appears possible that the manipulation could cause heightened sensitivity to the use experience among the participants, masking the effects of the personality trait.

Situational Influence or Enduring Trait?

Another opportunity for exploration exists in the potential debate as to the situational or contextual effects of interpersonal influence. Bearden and Etzel (1982) initially suggested that the use of interpersonal information might be moderated by situation. However, Bearden and his colleagues (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989, 1990) later applied the concept of interpersonal influence and perceptive social approval in the development of their Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence Scale (SUSCEP) (see Appendix B). They suggested that a strong attention to, and desire to seek out, interpersonal influence was a distinct personality trait that could be tested in a consumer context. Additionally, the authors posited that since this behavior was linked to a personality trait, the behavior should endure across situations and products, and in both the pre- and post-purchase contexts.

Although we are very familiar with, and readily accept the idea that consumers are subject

to interpersonal influence during the search and selection stages of product acquisition, to date, no studies have examined interpersonal influence as a factor in the post-purchase evaluation of a product.

PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE FOR THE COMPARISON STANDARD

Within an exploratory study designed to investigate the conditions under which multiple comparison standards are used, evidence for a new, externally driven standard surfaced. In-depth interviews were conducted with nine college-age consumers to determine the standards used in the purchase and evaluation of four different products. Participants were selected based on their confirmation of a recent purchase/experience with the examined products. A grand tour interviewing technique (Woodruff and Gardial 1996) was used to gain understanding of purchase experiences. Respondents were probed about their thought processes, their decision criteria, and their post-purchase consumption evaluation and satisfaction determination. Four different products/experiences were examined: purchasing an automobile, purchasing a home electronics item, purchasing a sweater, and having dinner in a restaurant with a significant other. These products/experiences were chosen to reflect both familiar and highly involving consumer situations.

For two products, the automobile and the sweater, evidence of a comparison standard that reflected how others would perceive the respondent emerged. Note the following examples from the interview transcripts:

I didn't really evaluate it, it's basically the other people evaluate it when they vindicate [sic] what you buy . . . Because most people generally don't trust their own judgment on clothes, or cars, or just real material stuff. You just sorta wait until you get compliments and they notice it.

You know, it was just the greatest thing in the world. I rode home with my brother and he's like, "You know, this is neat." He's a little guy, you know, but he's like "yeah, I like your car." But, and I knew right then and there.

As soon as I got home I threw it on immediately and I went and ran and looked in the mirror. It was like, "How does it look?" I went around and asked my fiancé, "What do you think?" I called her down, you know, my family and said, "What do you, you know, do you like it, what do you think?" People gave me good input on it so that made me, so that made me feel better about the sweater itself.

Statements such as these appear to suggest the existence of a comparison standard based on interpersonal influence, which as yet, has not been examined.

DEFINING THE COMPARISON STANDARD: PERCEPTION OF WHAT OTHERS THINK

Relying on one's perception of what others think appears to be a deliberate action on the part of some consumers. People identify specific reference individuals and seek out those individuals' reactions. For the products employed in the aforementioned study, friends and family members were typically identified as references. Furthermore, the respondents who used this comparison standard delayed their own evaluations of a new purchase until they received evaluative information from others. From the examples above, this proposed comparison standard appears to serve as an external validation of one's own opinion about a product or brand, and/or validation of the purchase decision one has made.

The proposed comparison standard of perceptive social approval fits within the framework of both the Disconfirmation Model

and the social approval/interpersonal influence literature in that this construct reflects the conscious attempt to internalize external information for use as a comparison standard. Consumer researchers readily accept that consumers utilize interpersonal influence in the pre-purchase situation. This example of perceived social approval represents the fact that this same interpersonal influence may be employed in the post-purchase evaluative context of product consumption and satisfaction determination.

METHOD

This study was undertaken to examine the proposed phenomenon of perceived social approval as a comparison standard in the post-purchase evaluation of a product. The overriding goal of this project was to determine if this phenomenon existed in a larger sample, or if it was an artifact of the original interviews.

The first objective of the study was to ascertain whether the type of product evaluated moderates the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard. Bearden and Etzel (1982) suggested that interpersonal influence is subject to the public- or private-ness of a product. These authors presented evidence that when a product is intended for use or presentation outside the home, where the product will most likely represent the consumer's image, the consumer will be more concerned with the opinions and attitudes of others regarding the product. If, on the other hand, the product will be consumed inside the home for personal purposes, where the product will not represent an image to others, the consumer will be less likely to seek out, or will be less concerned with the opinions and attitudes of others regarding the product.

The second objective of this study was to determine if the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard is related to a person's score on the Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SUSCEP) scale, thus reflecting a personality trait that exists across consumer situations and products (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989, 1990). By virtue of the

test, an interaction effect between a person's susceptibility to interpersonal influence and the public- or private-ness of the product is explored.

The research questions for this study examine the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard during two post-purchase stages, product evaluation and satisfaction determination. As such, the following hypotheses are tested.

During post-purchase evaluation:

H1a: perceived social approval will be used more often as a comparison standard for public products than for private products (simple main effect)

H1b: the use of perceived social approval will be ranked as a more important evaluation criterion for public products than for private products

H1c: persons higher in susceptibility to interpersonal influence will use perceived social approval more than persons low in susceptibility (simple main effect)

H1d: persons higher in susceptibility to interpersonal influence will rank the use of perceived social approval as a more important evaluation criterion than persons low in susceptibility

H1e: persons scoring high in susceptibility to interpersonal influence will use perceived social approval more as a comparison standard for public products than for private products (interaction)

During post-purchase satisfaction determination:

H2a: perceived social approval will be used more often as a comparison standard for public products than for private products

H2b: persons higher in susceptibility to

interpersonal influence will use perceived social approval more than persons low in susceptibility.

H2c: persons scoring high in susceptibility to interpersonal influence will use perceived social approval more as a comparison standard for public products than for private products.

Respondents

The respondents for this study were undergraduate students enrolled in Marketing courses at a major southeastern state university ($n = 113$). The students were classified primarily as juniors and seniors at an early stage in the Marketing course progression. These students were selected to represent a diverse sample of the student population since the marketing courses from which the sample was drawn are often taken not only by marketing majors but also by non-marketing business majors and by students pursuing non-business degrees.

The students were invited to participate by the course instructor and researchers. The students were reminded several times that their participation was voluntary and they would receive no direct benefit from participation. Because actual involvement in the study was relatively brief, no incentive was deemed necessary.

Measures

The Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SUSCEP) scale (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989, 1990) was used in phase one of this study. (The SUSCEP scale is fully explained and documented in *The Handbook of Marketing Scales*, Second Edition, William O. Bearden and Richard G. Netemeyer, editors, Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 104 - 106). Although the SUSCEP scale was developed to reflect susceptibility to interpersonal influence in the pre-purchase situation, this study utilizes the same scale as a measure of susceptibility in the post-purchase

situation, since the trait is assumed to maintain consistency across situations.

To mask the real purpose of the study, the research was conducted in two phases. The personality test was administered during the first phase and was positioned separately from the remainder of the study (see procedure description that follows shortly). Two weeks later the second phase was initiated. A testing instrument was administered that consisted of a written scenario and corresponding questions. A projective scenario format was employed to minimize respondent unwillingness to self-report on social influence, as well as to minimize possible social desirability bias (Fisher 1993, Fisher and Tellis 1998).

The scenarios provided respondents with one of four different product post-purchase evaluation situations. Each scenario presented a person described as a "typical college student" who had recently purchased a product. The person in the scenario was given an androgynous name (Chris or Terry) to avoid implying gender specific behaviors.

The products selected for the scenarios included a suit for job interviews, an automobile, a television set, and bath towels. The suit and automobile were categorized as public goods since the purchase and consumption of these items tend to be strongly related to a person's self-image and desired self-presentation (Bearden and Etzel 1982). The television and bath towels were classified as private goods since the selection and purchase of these items were assumed to be more attribute-based and consumed within the home.

The questions accompanying each scenario consisted of lists of eleven items (comparison standards) which the subject checked in correspondence with the types of information the "scenario person" would consult when: (1) evaluating the product in the post-purchase situation, and (2) determining satisfaction with the product (see Appendix for questionnaire). This list of comparison standards was derived from the various standards suggested in the literature (Woodruff, et.al.1991; Halstad and Ward 1996). Respondents were also asked to rank-order the

importance of information (i.e., comparison standards) used during product evaluation. Finally, respondents were asked to provide open-ended responses for the sources of the information used in each context.

Procedure

During the first phase of this study, one of the researchers approached the students in the selected classes and explained that their help was being sought to "norm" a scale that was being used for on-going research in the Marketing Department. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary, and their grades would not be affected by their participation. Students were given the SUSCEP scale questions among a number of other scaled personality items. Upon completion, the questionnaires were collected, and the students were thanked for their participation without any additional explanation.

Approximately two weeks to one month later the second phase was implemented. One of the researchers again approached the students in the selected classes and requested participation in another brief questionnaire. The students were not told of the connection between the first and second data collections. Upon completion of the test questionnaire, the students were debriefed, asked about guessed hypotheses, told of the connection between the first and second data collections, and informed of the purpose of the study.

Each respondent was asked to provide the last four digits of his or her social security number on both the personality scale and test questionnaire, to be used as an identification number. The use of only the last four digits allowed for matching of respondents, while ensuring confidentiality of respondents and the relative inability to match score and response to individual subject names. During the matching of scale to questionnaire, missing data was handled by a pair-wise deletion of cases.

RESULTS

Product Evaluation

The purpose of the first set of analyses was to determine the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard during post-purchase product evaluation. It was hypothesized that the evaluation of public products would generate more use of the comparison standard than the evaluation of private products. A Chi-Square analysis revealed a significant difference between the public/private-ness of the product and respondents' affirmative or negative response to the use of verbal feedback from others, $\chi^2 = 15.341$, $p < .0001$ (See Table 1). Seventy-two percent of respondents indicated the use of other people's comments during the post-purchase evaluation of public products. Only 28% of respondents indicated the use of others' comments when evaluating private products. Therefore, H1a was supported.

Participants were asked to rank the different comparison standards on a scale of one to ten (1 = most important evaluation criteria). It was expected that participants would rely on information from others more when evaluating public products than private products. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted on the mean rankings revealed that participants ranked perceived social approval as a more important criterion for public products (mean=6.23) than for private products (mean=7.89), $F(1, 112) = 9.986$, $p < .01$ (See Table 1). Therefore, H1b was supported.

The hypothesized relationship between the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard and a person's score on the Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SUSCEP) scale (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989, 1990) was also tested. A median split was used to categorize susceptibility to interpersonal influence as high or low. (Due to issues of small sample size, analysis was not conducted to determine differences based on the normative/informational dimensions of this scale). A Chi-Square analysis revealed that a person's

Table 1
Post-Purchase Evaluation Results

		Use Other's Comments	Do not use Other's Comments	Sample Size
Post-Purchase Evaluation	<i>Public Product</i> (col %)	36** (72.0%)	22** (34.9%)	58/113
	<i>Private Product</i> (col %)	14** (28.0%)	41** (65.1%)	55/113
Importance of Comments	<i>Public Product</i>	Mean = 6.23**	na	55/111
	<i>Private Product</i>	Mean = 7.89**	na	56/111
Importance of Comments x SUSCEP	<i>High Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence</i>	Mean = 6.59*	na	56/111
	<i>Low Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence</i>	Mean = 7.53*	na	55/111

** Denotes significant differences at $p < .05$

* Denotes significant differences at $p < .10$

susceptibility alone did not predict the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard during product evaluation. Thus, results did not support H1c or Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989, 1990).

It was further hypothesized that persons higher in susceptibility to interpersonal influence would rank "what others say" as a more important criterion in post-purchase product evaluation than would persons less susceptible to this influence. Bivariate correlation analysis was performed between the raw SUSCEP scores and the importance of using the perceived social approval criteria. A significant relationship (Pearson's $r = .1868$; $p = .05$) in the hypothesized direction was found between the variables. Those persons who scored higher in susceptibility to interpersonal influence ranked "what other people say . . ." as a more important evaluation criterion, than persons lower in susceptibility to influence. An additional one-way ANOVA was performed on the mean rankings categorizing the participants into high and low susceptibility groups (using a median split on SUSCEP score). Those persons high in susceptibility to interpersonal influence

ranked perceived social approval as a more important criterion (mean = 6.59) than did persons low in susceptibility (mean = 7.53) (See Table 1). These differences were marginally significant ($F = 3.006$; $p = .086$). Therefore, H1d received weak support.

Additional analysis on this data sought to examine the interactive relationship between the public/private-ness of the product and a person's susceptibility to interpersonal influence, during post-purchase evaluation. Results were mixed. A z-test of proportions examining the percent of respondents selecting perceived social approval as a comparison standard, was conducted on each of the relationships within the 2 x 2 (high/low susceptibility x public/private product) analysis. The z-test revealed only one significant difference ($\alpha = .05$). As predicted in the hypothesis, under high susceptibility to interpersonal influence, a significantly higher percent ($z = 2.21$) of respondents selected perceived social approval as a comparison standard for public products (34.5%) than for private products (10.9%), supporting H1e (See Table 2). However, additional ANOVA results of the importance

Table 2
Results of Interactive Relationship Between Product and Susceptibility in Post-Purchase Evaluation

	High Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence	Low Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence	Total
Public Product (row proportion) (col proportion)	20/28 (.345)** (.351)	16/30 (.275) (.286)	36/58
Private Product (row proportion) (col proportion)	6/29 (.109)** (.105)	8/26 (.145) (.143)	14/55
Total	26/57	24/56	50/113

** Denotes significant differences at $p < .05$

Table 3
Importance of Others' Comments by Product and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

		Mean	N
High Susceptibility	<i>Public Product</i>	5.41	27
	<i>Private Product</i>	7.69	29
Low Susceptibility	<i>Public Product</i>	7.00	29
	<i>Private Product</i>	8.12	26

Note: Lower mean score denotes higher ranking of importance

Table 4
Post-Purchase Satisfaction Results

		Use Other's Comments	Do not use Other's Comments	Sample Size
Post-Purchase Satisfaction	<i>Public Product</i> (col %)	38*** (76.0%)	20 (32.3%)	58/112
	<i>Private Product</i> (col %)	12*** (24.0%)	42 (67.7%)	54/112
Use of Comments x SUSCEP	<i>High Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence</i>	30* (52.6%)	27* (47.4%)	57/112
	<i>Low Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence</i>	20* (36.4%)	35* (63.6%)	55/112

*** Denotes significant differences at $p < .01$

* Denotes significant differences at $p < .10$

Table 5
Use of Others' Comments Based on Product and Susceptibility in Post-Purchase Satisfaction Determination

	High Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence	Low Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence	Total
Public Product	22/28	16/30	38/58
(row proportion)	(.379)**	(.533)	
(col proportion)	(.386)	(.291)	
Private Product	8/29	4/25	12/54
(row proportion)	(.148)**	(.074)	
(col proportion)	(.140)	(.072)	
Total	30/57	20/55	50/112

** Denotes significant differences at $p < .05$

ranking of perceived social approval revealed a main effect for product public-/privateness ($F = 10.75$; $p = .001$) and a marginal main effect for high/low susceptibility ($F = 3.793$; $p = .054$), but no product x score interaction ($F = 1.268$; $p = .263$). Therefore, H1e is partially supported.

Satisfaction Determination

Participants' use of perceived social approval was also examined during the determination of product satisfaction. Participants suggested they used other people's comments more on public than private products during satisfaction determination ($\chi^2 = 21.211$; $p = .000$) (See Table 4). Seventy-six percent of respondents used interpersonal influence when determining satisfaction with-public products, versus 21% who used influence with private products. Therefore, H2a was supported.

A Chi-Square analysis examined the relationship between a person's high or low susceptibility to interpersonal influence and his or her use of perceived social approval during product satisfaction determination. The findings revealed marginally significant differences between high and low susceptibility in people's use of perceived social approval, $\chi^2 = 2.997$; $p = .083$ (See Table 4). Therefore, H2b is only weakly supported.

Finally, a relationship was hypothesized such that persons scoring high in susceptibility to interpersonal influence will use perceived social approval more as a comparison standard for public products (37.9%) than for private products (14.8%), during satisfaction determination ($z = 2.05$; $\alpha = .05$) (See Table 5). For respondents scoring low in susceptibility to interpersonal influence there were no differences. Therefore, H2c was supported.

These findings, during both post-purchase evaluation and satisfaction determination, support Bearden and Etzel's (1982) suggestion that public products would generate more use perceptive social approval as a post-purchase comparison standard was not just an artifact of the original interviews. Results of this study suggest that some individuals in the population are concerned with the opinions and attitudes of others regarding purchased products, and that these individuals may seek out validating information for some products during post-purchase evaluation and satisfaction determination.

DISCUSSION

This study found evidence which not only supports, but adds additional information to the previous studies of both Bearden and Etzel (1982) and Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989, 1990),

now extended to a post-purchase evaluative situation. With regard to the public- or private-ness of a product, Bearden and Etzel (1982) suggest that a consumer's use of interpersonal information is context specific. If the product is to be displayed or consumed in a public setting where its use reflects the consumer's image, then the consumer will likely seek out information from others. In the case of private products, interpersonal information is often not sought.

Product Evaluation

This study found an interesting relationship between public-/privateness of the product and the susceptibility to interpersonal influence personality trait, during post-purchase product evaluation. A consumer's susceptibility to interpersonal influence *alone* does not appear to be a good predictor of the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard during product evaluation. However, persons who were higher in susceptibility to interpersonal influence ranked others' opinions as a more important evaluation criterion, and used the opinions more during the evaluation of public products than during the evaluation of private products. Persons who were lower in susceptibility to interpersonal influence ranked interpersonal influence as a much less important evaluation criterion across both public and private products.

Satisfaction Determination

Individuals also appear to use perceived social approval as a comparison standard when determining satisfaction with a purchased product. As in post-purchase evaluation, the public-/private-ness of the product appears to be a strong influencing factor in a person's use of perceived social approval. Public products are evaluated using perceived social approval more than private products. There was more support for the influencing role of susceptibility to interpersonal influence during satisfaction determination than during product evaluation. The moderating role of the personality trait (H2b) was weakly

supported by the study results, but strong evidence was found for the interaction of susceptibility and public-/private-ness of the product (H2c).

It appears that a key factor explaining the use of perceived social approval is more likely to be the public/private-ness of the product than susceptibility to interpersonal influence. The main effect of public/private-ness was strong enough to over-shadow or weaken interaction effects between product public/private-ness and susceptibility to interpersonal influence during product evaluation. However, the study did reveal that for individuals high in susceptibility to interpersonal influence, public products prompt a magnification of the attention to other people's opinions that may not be seen with private products.

This study's findings lead to the suspicion that a person who is more susceptible to interpersonal influence, and seeks out opinions and validation from others when evaluating public products, may exhibit a lack of confidence in a potentially social-image-threatening situation and a need to transfer the validation process to someone else. Some original interviewees suggested that using one's perception of what others will think is a common action among all consumers during post-purchase evaluation and satisfaction determination.

An interesting phenomenon that appeared in the non-hypothesized results was a positive correlation between high susceptibility to interpersonal influence and the use of other brands as a comparison standard (Pearson's $r = .3296$; $p = .014$). This finding suggests that individuals who are keenly aware of, and seek out, information from others regarding purchase and evaluation decisions, may also exhibit high brand awareness. This potential relationship suggests the opportunity for further exploration and research.

Limitations

This study was proposed as an examination of a phenomenon that arose during interviews conducted as part of a different study. Its overall

goal was to ascertain whether the phenomenon existed in a larger population, or whether it was an artifact of the interviews. Although this overall goal was achieved, and evidence was presented that the phenomenon exists, this study still has certain limitations.

First, this study was conducted using a student sample. Although this sampling technique is appropriate for theory-building studies such as this, the argument can be made that college students as a segment are more susceptible to interpersonal influence than the larger population (Park and Lessig 1977).

Another limitation of the study may lie in its use of a projective scenario questionnaire format. There is an assumption built into projective techniques that respondents project their values and attitudes in considering situations involving others. It is possible, despite supportive evidence for the assumption, that this was not the case. Additionally, some respondents may second-guess the projective technique and due to concern over self-reporting, understate their own level of susceptibility to influence, increasing social desirability bias.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because this study was an exploration of the existence of perceptive social approval as a comparison standard in post-purchase contexts, opportunities abound for additional research on this subject. First, this study needs further external validation through replication in a larger, non-student sample. Age and gender differences may exist in the use of perceived social approval as a comparison standard, variables not tested in this study.

Second, an opportunity exists for further studies that utilize testing methods other than projective scenarios. The existence of perceived social approval was suggested in interviews, but was not probed in those interviews. Qualitative research that probes for more depth of explanation about reliance on perceived social approval could lend interesting insights about reference individuals/groups and products.

Finally, there is a need for similar studies examining other types of public and private products. The use of an interview suit may have over-exaggerated the use of perceived social approval with this sample. Studies examining multiple products of varying levels of public-/private-ness would be very beneficial and could produce further insights into the depth of this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

This study found clear evidence for perceived social approval as a comparison standard in post-purchase product evaluation and satisfaction determination. The study also suggests two variables that may have some influence on when perceived social approval is employed. The public- or private-ness of the product appears to have the strongest impact; perceived social approval is used as a standard more for public products than for private products. Additionally, an individual who has higher susceptibility to interpersonal influence appears to use the comparison standard more for public products, than for private products.

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**APPENDIX A
 QUESTIONNAIRE**

General Instructions

We are interested in understanding the criteria people use to judge products. On the next page you will be provided with a scenario of a typical college student and a product. Please respond to all four questions on the following page.

Note: (each subject received one questionnaire. The four versions of the questionnaire were identical except for the changed product [suit, automobile, television set, bath towels]).

Chris has just bought a new television set. Which of the following criteria will Chris likely use to evaluate the purchase? Please check all that apply below.

- _____ Expectation of what the TV would be like
 _____ How the TV works when used
 _____ Anticipated or predicted future use of the TV
 _____ How well the TV met what Chris wanted
 _____ What other people say about the TV
 _____ Chris's experience with other TVs purchased in the past
 _____ The benefits that Chris receives from the TV
 _____ What the advertising or sales clerk promised the TV would do
 _____ How well the TV performs in comparison to other TVs of the same brand
 _____ How well the TV compares to other brands
 _____ Other (please specify)

How do you think Chris would rank the importance of the criteria in evaluating the TV purchase? Please rank below, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being the most important criteria), how you think Chris would evaluate

the TV.

- _____ Expectation of what the TV would be like
- _____ How the TV works when used
- _____ Anticipated or predicted future use of the TV
- _____ How well the TV met what Chris wanted
- _____ What other people say about the TV
- _____ Chris's experience with other TVs purchased in the past
- _____ The benefits that Chris receives from the TV
- _____ What the advertising or sales clerk promised the TV would do
- _____ How well the TV performs in comparison to other TVs of the same brand
- _____ How well the TV compares to other brands
- _____ Other (please specify)

Chris is trying to determine overall satisfaction with the TV purchase. Which of the following criteria do you think Chris will use for this determination? Check all that apply.

- _____ Expectation of what the TV would be like
- _____ How the TV works when used
- _____ Anticipated or predicted future use of the TV
- _____ How well the TV met what Chris wanted
- _____ What other people say about the TV
- _____ Chris's experience with other TVs purchased in the past
- _____ The benefits that Chris receives from the TV
- _____ What the advertising or sales clerk promised the TV would do
- _____ How well the TV performs in comparison to other TVs of the same brand
- _____ How well the TV compares to other brands
- _____ Other (please specify)

Where do you think Chris would get the information that is important in evaluating the TV? Please write in the space below where you think the criteria information would come from.

APPENDIX B
CONSUMER SUSCEPTIBILITY TO INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE*
 (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989)

1. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class.
2. If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy.
3. It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.
4. To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying and using.

5. I rarely purchase the latest fashion styles until I am sure my friends approve of them.

6. I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase.

7. If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product.

8. When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of.

9. I like to know what brands and products make a good impression on others.

10. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a product before I buy.

11. If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.

12. I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase.

Notes: Normative factor items are 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12; informational factor items are 1, 4, 7, and 10.

* The CONSUMER SUSCEPTIBILITY TO INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE scale by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) is reprinted with permission from the *Journal of Consumer Research*, University of Chicago Press.