AN EXTENSION OF THE BOURNE TYPOLOGY OF REFERENCE GROUP INFLUENCE ON PRODUCT-RELATED DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT: The Bourne (1957) typology of reference group influence on product ownership and brand decisions has received broad exposure and generated recent research on aspects of the typology's foundations. Although updates have recently been offered to the proposed product placements forwarded by Bourne, the typology itself is believed to be of limited present use without incorporating a third decision to the framework—the type or style of product. The merit of adding this third dimension was assessed using two samples of undergraduate students and a set of thirty student-generated product categories. Results of student perceptions provided general support for the study's basic premise. Implications and research directions are provided.

The term reference groups is used to describe those groups which serve as a source of reference for an individual and thus are capable of having an influence on the person's attitudes and behaviors. Even in instances where the individual is not a bona fide member of the group but wishes to become one, he or she will tend to take the group into account when forming attitudes, beliefs and behavior patterns. As such, the person will tend to act in accordance with prescribed norms or standards which have been set for the group (Sherif, 1966; Sherif & Sherif, 1969).

Marketers and consumer researchers have long been concerned with the study of reference groups, for these groups can have a direct influence on aspects of an individual's purchase and consumption behavior. It is also recognized that reference group influence is oftentimes tacit and symbolic; individuals perceive the ownership of particular...
products and brands to be an important means of identifying with valued reference groups and accompanying roles (Solomon, 1983). Only a handful of studies have focused on product-related aspects of reference group influence. Several of these studies have addressed the issue of reference group influence on the product ownership and brand decisions involved in the purchase process (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Bourne, 1957; Park & Lessig, 1977; Reingen, Foster, Brown & Seidman, 1984).

To date, no published study has considered the extent of reference group influence on product type or style decisions that are also inherent in most purchases. One purpose of this study was to determine if there is perceived to be reference group influence on product type or style decisions that can be distinguished from the more traditional product ownership and brand decisions. A second purpose was to determine the extent to which perceptions of reference group influence for selected product categories conform to an a priori classification defined on the basis of the three decision areas—product ownership, the type or style of product, and the brand.

BASIS FOR STUDY

The founding work on purchase-related influences of reference groups was compiled by Francis Bourne (1957). In this paper, it was posited that reference group influence will be either weak or strong to own a particular product and to own a particular brand of the product, if it is in fact purchased. The derived four-category typology is based on the belief that reference group influence will be stronger for those products and brands that are more conspicuous—that is, more socially visible. The typology shown in Figure 1 was developed to convey the likely susceptibility of product purchases to reference group influence.

Products in the upper right quadrant are ones Bourne describes as being socially conspicuous at both the product ownership and brand level, thus exhibiting significant influence at both levels. The lower right quadrant depicts cases where the product itself is socially visible

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1Reference group influence has been used loosely to encompass both (1) deliberate attempts made by reference group members to direct the behavior of an individual member, and (2) indirect influence that might occur if an individual were to observe group member behaviors and alter his or her own. Although reference group relevance is perhaps a more suitable term for describing the second usage, which is the focus here, influence and relevance will be used interchangeably in this paper.

2Although Bourne (1957) is usually given sole credit for developing the ideas presented in this seminal paper, the paper is actually a compilation of ideas and research results presented by a number of different scholars at two seminars held on the topic of group influence. With this caveat stated, the traditional mode of referencing the typology will be used for ease of presentation.