



LIONAH LEHRER SCIENCE 10.14.11 9:23 AM

## THE DRIVE TO BE DIFFERENT



I'M WAITING IN line for a cappuccino. It's gonna be a good one: short, intense, the foamed milk emulsified with the syrupy shot. I glance up from my phone and look around at the cafe. It is, for lack of a better adjective, a hipster joint. There are the artfully branded items for sale (T-shirts, espresso cups, etc.) and a long list of single varietal beans. Hot water is being poured out of sleek Japanese kettles; the baristas are wearing fedoras. And then I look at the other people in line. I notice

their costumes: the slim dark jeans, flannel shirts, scuffed boots, designy glasses, mussed hair. Everyone is staring down at the gadget in their hands. They all look like me. I look like them. This is the definition of self-loathing.

I mean no disrespect. I'm a sucker for single-varietals. I own one of the Japanese kettles. Right now, I'm wearing that branded T-shirt from my coffee place. What interests me, however, is the irony of the situation. Here we all are, seeking uniqueness, looking for those things that neatly express the idiosyncrasy of our peculiar personalities. And yet, our uniqueness (at least as consumers) is mostly a sham. Somehow, we all end up in the same place, chasing the same trends while drinking the same drink while staring at the same app on the same phone.

I was reminded of this contradiction while reading a new paper by two excellent social scientists, Jonah Berger and Baba Shiv. The researchers were interested in our so-called "drive for distinctiveness," that urge we all feel to *not* be like everyone else. But how real is this drive? Is it as tangible and powerful as those other rewards we seek, such as food, sex and love?

To answer these questions, Berger and Shiv played a variety of tricks on undergraduates. In one experiment, for instance, they primed subjects to think of distinctiveness — they had to write an essay "about a time they felt extremely distinctive ... separate and different from the people around you" — before asking the students a bunch of seemingly unrelated questions about food. It turned out that people primed to think of distinctiveness were willing to walk a lot further to get their favorite snack. They were also willing to pay about 70 percent more for it.

What does this data teach us about the drive for distinctiveness? Berger and Shiv argue that it reveals the primal component of the drive, since it's long been known that our other basic drives exhibit a "spillover" effect. When people are exposed to erotic pictures, for instance, they express an increased desire for money. Showing people a tasty beverage makes them more interested in seeing a romantic movie, while actually

consuming calories makes us less interested in sex, and so on. The point is that our most essential desires are weirdly intertwined, which is why it's interesting that making people think about distinctiveness has such a big impact on how badly they crave food.

Another experiment asked 90 male undergrads to complete a survey on the attractiveness of various swimsuit models. (This was the arousing condition. The control condition rated the attractiveness of various pets.) Berger and Shiv then quizzed the students about how interested they were in purchasing items of varying levels of distinctiveness. Car A, for instance, had been purchased by 30 percent of the student body, while Car B had only been purchased by 10 percent of students.

According to the data, people primed to think of sex (via swimsuit models) were much more interested in buying the most distinctive products. Interestingly, this desire for distinctiveness could be quelled by giving the aroused males a candy bar. Because our different drives are largely interchangeable, a few bites of chocolate managed to reduce the desire that had just been triggered by the arousing images. We no longer needed to be so unique.

There are some obvious marketing takeaways from this research. For one thing, it suggests that only brands selling distinctiveness — Berger and Shiv cite Gucci and BMW as examples — benefit from sex appeal. Because we are aroused, we also experience an increased desire to be different. However, mainstream brands that don't sell distinctiveness — think of Gap and Ford — may actually be hurt by sexy campaigns. (That attractive model in the Gap ad sends us straight to Urban Outfitters.) In other words, sex sells. But what it sells best is stuff that makes us feel special.

The real point of this paper, though, is that we can no longer write off the “drive for distinctiveness” as merely a habit of insecure teenagers.

Instead, it appears to be a pretty essential component of Westerners — that's why it's engaged in a deep psychological dialogue with rewards for food and sex. Of course, this won't be news to retailers. They've long catered to our desire for uniqueness, selling us mass-produced commodities that promise to express our real, authentic selves. It's not until we're standing in line waiting for a cappuccino that we realize how badly we've been played.

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