
**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE NEED FOR UNIQUENESS
AMONG INDIAN ADOLESCENTS**

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ABSTRACT

Need for uniqueness is a human motivation which is expressed in many ways, one of them being in the consumer domain. It is a universal trait that most people have in various degrees. Some express their uniqueness in socially approved ways such as procuring and consuming consumer goods. Others express it outside socially approved boundaries. Adolescents are a significant consumer segment and express their individuality in many consumer specific areas. Decision making among adolescents have many aspects and their decision-making is not as mature as that of an adult. However, the need for uniqueness is one strong factor in this decision making process. This exploratory study looks at the need for uniqueness and its expression as consumer need for uniqueness in the market place among adolescents in India and the relevant drivers, divided into intrinsic and extrinsic antecedents. Research into this area will have important implications for marketers who target a sizeable 20% of the Indian market comprising of adolescents. The article also points towards pertinent research areas for the future, most important of which is the empirical validation of the propositions presented here.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have an innate desire to express their own identity and individuality. The more attempts at enforcing conformity, the more one strives to express personal uniqueness. People have a fear of losing their unique nature in the sea of sameness. With the advent of mass marketing in the 20th century, the cry for exclusivity got more strident. India is in the throes of a massive cultural shift with the advent of multinational firms. These firms have made inexpensive manufacture and intensive distribution ways by which people have uplifted the quality and standard of life from the mundane, the undifferentiated, the commonplace, to something higher, superior and more unique.

Of all the consumer segments, it has been researched that adolescents are not only a significant chunk of the burgeoning markets worldwide for consumer goods, but that they are also significant trendsetters for others in the community to follow. In both respects they constitute a very important segment for marketers in India. In monetary terms the adolescent power in the market place was to the tune of USD 108bn in 2012. That is not an insignificant number by any standards. In addition, the sheer number of adolescents in India, 243 million between 10 – 19 years (UN World Report 2013), is reason enough for this demographic to be studied very closely.

The second aspect, where adolescents play trendsetters and impact household expenditure significantly, makes it useful to study what the drivers are that push them towards certain consumption patterns. More and more young people in India are being courted by foreign brands to ‘breakaway’ from the traditional mould (Khare and Handa, 2011). They are being encouraged and pressured to step out and make a path of their own which is so opposite of what traditional Indian culture prescribes. Adolescents are at the forefront of this uprooting of traditional mores of behavior and consumption patterns. Today adolescents are inordinately brand conscious

ADOLESCENT DECISION MAKING

Many different factors influence how adolescents make decisions (Fischhoff et al., 1999). These may include cognitive, psychological, social, cultural, and societal factors (Gordon, 1996). Cognitive factors refer to the mental processes of reasoning and perception (Gordon, 1996). These decision-making processes mature with age and experience and are influenced by an adolescent's brain development and acquisition of knowledge. Social and psychological factors refer to those influences from within an adolescent's family, peer group, or self (e.g., self-

esteem, locus of control, personality). Some cultural and societal factors which influence adolescents' decisions include religious beliefs, socio-economic conditions, and ethnicity (Gordon, 1996).

Addressing adolescents' independent thought involves a complex pattern of environmental and developmental factors. The societal pattern of requiring advanced independent thought at younger ages seems inevitable. Consequently, a cognitive stage adolescent might be at a disadvantage compared to his physical stage of development as the latter happens at a much slower pace than the former. (Kuhn, 2006). Simply put, a 14 year old might look like a 16 year old and be expected to take decisions of a 16 year old. This societal demand queers the pitch a bit.

Adolescents face a number of challenges in making purchase or other decisions because they:

- may see only either-or choices rather than a variety of options (Fischhoff et al., 1999);
- may lack the experience, knowledge or feeling of control over their lives to come up with alternative choices (Fischhoff et al., 1999);
- may misperceive certain behaviors as less or more risky, and may be overly optimistic about their ability to recognize and avoid threatening situations (Cohn, Macfarlane, Yanez, & Imai, 1995);
- may favor their own experience over probabilistic evidence when determining the likelihood of the consequences of their actions (see Jacobs & Potenza, 1991, as cited in Fischhoff et al., 1999);
- may focus more on the social reactions of their peers when deciding to engage in or avoid risky behaviors (Beyth-Marom, Austin, Fischhoff, Palmgren, & Jacobs-Quadrel, 1993);
- may not be able to accurately estimate the probability of negative consequences (Fischhoff et al., 1999; Ganzel, 1999);
- may have a hard time interpreting the meaning or credibility of information when making decisions (Fischhoff et al., 1999); and
- may be influenced by their emotions and fail to use decision-making processes (Fischhoff, 1992).

Consumer behavior of young people can be examined from the perspective of "consumer role" enactment, a concept which includes what Ward (1974) describes as "the set of physical and mental activities specially involved in purchase decisions—shopping, talking to others about products and brands, and weighing purchase criteria," and examines relevant skills that motivate purchase and consumption, as well as socially desirable behaviors that may contribute to efficient utilization of economic resources for the satisfaction of the maximum number of society's members. Thus, consumer role is defined in line with Brim's (1966) broad conception of the person's "role" in society and includes a wide variety of consumer-related thoughts and actions (skills, knowledge, attitudes, predispositions, and behaviors).

According to Moschis and Moore (1979), information search activity entered into by adolescents in their decision making process is a *direct-complex* category skill, which includes basic information search, the ability to filter advertising puffery, cognitively differentiate between advertising stimuli and manage consumer finance. In their work (1979) Moschis and Moore empirically arrived at the conclusion that older adolescents (15- 19) had greater amounts of consumer affairs knowledge, were better able to cognitively differentiate product attribute information in advertisements, manage consumer finances, and seek information from a variety of sources prior to decision making, and were more likely to perform "socially desirable consumer behaviors" than their younger counterparts.

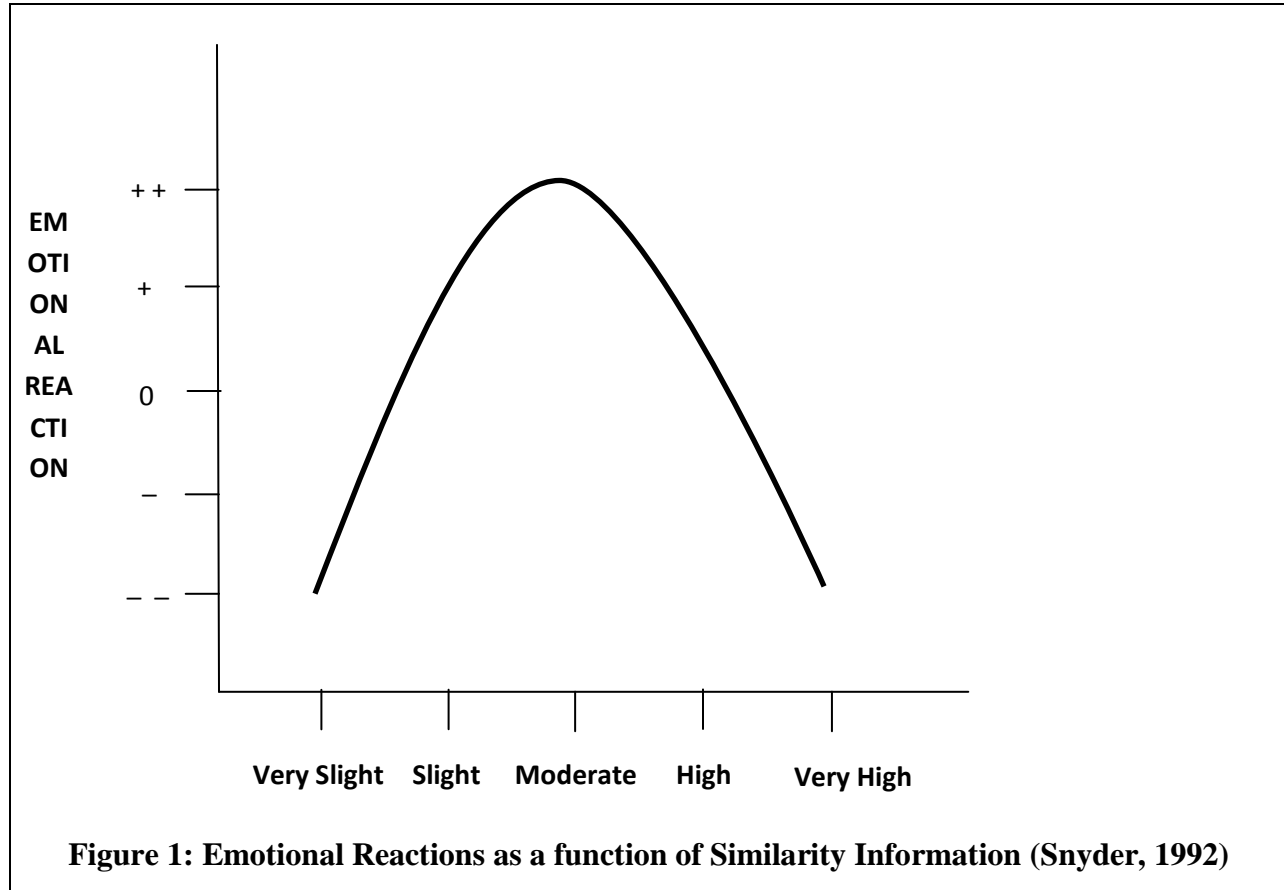
Moschis and Moore (1978) claim that during consumer socialization, *the process by which young people develop consumer-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes*, the family (Moore and Stephens, 1975), the school (Campbell, E.Q. 1969), the mass media (Bandura, A., 1971) and peer groups (Reisman and Roseborough, (1955) play important roles of socialization agents and information sources.

It would be very useful for marketers to isolate adolescents with high need for uniqueness personality trait, identify their market behavior drivers and adjust their marketing and promotional mixes accordingly to improve product sales and brand image building.

UNIQUENESS THEORY

Snyder and Fromkin (1980) in their Theory of Uniqueness state that people try to maintain a moderate level of differentness relative to other people. Accordingly, a curvilinear relationship best illustrates the predictable emotional and behavioural reactions to varying degrees of perceived similarity (refer figure 1). This curvilinear relationship suggests that people are most

comfortable at a moderate level of perceived similarity with others. High similarity and high dissimilarity creates less positive emotional reactions in people. It results in behavior that attempts to restore a moderate sense of uniqueness.



The theory of uniqueness also states that the need for uniqueness is an individual specific motivation, such that some individuals have a higher level of need for uniqueness compared to others when placed in a similar situation. This means that people with a high NFU motivation will experience positive emotions in situations of high dissimilarity and they will pursue behaviours that support this search for high dissimilarity. On the other hand those with a low NFU motivation will feel negative emotions in situations of low similarity and seek to pursue behaviours tending toward conformity with others (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980).

NFU is expressed in overtly observable behaviours. Therefore they are verifiable too. One such behavior could be the acquisition of specific consumer goods that confer feelings of moderate dissimilarity with others. Acquisition and consumption of consumer goods have been seen to be an extension of the self, a tool in helping build one's self-identity (Belk, 1988). Acquisition and

consumption of goods for one's self or as gifts for important others in one's social and family circles are seen as an expression of one's need for uniqueness.

Though the need for uniqueness is such a powerful trait in many people, not much research has been done on this critical motivation. The implications for marketers in understanding this need that people possess can lead to many successes in product development and communication of messages. For theory building, this motivation requires more adaptation to specific cultures. Most studies in this area have been done in individualistic societies. Only a few studies have been done in collectivistic societies (Burns and Brady, 2001; Khare and Handa, 2011; Knight and Kim, 2006).

NEED FOR UNIQUENESS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The interpersonal need for uniqueness has been hypothesized to be environmentally based (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). This means that NFU has cultural origins (Burns and Brady, 2001) and therefore it is not essential that NFU would exist in the same form in different cultures. India is unique in the sense that there is no 'one India'. Rather it is an agglomeration of many 'India's', placed together only by common geography and strung together by a once strong (but now tenuous) Sanskritic tradition. Studying any human motivation in India is a challenge by itself given the myriad cultural backgrounds and socio-economic groups its people belong to.

Further, Generation Y (Millennial) consumers born between 1977 and 1994 (Morton, 2002) and the post-Millennial Generation consumers born after 1995 till date (Jeanine Poggi, 2013) have a deeper sense of individual self-worth and strive to express their uniqueness more aggressively or nonchalantly, as the case may be. Some are quite blatant about their choices, even deliberately going against accepted norms, while others do it as a matter of course, with scant regard for social niceties.

Creative Choice Counterconformity is the order of the day in the larger cities. Even Unpopular Choice Counterconformity today does not invite the same condemnation as a generation or two ago even in a conservative society such as India's.

Given the above, there is a strong case for studying the need for uniqueness among the Millennial and post-millennial generations especially when the post-millennials alone account for more than USD 108 bn in consumption in India in 2012 (Sommer, 2012).

However, taboos are still strong in many parts of the country. Career choices, life partner choices and apparel choices-all of these must pass muster, especially for girls and women. There was a

case of one respondent mentioning her sister-in-law (brother's wife) wanting to experiment with western wear but was simply not allowed to do so because of her marital status in a middle class Indian family.

Need for Uniqueness theory (Fromkin, 1970) states that people have a need for a 'separate identity', a desire to 'stand apart' from others and an urge to go 'against the common grain'.

CONSUMER NEED FOR UNIQUENESS (CNFU)

The Need for Uniqueness finds expression in one of two ways: in the consumer domain, through the purchase and consumption of unique or differentiating goods and services (Tian et al., 2001, Tian and MacKenzie, 2001; Snyder, 1992) or in the non-market domain, through the pursuit of differentiating interpersonal interaction (Maslach, Stapp, and Santee, 1985) and certain behaviors (such as the way one thinks or carries oneself).

Consumer Need for Uniqueness is the achievement of differentness compared to others that is achieved through purchase, use and disposal of goods and services. This is most often attempted in order to develop and embellish one's personal and social identity in society.

People with a high need for uniqueness motivation express their uniqueness behaviorally despite risk of social disapproval for such expressions (Fromkin&Lipshitz, 1976). At the same time there is a balancing act performed by most who express their need for uniqueness by staying within the boundaries of social approval. They carefully keep the conflicting needs of differentiation and assimilation (Ruvio, 2008) satisfied and practice "creative choice counterconformity" (Tian et al., 2001).

NEED FOR ASSIMILATION

		H	L
NEED FOR DIFFERENTIATION	L	Positive Uniqueness Consumption	Dark Side of Consumption
	H	Assimilation consumption	Utilitarian consumption

Figure 2: CNFU/NSA Matrix (Ruvio, 2008)

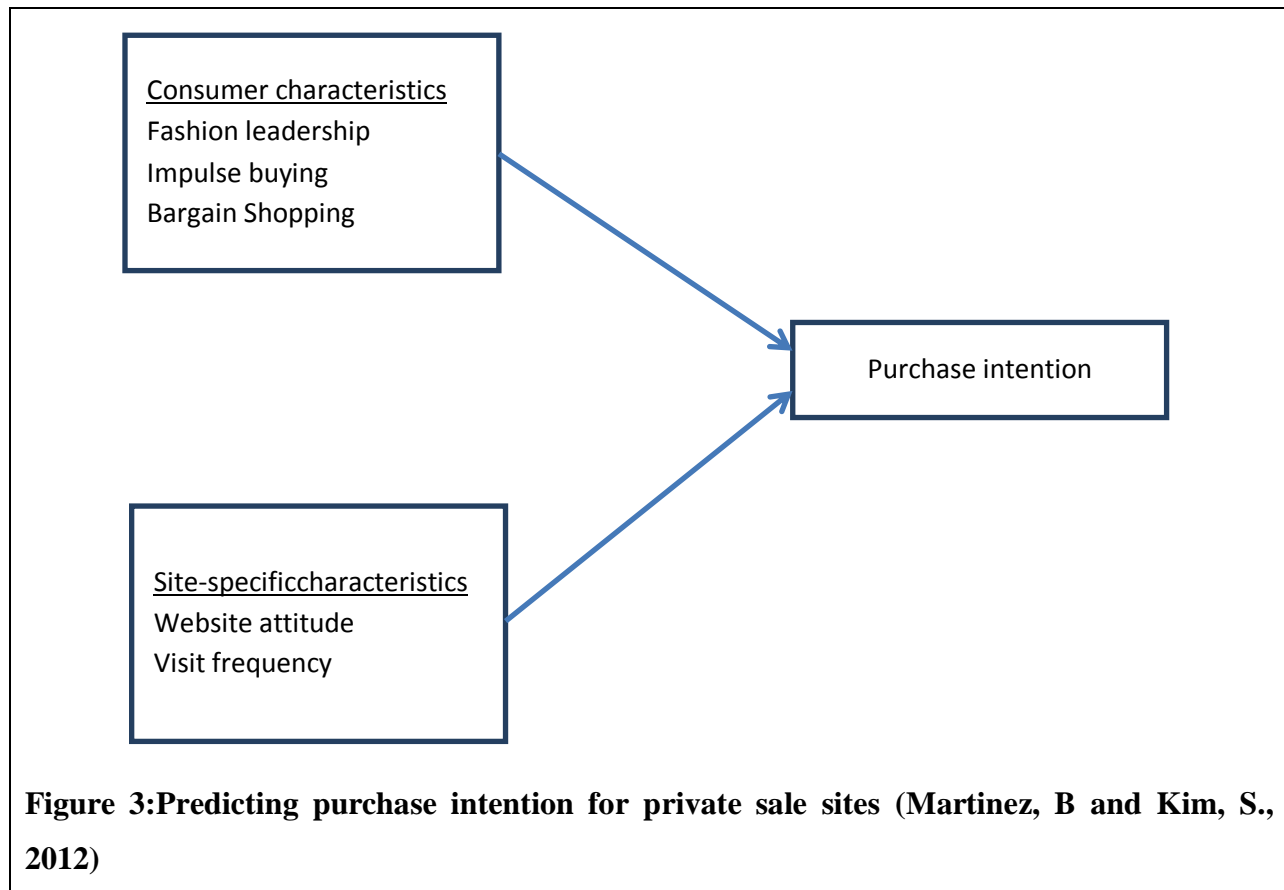
People high on both NFA and NFD, which should be treated as two separate forces of the need for uniqueness (Ruvio, 2008), play the role of Opinion Leaders and are able to influence the behavior of their peers and in the case of adolescents also of their earlier cohorts. This category falls under the positive uniqueness consumption slot. These consumers are highly likely to be the first adopters of a new product. They are also more likely to shop in unusual places and small, out of the way stores and the internet (Ruvio, 2008). Other consumers satisfy their need for differentiation but not their need for assimilation and end up being the rebellious, unpopular counter conformity choice people (Tian et al, 2001; Grover, 1997). This segment constitutes the ‘dark consumer’ characterized by his or her rebellious and risky consumption behaviour. High NFU adolescents would fit well into the above two segments. Those low on NFU would probably fit best into the assimilation consumption and utilitarian consumption segments.

When people diverge away from the norm, the act is called ‘counterconformity’ (Nail, 1986). Creative Choice Counterconformity refers to behavior that is different from the norms of a group, yet acceptable to society. For instance, when every middle class parent wants his or her child to grow up to be a doctor or an engineer (as the case is in India) someone who encourages his or her child to be a radio jockey is pursuing creative choice counterconformity. A radio jockey’s profession is ‘different’ from the usual choice and yet not considered completely ‘unacceptable’. It could raise eyebrows on the academic competence of the individual but would not bring opprobrium or incur a stigma. Hence it lies within the realm of acceptable professions in Indian society. On the contrary, were someone to adopt the profession of a *masseur*, it is likely to be met with strict disapproval. This would be referred to as ‘Unpopular Choice Counterconformity (Tian *et al.*, 2001). And then there are yet others who lose interest and discontinue the use of certain products or services when they become too popular. The commonplace causes such people to move away and try other newer things to express their uniqueness. This is called ‘Avoidance of Similarity’ (Tian *et al.*, 2001).

Consumer expressions of this need for uniqueness may be exhibited by the acquisition and use of unique apparel or other lifestyle possessions and experiences (Tepper and Hoyle, 1996) such as wristwatches, consumer electronics, tourist destinations, exotic restaurants, unusual cuisines and so on. This expression of the need for uniqueness in the consumer domain was first postulated by Tian *et al.*, (2001) and is called Consumer Need for Uniqueness (or CNFU). CNFU is “the individual’s pursuit of differentness relative to others that is achieved through the acquisition,

utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's personal and social identity" (Tian *et al.*, 2001).

Adolescents' consumer characteristics typically expressed in fashion leadership, impulse buying and bargain shopping behavior impact purchase intention significantly (Martinez and Kim, 2012). This is particularly true in apparel purchases. As the emphasis on e-commerce increases across a country like India, this is of even more significance as the size of this industry is growing at a very fast pace, expected to reach USD 1.5 Tr in value terms by 2015 (MacQuarie Asia Report, Jan 2014). The search for procuring uniqueness conferring goods has moved online with adolescents scouring the world's markets to acquire that one-of-a-kind product to outshine the others in their peer group.



NFU AND GENDER

Existing literature does not throw up many research articles that map the relation between NFU and gender and this continues to be a gap in the literature. Some studies have indicated that CNFU and gender are not related in any significant manner (Tian *et al.*, 2001). In a patriarchal

society such as India, women have lesser opportunity to express their individuality in terms of decision making in the family. An Indian woman's whole life gets expended in being first a daughter, then a wife and daughter-in-law, and then a mother. The pivot of the woman's life is outer directed (parents, husband and in-laws and children, in that order). There was very little scope for any expression of the need for uniqueness. The need for assimilation was much more powerful. In many parts of India it is still the more powerful need. However, lately, with families going nuclear and women entering the workforce in large numbers as well as legal and political strengthening of the woman's hand, there has been a visible shift in the locus of the need for uniqueness among Indian women, especially in the larger cities. This trend has been pushed further by extensive retail expansion and relaxation of social mores. Women have seized the day and one of the avenues they are pursuing to differentiate themselves and establish their identity, both at home and the work place, is to express their need for uniqueness unabashedly. Hence, the present study posits that NFU is more positively related to women than men.

ANTECEDENTS OF NFU AND SHOPPING ASSOCIATIONS

Existing literature has focused on identifying the psychological aspect of the need for uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977) and the environmental aspects of the need for uniqueness (Burns and Brady, 2008). Despite it being a very important motivation for marketers in general, the subject of antecedents of the need for uniqueness has not received much attention. A proposed model is given below in Figure 4 which links the intrinsic and extrinsic antecedents of NFU to brand choice, product choice and shopping location choice associations.

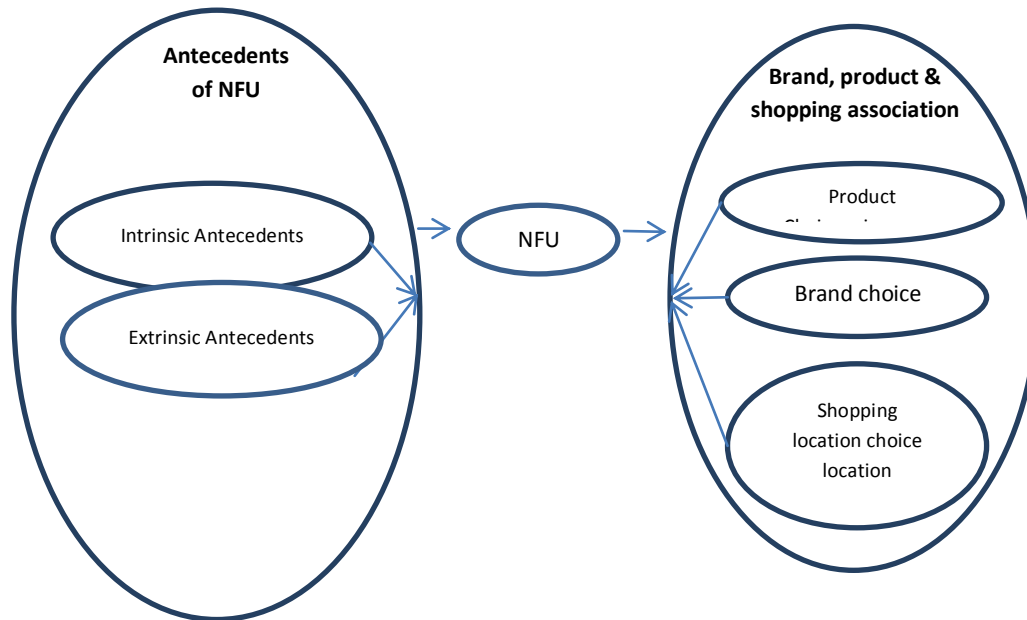


Figure 4: Hypothesized relation between NFU Antecedents and Brand, Product and Shopping Associations (Author's own)

Research on this topic is of crucial importance for marketing practitioners as well as marketing theorists. In the area of practical marketing, knowledge from this research will help in building long term product development, brand image communication and retail footprint strategies. In the area of theory building, it will lead to a richer base of knowledge that can be used to study this construct in more depth.

PROPOSED FUTURE AREAS FOR RESEARCH

We propose that based on this conceptual framework, empirical validation of the antecedents of the need for uniqueness and its impact on brand choice, product choice and shopping location choice among adolescents in India can be attempted to enrich marketing literature.

Secondly, there must be empirical testing of the proposed assertion that gender has a positive relation with the expression of the need for uniqueness motivation among adolescents in the Indian market place.

Finally, it would be useful to explore the impact of personality traits on the need for uniqueness. This is an area which has not received its due share of attention in the existing marketing literature.

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