

# Playing It Safe: Susceptibility to Normative Influence and Protective Self-Presentation

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Two studies support the usefulness of susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) as a predictor of protective self-presentation—efforts to avoid undesirable or as-sailable self-presentations that may lead to disapproval. Study 1 finds that high SNI consumers are especially concerned about avoiding negative impressions in public settings. They respond more favorably to protective messages than do their low SNI counterparts, but only when the messages pertain to conspicuous benefits. Study 2 suggests that SNI is inversely related to individuals' tendencies to exaggerate similarities to their "ought" selves and their willingness to portray themselves more favorably than others. Overall, these findings suggest that high SNI consumers are averse to calling attention to themselves, especially when doing so may lead to disapproval.

Consumers' susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) is defined as the need to identify with others or enhance one's image with products and brands or the willingness to conform to others' expectations regarding purchase decisions (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). Research has found SNI to predict concerns about public appearances and efforts to gain social acceptance. For instance, high SNI consumers value conspicuous benefits more than do their low SNI counterparts (Batra, Homer, and Kahle 2001). Compared with low SNI consumers, high SNI consumers are also more easily persuaded to join their peers who support a boycott (Sen, Gurhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001).

Bearden et al. (1989) developed a 12-item measure of susceptibility to social influence based on McGuire's (1968) research on influenceability and Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) distinction between normative and informational influence. Our research focuses on the normative dimension as measured by the eight-item SNI subscale. Bearden et al. (1989) found SNI to predict concerns about others' opinions, compliance with others' expectations, and tendencies to emulate others. Batra et al. (2001) used a similar measure and found the importance of conspicuous attributes to increase with SNI. These findings suggest that SNI reflects a desire to fit in—a

concern often associated with protective self-presentation (Wolfe, Lennox, and Cutler 1986). However, despite evidence of its predictive validity, the SNI construct has received surprisingly little attention in consumer research (Batra et al. 2001). Moreover, SNI has yet to be assessed in terms of its relationship to particular self-protective styles of self-presentation.

Arkin, Lake, and Baumgardner (1986) describe acquisitive and protective self-presentation as distinct but independent self-presentation styles. The acquisitive style involves actors' efforts to gain approval or ingratiate themselves with others by presenting themselves in the most favorable light. By contrast, the protective style reflects desires to avoid losing approval or garnering disapproval. This approach involves avoiding impressions that are likely to be negatively evaluated by target audiences or making impressions that are unlikely to be challenged, disapproved, or even noticed (Arkin 1981). In this article, we examine SNI as a predictor of the protective style by presenting two studies relating SNI to different protective tactics.

## INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN PROTECTIVE SELF-PRESENTATION

Social disapproval can occur when individuals fail to convey desired impressions or when they successfully convey impressions that are undesired by their target audiences. Actors who value approval but lack confidence in their abilities to discern or enact desired impressions often protect themselves from losses of approval by avoiding undesired, contestable, or even noticeable impressions. Personality inventories that assess need for approval, especially those re-

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TABLE 1  
PRETEST 1: TEST TO IDENTIFY CONSPICUOUS PRODUCT BENEFITS

Product category	Benefit conspicuousness		Score (SD)
	High	Low	
Mouthwash*	Prevents bad breath	Prevents gingivitis	1.42 (.12)
Soap*	Prevents blemishes	Prevents dryness	.98 (.18)
Detergent*	Brightens colors	Softens fabrics	.93 (.14)
Disinfectant*	Eliminates odors	Kills germs	.49 (.21)
Toothpaste	Prevents cavities	Controls tartar	.36 (.19)
Medicine*	Relieves runny noses	Relieves nasal congestion	.33 (.16)

NOTE.— $N = 45$ . Scores close to zero reflect no difference in conspicuousness whereas scores close to two indicate large differences.

\*Denotes categories with significant differences between benefits ( $p < .05$ ).

flecting negative outcome expectancies, should predict one's propensity to exhibit these protective tendencies (Arkin 1981).

For several reasons, SNI appears to represent a class of measures associated with the protective style of self-presentation. First, the need to identify with others is a defining characteristic of SNI and an antecedent of protective self-presentation. People with high acceptance needs but low outcome expectancies often exhibit protective tendencies (Arkin 1981). Second, the willingness to conform to others' expectations is a defining characteristic of SNI and a protective response to potential social losses. People individuate themselves to achieve gains and conform to avoid losses (Santee and Maslach 1982). Third, specific items on the SNI scale reflect efforts to conform to expectations (e.g., "If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy") and avoid disapproval (e.g., "I rarely purchase the latest fashion styles until I am sure my friends approve of them"), thereby capturing protective tendencies. Fourth, SNI is negatively correlated with self-esteem and positively correlated with attention to social comparison information (Bearden et al. 1989). Low self-esteem (Brown, Collins, and Schmidt 1988) and attention to social comparison information (Wolfe et al. 1986) both predict protective self-presentation.

Prior theorizing on conditions conducive to normative influence suggests that SNI should predict protective tendencies only when consumption outcomes are conspicuous. According to Bourne (1957, p. 218), "the conspicuousness of a product is perhaps the most general attribute bearing on its susceptibility to reference group influence." Normative influence requires the presence of others to maintain surveillance, mediate valued rewards, or impose sanctions (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975). This logic suggests that consumption outcomes that are not visible to others should be accompanied by minimal self-presentational concerns or social pressures. In other words, SNI should not predict self-protection when there is no audience from which there is a need to be protected. We conducted an advertising claims experiment to test this argument and the following hypotheses:

**H1a:** High SNI participants should evaluate protective

messages about conspicuous benefits more favorably than should their low SNI counterparts.

**H1b:** The effect of SNI on evaluations of protective messages about conspicuous benefits should be greater than its effects on protective messages about inconspicuous benefits or acquisitive messages about either conspicuous or inconspicuous benefits.

## STUDY 1

We conducted an advertising claims experiment with a 2 (SNI: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (benefit conspicuousness: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (message framing: protective vs. acquisitive)  $\times$  2 (product category: mouthwash vs. soap) design. We measured SNI by using Bearden et al.'s (1989) eight-item scale and dichotomized SNI by a median split. Benefit conspicuousness and message framing were between-subjects factors manipulated with stimuli developed and tested on respondents who were not included in the actual experiment. Product category was a within-subjects replicate factor also determined through pretesting.

### Stimulus Development and Testing

In order to identify product-benefit combinations for the experiment, we asked 45 undergraduate students to use a five-point scale to rate the relative visibility of benefits for six product categories. Based on the pretest results reported in table 1, we selected high and low conspicuousness benefits for the mouthwash and soap product categories.

We developed protective (negatively framed) and acquisitive (positively framed) claims for the chosen product-benefit combinations and conducted a second pretest to assess their equivalence at each level of conspicuousness. Ninety pretest participants rated the noticeability of four pairs of benefits on a seven-point scale. The means reported in table 2 show that (1) the conspicuous mouthwash benefits were equally noticeable and more noticeable than the inconspicuous benefits ( $p < .01$ ), (2) the acquisitive framing yielded a more noticeable benefit than did the protective

**TABLE 2**  
 PRETEST 2: MEAN (SD) NOTICEABILITY RATINGS OF CLAIMS BY FRAME, LEVEL OF CONSPICUOUSNESS, AND PRODUCT CATEGORY

	Framing	
	Protective	Acquisitive
Mouthwash:		
High conspicuousness	Prevents bad breath 5.49 <sup>a</sup> (1.52)	Freshens your breath 5.62 <sup>a</sup> (1.36)
Low conspicuousness	Prevents gingivitis 2.40 <sup>b</sup> (1.48)	Causes healthy gums 3.12 <sup>c</sup> (1.59)
Soap:		
High conspicuousness	Prevents blemishes 5.03 <sup>d</sup> (1.65)	Cleanses your skin 4.36 <sup>e</sup> (1.70)
Low conspicuousness	Prevents dry skin 4.31 <sup>e</sup> (1.56)	Moisturizes your skin 4.16 <sup>e</sup> (1.50)

NOTE.—*N* = 90. Scores range from 1 (not very noticeable) to 7 (extremely noticeable). Comparisons across product categories are not a focus of this analysis. The difference between claims marked with superscript a is not statistically significant. Each claim marked by superscript c is significantly greater than those marked superscript b. Each claim marked by superscript a is significantly greater than claims marked superscript c. This score marked by superscript d is significantly greater than each of the three claims marked by superscript e. The difference between the three claims marked with superscript e is not statistically significant.

framing for the inconspicuous mouthwash benefit ( $p < .01$ ), (3) the protective framing yielded a more noticeable benefit than did its acquisitive counterpart for the conspicuous soap benefit ( $p < .01$ ), and (4) the acquisitive framing of the conspicuous soap benefit did not yield a more visible benefit than did either inconspicuous claim.

The significant difference between the inconspicuous mouthwash claims is inconsequential to our experiment. However, the fact that the acquisitive claim for the conspicuous soap benefit differs significantly from its protective counterpart, but not from either inconspicuous claim, biases our test of hypothesis 1b in favor of supporting the hypothesis. We corrected this problem in the actual experiment by supplementing each claim with subcaptions providing protectively worded evidence to substantiate the claim. For instance, we supplemented the acquisitive and preventive claims for the conspicuous soap benefit with the subcaption “clinically proven to purify skin by eliminating imperfections and discolorations.”

**Procedures**

One hundred and forty undergraduate students participated in a 1-hr. session involving four ostensibly unrelated tasks. The first task was a personality questionnaire containing the eight-item SNI scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and other individual difference measures. We dichotomized SNI for our analysis ( $M_{low} = 15.62$ ,  $M_{high} = 31.34$ ;  $t_{138} = 17.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The second and third tasks were unrelated studies of consumer choice and attitudes, respectively. The final task, the advertising claims experiment, required participants to evaluate two advertising claims.

The advertising claims experiment was a self-paced task.

Research participants were randomly assigned to conspicuousness and framing conditions and instructed to evaluate claims about two products (order was rotated). They used a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to indicate their agreement with four statements about each claim. They evaluated each claim for its appeal, importance, persuasiveness, and likelihood of success in the marketplace. Responses to these items were combined to form our dependent measure ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Results and Discussion**

We used planned contrasts to test the hypothesized effects of SNI on evaluations of the chosen claims. We predicted that the effect of SNI on evaluations of protective messages about conspicuous benefits would be positive (hypothesis 1a) and greater (i.e., more positive) than its effects on evaluations of protective messages about inconspicuous benefits, acquisitive messages about conspicuous benefits, or acquisitive messages about inconspicuous benefits (hypothesis 1b).

Our analysis supports our hypothesis regarding the conditions under which SNI predicts responsiveness to protective messages. As expected, high SNI participants responded more favorably to protective messages pertaining to conspicuous benefits than did their low SNI counterparts ( $F(1, 132) = 7.39$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, this effect was greater than the average effect of SNI across the three remaining experimental conditions ( $F(1, 132) = 7.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), which were all statistically insignificant ( $F$ 's  $< 1$ ). Table 3 reports means, standard deviations, and cell sizes across experimental conditions (broken out by product replicate). The effects of product replicate were not significant.

We found that high SNI participants are especially re-

**TABLE 3**  
STUDY 1: MEAN (SD) EVALUATIONS ACROSS EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

	Stimulus replicate			
	Mouthwash		Soap	
	High SNI	Low SNI	High SNI	Low SNI
Protective frame:				
High conspicuousness	4.95 (.92) <i>n</i> = 20	3.98 (1.11) <i>n</i> = 15	4.89 (.99) <i>n</i> = 20	4.27 (.95) <i>n</i> = 15
Low conspicuousness	4.52 (1.01) <i>n</i> = 21	4.84 (.68) <i>n</i> = 14	4.57 (.98) <i>n</i> = 21	4.82 (1.00) <i>n</i> = 14
Acquisitive frame:				
High conspicuousness	4.30 (.96) <i>n</i> = 16	4.13 (1.13) <i>n</i> = 19	4.13 (1.29) <i>n</i> = 16	3.47 (1.38) <i>n</i> = 19
Low conspicuousness	4.11 (1.04) <i>n</i> = 14	4.42 (1.17) <i>n</i> = 21	3.96 (1.20) <i>n</i> = 14	4.56 (1.14) <i>n</i> = 21

NOTE.—SNI = susceptibility to normative influence; data in the table are based on a median split on SNI.

sponsive to messages that emphasize avoiding undesirable outcomes that are visible to others, thereby providing evidence of a link between SNI and protective self-presentation. Researchers (e.g., Roth, Snyder, and Pace 1986) occasionally overlook the fact that avoiding negative characterizations of themselves is not the only means by which social actors protect themselves from disapproval. Individuals also protect themselves by making innocuous self-presentations that are unlikely to be challenged or noticed (Arkin 1981). We obtain additional support for the relationship between influenceability and self-protection by conducting a correlational study that relates SNI to other protective responses.

## STUDY 2

### Procedures

In order to examine SNI as a predictor of tendencies to avoid indefensible or noticeable impressions, we conducted a correlational study relating SNI to a 20-item Self-Presentation Scale (SPS) developed by Roth et al. (1986). The SPS measures respondents' tendencies to make unrealistically favorable self-portrayals by attributing positive but unlikely traits to themselves (attributive tactics) or denying negative traits that probably apply to them (repudiative tactics). Examples of attributive items include "I always help people who feel lonely" and "I always enjoy accepting new responsibilities." Examples of repudiative items include "I sometimes think about attacking others physically" and "In my private thoughts, I laugh at the incompetencies of others."

After completing the SNI scale, respondents completed the SPS using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to indicate their agreement with each item. For our analysis, we used a reverse scoring procedure on the repudiative items to make higher scores reflect a greater tendency to unrealistically deny statements that are probably true. To aid interpretation, we averaged responses across items so that composite scores and scores

for each dimension are reported on a familiar seven-point scale. Respondents with high composite scores are viewed as practicing deceptive self-presentation by overstating their tendencies to behave as their "ought" selves—the selves they think they ought to be (Higgins 1987). High scores on a particular dimension reflect use of the corresponding tactic to make deceptive self-portrayals.

After respondents indicated their self-perceptions on the SPS, they indicated their perceptions of how each SPS item applies to other people. We averaged the item-by-item differences between their self-perceptions and their perceptions of others in order to ascertain their willingness to portray themselves as better than others. We used this other-adjusted measure as an indicator of respondents' efforts to make innocuous self-presentations (i.e., undifferentiated ones), and we employed the original measure as an indicator of their tendencies to make indefensible self-presentations (i.e., unrealistic ones). The two measures enable us to test hypotheses about SNI as a predictor of the following protective tendencies:

- H2a:** As SNI increases, respondents are less likely to make self-presentations that exaggerate their proximity to their ought selves.
- H2b:** As SNI increases, respondents are less likely to make self-presentations that differentiate themselves favorably from others.

### Results and Discussion

The correlations reported in table 4 support the hypothesized relationships between SNI and propensity to make unrealistic (hypothesis 2a) or distinctive (hypothesis 2b) self-presentations. We found SNI to be negatively correlated with respondents' composite scores ( $r = -.53, p < .01$ ) and with their scores on the repudiative dimension of the unadjusted SPS scale ( $r = -.52, p < .01$ ). As consumers became more easily influenced, they were less likely to ex-

**TABLE 4**  
STUDY 2: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SNI AND SPS MEASURES

SPS measure	Mean	SD	Alpha	Correlation with SNI	
				Attenuated	Corrected
Composite score:					
Unadjusted	4.24	.50	.57	-.38*	-.53*
Other-adjusted	.90	.52	.52	-.43*	-.62*
Attributive dimension:					
Unadjusted	4.78	.67	.65	-.05	-.07
Other-adjusted score	1.13	.77	.54	-.25*	-.35*
Repudiative dimension:					
Unadjusted	3.69	.84	.69	-.41*	-.52*
Other-adjusted score	.67	.69	.55	-.38*	-.53*

NOTE.—SNI = susceptibility to normative influence; SPS = self-presentation scale; SNI exhibited high reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 24.22$ ,  $SD = 8.78$ ). However, we report corrected correlations to compensate for the low reliabilities of SPS measures.

\*Significant at  $p < .05$ .

aggrate their similarity to their ought selves, especially by denying negative traits that probably apply to them. This finding supports hypothesis 2a and the reluctance of influenceable consumers to present themselves in a manner that is likely to be challenged by others.

We also found SNI to be negatively correlated with respondents' composite scores ( $r = -.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ), their scores on the repudiative dimension ( $r = -.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and their scores on the attributive dimension ( $r = -.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ) of the other-adjusted SPS measure. Greater influenceability was associated with greater reluctance to differentiate oneself favorably from others by repudiating negative traits or making positive self-attributions. This finding supports hypothesis 2b and the notion that SNI reflects a reluctance to stand out from the crowd, thereby offering further evidence of a link between influenceability and protective tendencies.

The correlations between SNI and the SPS measures are similar to correlations that Roth, Harris, and Snyder (1988) found between social anxiety and the SPS. In their study, social anxiety was inversely related to the total score ( $r = -.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), unrelated to the attributive dimension ( $r = -.13$ , NS), and inversely related to the repudiative dimension ( $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These coefficients are comparable to the ones we observed between SNI and the unadjusted SPS measures before correcting for attenuation. Thus, we found SNI to behave like a well-accepted predictor of self-protection. Interestingly, both measures were negatively correlated with denials of negative traits, a tactic that, on the surface, appears to reflect protective tendencies. However, the correspondence between the two self-presentation styles and two self-presentation tactics is more complex than it appears and needs clarification in future research (Roth et al. 1988).

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

This article examined the relationship between influenceability (as measured by the SNI scale) and self-presentation

style. Findings from an experiment and a correlational study suggest that SNI reflects a protective style of self-presentation characterized by efforts to avoid self-presentations that are likely to be disapproved, challenged, or even noticed by others. Findings from the experiment show high SNI to be associated with preferences for products that facilitate self-protection by preventing negative outcomes that are noticeable to others. Findings from the correlational study show that SNI is inversely related to tendencies to make contestable or noticeable self-presentations that may result in social disapproval or losses of approval. Both studies provide convergent evidence that protective tendencies are a function of high SNI.

Our research contributes to a better understanding of influenceable consumers, especially those who are susceptible to normative (as opposed to informational) influence. Study 1 replicates previous findings that conspicuous attributes matter to high SNI consumers. Batra et al. (2001) found that as SNI increases, consumers place greater emphasis on highly visible attributes like style and reputation as opposed to less visible attributes like fit and care when evaluating conspicuous products like clothing. We build on those findings in two ways. First, we find that effects of conspicuousness obtain among high SNI consumers even when the products themselves are consumed in private settings, as long as the products offer benefits that are publicly observable. Second, we find that efforts to avoid socially visible negative outcomes are greater differentiators between high and low SNI subjects than are efforts to achieve noticeable positive outcomes. We interpret these findings as evidence that highly influenceable consumers are more concerned about approval in general, and avoiding losses of approval in particular, than are their less influenceable counterparts.

Our research also contributes to knowledge on individual differences in two ways. First, we identified SNI as a predictor of various protective self-presentation tactics, thereby extending research on individual difference predictors of self-presentation style (e.g., Arkin et al. 1986; Wolfe et al. 1986; Wood et al. 1994). Second, we used a novel theoretical perspective to examine an underutilized individual difference variable, thereby facilitating construct validation that ideally involves consistency across studies, researchers, and theoretical perspectives (Carmines and Zeller 1979).

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