

STUDY ON THE NEED FOR UNIQUE PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT: The need for unique products stems from a personal sense of uniqueness. People have more free time and the opportunity to explore the world of products. The aim of this study is to determine the level of the need for unique products, assess the level of centrality of visual aesthetics, evaluate each participant's perception of a series of products with varying designs, and assess the purchase intention for each product. The main conclusion is that there is a moderate correlation between the centrality of visual aesthetics of products and the need for unique products.

KEYWORDS: need for unique products, design, purchase intention.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, there are a series of upward trends. Despite economic crises and periods of recession, the majority of the population is experiencing an increase in their standard of living. The technologies that underpin the production and functioning of most products are becoming cheaper and more accessible to small companies. Due to the growth of formal and informal education, more and more people are becoming refined and sophisticated compared to their parents' generation. Despite the existence of a segment of the population dependent on work, people have more free time and the ability to explore the world of products on a global scale through the internet. One of the results of these upward trends is the emergence of the need for unique products, which is being experienced by an increasing number of individuals. This need has generated a market niche that is being exploited by a series of specialized companies. It is expected that this niche will transform into a market segment with its corresponding consequences: being a significant source of profit, generating a large number of job opportunities in the manufacturing industry, and so on.

As the opportunity needs to be rational, strategic, and intensive, the need for unique products has caught the attention of specialists. It has been discovered that the need for unique products stems from a personal sense of uniqueness [1]. Techniques have been developed to identify those who have this need. The characteristics of individuals driven by the need for unique products have been studied in order to create a generic profile (such as [2] for high-tech products).

The need for unique products is unexpectedly exploited through the principles of mass production, particularly in the case of manufacturing personalized products. Not every industry lends itself to this approach, and the core idea of "mass customization" revolves around the existence of an online tool that allows consumers to configure their desired product, which they will perceive as unique, even if it is not entirely so. It has been demonstrated that the relationship between the perceived uniqueness of a personalized product, the resulting utility for the consumer, and purchase intention is moderated by the general need of the customer for unique products [3].

2. Current status

The need for unique products has been analyzed from various perspectives. This need does not differ based on the gender or socio-economic status of the consumer [4], but the consumer's culture influences the level of the need for unique products [5]. This need is in a complex direct-inverse relationship with the tendency of the consumer's perceived self-congruence with the owned brands [6]. From a brand perspective, it has been found that individuals with a high level of this need are more likely to switch brands compared to those with a low level of the need for unique products, but the tendency is considerably weaker for brands with a strong personality [7]. In the luxury products domain, studies have

analyzed the relationship between this need, sustainability, and the luxury inclination [8]. It has been found that the need for unique products is triggered and sustained by "status consumption" in the luxury products domain [9]. Individuals with a high level of this need are conscious of how they are perceived by others and prefer discreet products and brands in the luxury segment [10], somewhat contradicting the observation that individuals with a high level of the need for unique products exhibit low visual sensitivity because they aim to break the norms of accepted aesthetic taste [11].

The need for unique products is determined by three main factors: the need for uniqueness, the aspiration for a distinctive status, and materialism [12]. It is known that individuals with a stronger need for uniqueness are more sensitive to information about similarities among people and desire means to differentiate themselves from others. The aspiration for a distinctive status reflects the desire for dominance and leadership in social hierarchies. People often rely on owning and displaying products to attain and communicate their social status. Materialism is a human characteristic that reflects the importance an individual places on material possessions. Among other things, materialistic individuals are more inclined towards purchasing and owning objects compared to less materialistic individuals.

The consequences of the need for unique products are as follows [12]:

- Increased intensity of the desire to possess rare products.
- Emergence of consumers who appreciate innovations.
- Product personalization.
- Persistence in using outdated products.
- Choice of non-standard locations for shopping.

The need for unique products is also satisfied through the possession of rare or hard-to-obtain products [13]. While the majority of consumers are conservative and hesitant towards novelty, there is a small group of consumers who are enthusiastic about innovative products, purchase them, and use them publicly, thus popularizing them. There are product categories that cannot be crafted manually (e.g., automobiles). One way to have a unique product from such a category is to personalize it through one's own intervention after purchase or to seek the services of a specialized company. One possibility for individuals to differentiate themselves among the anonymous mass of trendy product users is to continue using a dated product long after it has gone out of fashion. Since large shopping centers and hypermarkets tend to carry similar brands (including private labels), some consumers prefer to frequent independent stores, small chains, or even second-hand markets. A tactic employed by major retailers is to create an impression of rarity through limited offers, but it has been found that purchase intention does not differ between those with a high level of the need for unique products and those with a low level [14].

An important aspect to study is the size of the niche represented by individuals driven by the need for unique products. Such a niche is relatively difficult to accurately determine and varies depending on the product category. For example, there are far more car owners who intend to personalize their vehicles compared to owners of dishwashers. However, the niche can be considered to have osmotic boundaries because the uniqueness theory states that most people desire to be somewhat different from others, as it is more comfortable and enjoyable than being completely similar or radically different [15]. The perception that someone is unique to some extent can strengthen an individual's identity in a positive way and help avoid the negative perception of being mundane.

The need for unique products of consumers is defined as the characteristic of seeking differentiation from others through the acquisition and use of products with the purpose of developing and enhancing self-image and social image [16].

The pursuit of differentiation (or motivation for counterconformity) varies from individual to individual and influences consumer choices. The motivation for counterconformity arises when individuals feel a threat to their identity, perceiving or believing that they are highly similar to others. Unlike a person driven by the motivation for independence, a counterconformist individual is influenced by the behavior considered conformist by the majority and chooses to behave differently [16].

Products themselves, their public display, and specific modes of use that are classified as outside the norm can serve as recognized symbols of uniqueness. Generally, such goods include innovative products, personalized items, craftsmanship, and antiques. Even mundane products can become unique

through creative modification or by grouping them into extensive collections. Enhancing self-image through a unique product occurs through the transfer of symbolic meaning from the purchased product to oneself. It is important that the symbolic meaning of the product is publicly recognized. It should be emphasized that perceived uniqueness pertains not only to the products themselves but also to brands (perhaps most significantly) and styles.

Counterconformity can be achieved through three paths: creative choice, unpopular choice, and avoidance of similarity. *Creative choice* involves creating a personal style achieved through original products, not necessarily unique ones, and especially through their tasteful display. Creative choice reflects the fact that the individual seeks social differentiation from the majority but makes selections that can be considered good choices by others. Often, consumers' actions are guided by suggestions and ideas from literature related to consumption. *Unpopular choice* refers to the selection or use of products and brands that deviate from the aesthetic norms of the social group and thus risk disapproval from others, but this is offset by the satisfaction of uniqueness. Even though acquaintances may criticize the individual for having questionable taste, paradoxically, the person in question will have an improved self-image and social image. *Avoidance of similarity* refers to losing interest or discontinuing the use of products that become commonplace due to their popularity and prolonged use. The consumer reaches a point where they monitor others' possessions in order to avoid similarity with them, and they start devaluing in their own value system the products and brands they consider ordinary.

Indeed, there are two widely used scales for assessing the need for unique products that have been established over time: the *Desire for Unique Consumer Products (DUCP)* scale and the *Consumer Need for Uniqueness (CNU)* scale. Both scales are based on a Likert scale format with endpoints ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree for evaluation.

The construct of the Desire for Unique Consumer Products (DUCP) scale [12] includes the following statements:

- I am very attracted to rare objects.
- I enjoy shopping at stores that carry merchandise which is different and unusual.
- I enjoy having things that others do not.
- I rarely pass up the opportunity to order custom features on the products I buy.
- I would prefer to have things custom-made than to have them ready-made.
- I like to try new products and services before others do.
- I tend to be a fashion leader rather than a fashion follower.
- I am more likely to buy a product if it is scarce.

The construct of the Consumer Need for Uniqueness (CNU) scale [17, modified by 18] includes the following statements:

Creative choice

- I often combine possessions in such a way that I create a personal image that cannot be duplicated.
- I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original.
- I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands.
- Having an eye for products that are interesting and unusual assists me in establishing a distinctive image.

Unpopular choice

- When it comes to the products I buy and the situations in which I use them, I have broken customs and rules.
- I have often violated the understood rules of my social group regarding what to buy or own.
- I have often gone against the understood rules of my social group regarding when and how certain products are properly used.
- I enjoy challenging the prevailing taste of people I know by buying something they would not seem to accept.

Avoidance of similarity

- When a product I own becomes popular among the general population, I begin to use it less.
- I often try to avoid products or brands that I know are bought by the general population.
- As a rule, I dislike products or brands that are customarily bought by everyone.
- The more commonplace a product or brand is among the general population, the less interested I am in buying it.

3. Experiment design

From the study of the specialized literature, it is observed that the need for unique products has been extensively studied both in itself and in its relationship with other variables. However, the relationship between the need for unique products and a variable that describes consumer sensitivity to design, namely Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics (CVPA), has not been investigated [19]. Additionally, the possible link between the need for unique products and product design and purchase intention has not been examined. Lastly, whether the two measurement scales (DUCP and CNU) for assessing the need for unique products yield equivalent results has not been studied. Therefore, the research questions are as follows:

1. Is there any correlation between the need for unique products (DUCP and CNU) and Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics (CVPA)?
2. Are the two measurement scales for assessing the need for unique products (DUCP and CNU) equivalent?
3. What is the relationship between the need for unique products and product design?
4. What is the relationship between the need for unique products and purchase intention?



Fig. 1. Lamp – simple design



Fig. 2. Lamp – elaborate design



Fig. 3. Lamp – kitsch

To answer these questions, an experiment was designed, consisting of the following steps: a) determining the participant's level of need for unique products (DUCP and CNU); b) determining the level of Visual Aesthetic Centrality for each participant (using the dedicated construct); c) evaluating the design of a series of products for each participant, where the design varies across three levels; d) assessing the purchase intention for each product. A 7-point Likert scale was used for each assessment. Four categories of products were chosen (chairs, lamps, sofas, and cup holders), and for each product category, three products were selected with varying design levels (ordinary design, elaborate design, and kitsch). For illustrative purposes, Figures 1-3 depict the lamps in the product category.

4. Experimental results

The experiment was conducted with 119 participants, consisting of 71 females and 48 males. The average age was 23.03 years ($\sigma = 2.94$). All participants were students enrolled at a major technical university in Romania. The participants had a basic background in product aesthetics. The accuracy of the results was tested using the Z-score. No Z-scores fell outside the range of $[-3; +3]$, so no data sets were excluded. The Z-scores ranged from -2.60 to 2.29. The data reliability was tested using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The calculated value for the complete data set was $\alpha = 0.95$, indicating excellent reliability.

The experimental results were processed using a spreadsheet program. Means and variances were calculated for each element of each construct. Additionally, the means of DUCP, CNU, and CVPA were determined for each participant. The means of overall aesthetic value and purchase intention were calculated, both globally and disaggregated for mundane design, elaborate design, and kitsch design, for each participant.

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to investigate the relationships related to the first research question.

$$r_{DUCP-CVPA} = 0.58$$

$$r_{CNU-CVPA} = 0.59$$

The conclusion is that there is a moderate correlation between the centralization of visual aesthetics of products (CVPA) and the need for unique products (whether measured by DUCP or CNU construct).

To test whether the two scales measuring the need for unique products (DUCP and CNU) are equivalent, the null hypothesis was formulated:

H₀: The application of the DUCP and CNU constructs leads to the same result.

A Z-test for means was conducted, and the result obtained was as follows:

$$z_{calculated} (p < 0.001) = 4.86 > 1.96 = z_{critical} ; P(Z \leq z) \text{ two-tail} = 1.157 \times 10^{-06}$$

That means the null hypothesis is rejected, both due to the value of z and the p-value, indicating that the two constructs are not equivalent.

Based on the calculations, correlations (Pearson) were computed between the two constructs of the need for unique products and design, as well as purchase intention. Higher values were obtained for CNU and design (0.35 - low correlation) and CNU and purchase intention (0.36 - low correlation), indicating that these correlations are practically insignificant.

Since the previous results are insignificant, the components of CNU (creative choice, unpopular choice, and avoidance of similarity) were considered, and correlations were calculated between these components and the levels of design (banal, elaborate, and kitsch), as well as the corresponding purchase intentions. The results of these calculations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation coefficients (Pearson)

<i>r</i> (Pearson)	Creative choice	Unpopular choice	Avoiding similarity
Simple design	0.39	0.05	0.02
Elaborate design	0.83	0.16	0.28
Kitsch	0.41	0.14	0.03
Purchase intent (banal design)	0.37	0.11	0.16
Purchase intent (elaborate design)	0.66	0.21	0.30
Purchase intention (kitsch)	0.33	0.18	0.03

It is observed that only the component "creative choice" of the need for unique products is correlated with design and purchase intention, with a strong correlation in the case of elaborate design and a moderate correlation for purchase intention for products with elaborate design. Therefore, designers can persuade individuals with a high level of the "creative choice" component by offering products that exhibit truly remarkable design.

5. Conclusions

The experiment was designed to determine the level of need for unique products, assess the level of visual aesthetics centrality, evaluate participants' perception of the design of a series of products with varying designs, and assess purchase intention for each product. The conclusion drawn from the correlation coefficients is that there is a moderate correlation between the centrality of visual aesthetics of the products and the need for unique products. Furthermore, the conclusion drawn from the calculation of the CNU components is that the "creative choice" component of the need for unique products is correlated with design and purchase intention. Therefore, it can be concluded that designers can

effectively persuade individuals with a high level of this component by offering products that exhibit truly remarkable design.

6. References

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