

DOES CONSUMER CONFORMITY AFFECT CONSUMER ATTITUDE - A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF METRO AND NON-METRO CITIES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to find out the components of consumer conformity through review of literature and then develop a simple and precise model of consumer conformity. Further, this paper measures the impact of brand equity on consumer attitude and undertakes comparative study for understanding the same in metro and non metro customers in India. This study is useful because in many ways Metro and non-metro customers are different in their consumer behaviour. Linear regression and z-test was used to measure the impact of these attributes on consumer attitude and difference in metro and non-metro customers respectively.

The paper identifies ten different antecedents of consumer conformity through extensive review of literature and then develops a simple model of brand equity for the study. Furthermore, consumer conformity in formation of positive consumer attitude is found high in metro cities as compared to that in non-metro cities. Regression result between consumer attitude and consumer conformity clearly explain that the higher level of consumer conformity provides higher level of positive consumer attitude among customers of both the metro and non-metro cities. Marketers have to understand the various components of consumer conformity in order to enjoy the substantial competitive and economic advantages.

Keywords: Consumer Attitude, Interpersonal Influence, Social Comparison, WOM

1. INTRODUCTION

A human being is a social being so commonly all the actions performed by a human being are to get social satisfaction whether it is generated through conscious or unconscious mind. People require to be acknowledged in social situations can be a powerful way for marketers to sell products. For living in a society individuals generally perform actions which may not go against the group. The value of conformity emphasizes self-restraint in everyday interactions, manifested in such qualities as obedience, self-discipline, politeness, and honoring parents and elders (Schwartz, 1992).

Conformity in general is defined as the tendency of group members to establish a group norm and the tendency of individuals to comply

with the respective norm (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). This is clear in the definition that inclination towards group norm or social norm comprised conformity. Consumer conformity is defined as compliance with group norms, susceptibility to group influence, and behavioural changes in consumption behaviour due to a reference group (Lascu and Zinkhan, 1999). In simple words, consumer conformity may be defined as consumer actions or behavior at the time of purchasing and consuming in correspondence with socially accepted standards. There are broadly two levels of conformity in the society higher level of conformity and lower level of conformity. People with a high level of conformity value tend to make decisions that conform to the expectations of their close social environment, while those with a low level of conformity value are likely to focus more on their own personal needs and care less about others' expectations (Bearden et al., 1989). Some researchers connect this type of conformity in terms of gathering information for the adoption of a new product. In a consumption context, conformity is associated with consumers' information acquisition (Rogers, 1995). In terms of new product adoption the two different levels of consumer in context of

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conformity display distinct behavior. High conformity consumers are more preventive in their information inflow and rely more on personal sources such as friends and neighbors for product information and purchase advice in order to conform to the expectations from one's social environment (Clark and Staunton, 1994). As such, consumers with a more approving attitude towards personal advice are likely to be less innovative and adopt fewer new products. However individuals having low level of consumer conformity have larger belief in all major sources. This study tries to find out the factors affecting consumer conformity, its impact on consumer attitude and comparative study of understanding the same in metro and non metro customers. Metro and non-metro customers are different in their consumer behaviour in many ways. Joshi and Mishra (2011) find that awareness level of the respondents is higher in the metros as compared to the non-metros in India. Datt & Sundharam (1990) explain a similar phenomenon which justifies the results of this study. They explain that one of the serious problems facing India's economy is the sharp and growing regional imbalances among India's metro and non-metro regions in terms of per capita income, poverty, infrastructure and socio-economic development.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There are some researchers who not only focus on level but also made certain dimensions of consumer conformity. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) established two distinct dimensions of consumer conformity: normative and informational. Normative consumer conformity refers to the conforming of behavior to be in line with the perceived expectations of other consumers, for example, purchasing of those products in which a consumer wants to fit in with his or her own social group. Informational consumer conformity involves conforming to others' purchase beliefs and decisions because of their knowledge and expertise. In this type of consumer conformity, consumers don't want to fit in but want to justify their purchasing decision. Park and Feinberg (2010) find that both dimensions of conformity are distinct and have separate antecedents. Normative consumer conformity is influenced by internal consumer characteristics, whereas informational consumer

conformity is related to external virtual community characteristics. In terms of understanding how consumer used the information, Henry (2001) said that learning drawn from our understanding of human need for intimate social interaction, group acceptance and conformity to group norms will be employed to question the viability of proposals such as future growth of virtual communities and significant expansion in the range of media programming content.

2.1 Consumer Conformity as an antecedent of Consumer Attitude

A substantial body of research indicated that consumer conformity had a significant impact on consumer decision making process. Venkatesan (1966) is the early contributor in this field. He finds the normative social influences on consumer attitude. Further research suggests that the informational aspect of social influence may also have influences on purchasing behaviour (Mangold et al., 1999). A consumer needs information to evaluate options in decision making (Solomon, 1994). When consumers are exposed to information in a community, they evaluate and use it. In decision making, when need information, they will find new information or use the information that has been stored.

2.2 Consumer Conformity: An exploration through literature

It is very important to identify factors on which consumer conformity is dependent. Although a great deal has been written about consumer conformity, still there is no clear understanding of how the factors purported to be associated with it contribute to its development.

On the basis of review of literature we have found following factors on which organizational commitment of employees is reliant.

It is right to say that our success is dependent on others because formal authority is not a variable of success but willing cooperation of others is the important tool for success. Interpersonal Influence arises through interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication may be defined as "communication that takes place between two persons who have established relationship; the people are in some way 'connected'" (DeVito, J. A., 2004). Thus Interpersonal Influence is to control the

behavior of others through interpersonal communication. The function of interpersonal processes is reliant upon the individual's attending to and acting upon the beliefs, thoughts, and expectations of others. The influence that others have on individual decisions is often due to the Individualistic apprehension or considering about reactions to his/her behavior. Interpersonal influence in consumer behavior is moderated by the extent of consumer sensitivity to social comparison information concerning product purchase and usage behavior (Calder and Burnkrant 1977).

At the time of studying consumer behavior, many researchers faced problem in the explication of conditions under which normative influences are likely to add considerably to the formation of behavioral intentions. As Miniard and Cohen (1983) have pointed out, to the extent consumers' behavior is influenced by concerns over what others might think of them or how others might act towards them as a function of their product choice and usage, the identification and separation of normative from personal reasons for preferring a product would appear to be quite useful. It is clear from the statement that people are influenced by the social comparison and the selection of goods and services are highly affected by this. On the same statement Bearden and Rose (1990) intend that sensitivity to social comparison information, motivated by such factors as a fear of negative social evaluation, is one such moderating variable. Lennox and Wolfe (1984) identified "attention-to-social-comparison-information", as a factor of consumer conformity.

There is mixed evidence in the literature about the relationship between public self consciousness and conformity in consumer setting. Public self-consciousness arises as a perceptual dimension of social sensitivity but, perhaps, not a motivational one, at least for men. It seems that individuals high in public self-consciousness are aware that people around them form impressions of them based on their product choice and usage behavior. However, it is unclear whether they are also motivated to act in a manner likely to elicit particular types of attributions or reactions.

The important psychological factor related to the attention of individuals to social comparison information is public self-consciousness. Fenigstein

et al. (1975) define public self-consciousness as the consistent tendency of persons to direct their attention towards themselves as social objects. It is clear that recognition is the prominent dimension of public self-consciousness. Fenigstein et al. (1975) evaluate public self-consciousness and envisaged that "people who are high in public self-consciousness should be more sensitive to the type of impression called for in social situations and more inclined to act in accord with these impressions than people who are low in public self-consciousness." However, Burnkrant and Page (1982) concluded from their data that persons high in public self consciousness "are not more inclined to act in accord with the reward contingencies inherent in social situations." Contrary to this conclusion, Miller and Cox (1982) found that women who scored higher on the public self-consciousness level tended to use more makeup than those with a lower score. Solomon and Schopler (1982) found that females, but not males, exhibited a significant correlation between their attitudes toward conformity in fashion and their public self-consciousness.

A value is a belief, a mission, or a philosophy that is meaningful. Every individual has his/her own set of values known as personal values. A number of studies have pointed to differences in hierarchical or status-oriented values because these are the certain variables of value building in individuals. Your personal values may change as per your status, Shavitt et al. (2006). The hierarchical nature of U.S. society rewards those who set goals and achieve them, whereas the same orientation is frowned upon in Denmark's society.

Different societies possess different levels of individualism and collectivism. Triandis & Gelfand (1998) proposed that some societies are *horizontal* (valuing equality) whereas others are *vertical* (emphasizing hierarchy). Horizontal individualism measures in terms of imparting equal values and the societies which possess the characteristics of status in value imparting come under vertical individualism. This distinction resembles the power distance continuum at the national level (Hofstede, 2001). The horizontal/vertical difference is also abstractly related to personal values such as power, achievement, self-direction, and conformity (e.g., Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). Shavitt et al. (2006)

established that American or British individualism differs from Swedish or Danish individualism in much the same way that Korean or Japanese collectivism differs from the collectivism of the Israeli kibbutz. Below is the classification of the various motives on the basis of Horizontal and Vertical differences.

making is a type of problem-solving activity; thus, the consumer needs information to evaluate options (Solomon, 1994). There are various sources through which consumers try to retrieve information. It may be classified into two broader groups: sources that are paid for this purpose and nonpaid non interest kind of source. The credibility of the source

Table 1: Motives Characterizing Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism

	<i>Horizontal</i> (Self at the Same Level as Others)	<i>Vertical</i> (Self in a Hierarchy Relative to Others)
Individualism (independent self)	Being distinct and separate from others Being self-directed, self-reliant Modesty, not conspicuousness Expressing uniqueness	Improving individual status via competition Seeking achievement, power, prestige Standing out Display of success, status
Collectivism (interdependent self)	Maintaining benevolent relationships Common goals with others Social appropriateness Sociability Cooperation	Maintaining and protecting in-group status Deference to authorities and to in-groups Conformity Harmony

*(Source: Shavitt et al. 2006)

In terms of consumer conformity Kim and Markus (1999) explain conformity in product choice may be a leaning to vertical

collectivism cultures. Lower levels of conformity may be observed in horizontal cultural contexts, which emphasize sociability but not deference or hierarchy (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

A sizeable body of research indicated that word-of-mouth (WOM) had a significant impact on consumer decision making process. WOM is defined as “the informal communication directed at other consumers about ownership and characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987). WOM is one of the biggest tools in the hand of the consumer in terms of future purchasing of the reference group. Blodgett et al. (1997) claim that WOM was often regarded as related to consumers’ satisfaction or dissatisfaction with previous purchasing experience. Consumers engage in WOM to satisfy their personal information needs (Bloch et al., 1986). This clearly explains that WOM is a tool in the hands of the consumer to get information related to any product and service. Consumer decision

becomes high when there is no benefit. When consumers are exposed to information in a community, they evaluate, use, and store the information, and if they need information, they will find new information or use the information that has been stored. Information about consumer decisions comes from three sources: the seller, other consumers, and other neutral sources (Markin, 1974).

Expanding globalization may increase the number of challenges and opportunities in marketing. The basic advantage is that the consumers get exposed to a plethora of domestic and foreign products and brands, among which choices have to be made. Understanding the bases on which they decide between those alternatives poses another strategic challenge for marketing management. By this there is the arousal of new challenge that preference among consumers in general for the products of countries in the advanced economies over those originating in less developed countries (Jaffe and Martinez, 1995). Most recently, Brown and O’Cass (2006) found that “consumer ethnocentrism” had negatively affected Australian consumers’ willingness to buy wine

produced elsewhere. This clearly shows the consumer animosity, Consumer animosity refers to a study of the impact of anger and negative attitudes between nations or regions upon consumer trends and habits. The positive form may be distinguished as Ethnocentrism. An ethnocentric attitude is one that would consider purchasing products from a foreign nation immoral and unpatriotic.

Jung et al. (2002) and Ang et al. (2004) have identified two types of animosity. "Personal stable animosity" is rooted in individuals' personal

and places, is controlled by the consumption of commercial products. It is also a structure in which the diffusion of existing cultural values, norms and customary ways of doing things from generation to generation "is largely understood to be carried out through the exercise of free personal choice in the private sphere of everyday life." Consumer culture denotes an economy in which value has been divorced from the material satisfaction of wants and the sign value of goods takes precedence (Baudrillard, 1998). In consumer culture predispositions toward social emulation, matching, and imitation expressed through marketplace

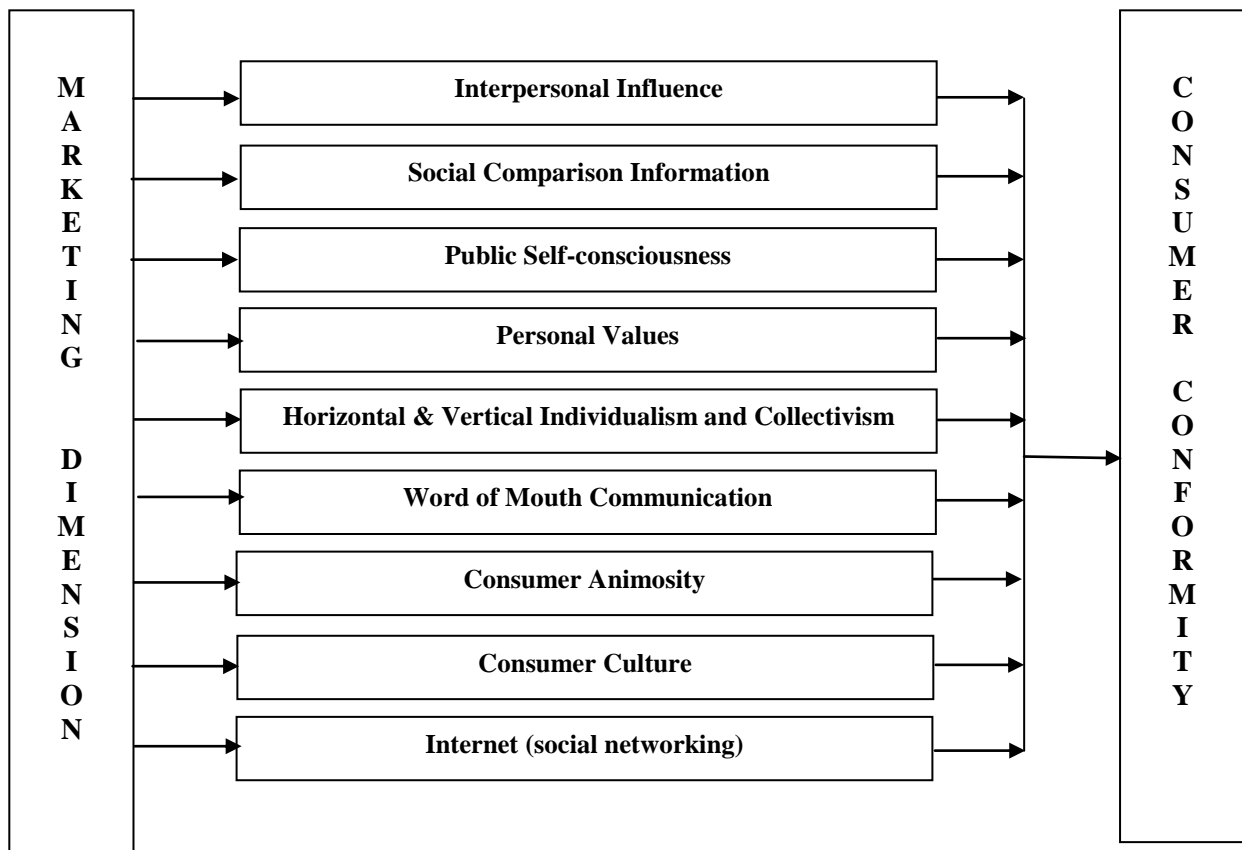


Figure 1: Proposed model of consumer conformity to test the difference between Metro and Non-metro cities.

experiences. In contrast, "Personal situational animosities", are temporary negative sentiments caused by specific current circumstances. This prejudiced tendency is appropriately summed up by Klein et al. (1998) as "consumer animosity", a term which carries a somewhat more outward-directed and active implication of resulting action on the consumer's part than does the inward-looking and abstract notion of "ethnocentrism".

Consumer culture is an arrangement in which consumption, a set of behaviors found in all times

choices are accompanied by a penchant for differentiation, individuality, and distinction also expressed through marketplace choices. These motives are spread in terms of products and services. These dynamics are often thought to have been generated by the purposeful social engineering of marketers (Williams, 1982), and to have spread from roots in the fashion industry into all parts of social life (Frisby & Featherstone, 1998).

The internet has unlocked new windows for establishing new forms of conforming influences.

With the emergence of internet and worldwide acceptance, consumers are now able to communicate on a global scale and share information in a way that was not previously possible. Consumers now have more interaction on internet. For example, a survey by Nielsen and NetRatings (Bausch and Han, 2006) reported that social networking websites showed 47 percent growth year over year. About 45 percent of internet users are social networking users (Bausch and Han, 2006). Online chatting, forums, blogs, online games, and instant messaging are new forms of communities in which consumers can share and communicate common interests and common goals, and influence others.

This new method of communication evolves the new virtual community. This evolution may open a new dimension in marketing. According to Inside Research (2007), network research spending was forecasted to be \$69 million in 2008 as compared to \$40 million from the previous year. It clearly shows the future potential of this market so the marketers need to reshape the nature and scope of consumer conformity.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is conducted using a theoretical model to measure consumer conformity. Methodology can be broadly explained by understanding theoretical model, framing hypotheses; sample and sample profile; tool and design of the study. A detailed description of all these are as follows:

3.1 Theoretical Model of Consumer Conformity

For conducting any research it is very important to conceptualize the thought. For the present study, a model of consumer conformity is developed. On the basis of extensive literature survey researchers have identified nine variables which have a straight impact on consumer conformity. Literature reveals that these nine variables are antecedents of consumer conformity. Figure-1 exhibits this proposed model of measuring Consumer conformity.

3.2 Research Question and Hypotheses

In the light of existing literature, the following research questions are framed:

1. There exists a different degree of understanding towards consumer conformity in metro and non-metro cities.

2. Consumer conformity enhances the consumer attitude level in both metro and non-metro cities.

Difference in consumer conformity was measured through measuring the summated difference in metro and non-metro cities. For measuring the statistical significant differences, main hypothesis was constructed. In addition to this, another two hypotheses were constructed to measure the linear impact of consumer conformity on consumer attitude level of metro consumers and non-metro consumers respectively. These three hypotheses are as follows:

H₁: There is a significant difference in the degree of consumer conformity in metro and non-metro cities.

H₂: Consumer conformity has significant linear impact on consumer attitude of metro city.

H₃: Consumer conformity has significant linear impact on consumer attitude of non-metro city.

3.3 Sample and sample profile

Subject of the present study are the consumer who visit to various shops and malls in metro and non metro cities. Sample drawn for metro city constitutes the consumers of National Capital Region of India i.e. New Delhi and sample drawn for non-metro city non-metro city constitutes the consumers of Gwalior and Mathura region of India. For sampling, Convenient Sampling technique is used. Individual respondent was the sampling element.

Subjects of the present study are selected from the various stores and malls of metro and non-metro cities. Total 250 subjects are randomly selected from each metro and non-metro city and will be given the same questionnaire, in which, respondents indicated their opinion about marketing dimension in both the cities (i.e. metro and non-metro city).

3.4 Tool

It has already been discussed that the present study is focused on the measurement of degree of difference in consumer conformity of a metro and

non-metro consumers. Consumer conformity is measured through nine independent variables. These ten variables are collected through literature. Each variable is measured using a five point rating scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' with 'neither agree nor disagree' as the middle point. Internal consistency of the scale is checked and Cronbach's alpha is found to be 0.87. Based on the literature, each question in the questionnaire is constructed.

For checking the validity of the scale we applied content validity technique. We systematically evaluated how well the content of a scale represents the measurement test at hand. Due to the subjective nature of this technique we also used a more sophisticated technique referred to as criterion validity.

For measuring the difference between means of metro and non-metro consumers, z-test for two populations is employed. In addition, for measuring the linear impact of consumer conformity on consumer attitude in metro and non-metro cities, simple regression technique is employed.

4. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

Data analysis is done using MS Excel software. Analysis is done using three steps: z-test for comparing means; regression for measuring linear impact of consumer conformity on consumer attitude in metro and non-metro city. Z-test result and regression results are presented from table-2 to table-4. Following section focuses on these 3 tables and their statistical interpretation:

Table 2: z-test for comparing two means (Consumer Conformity) in Metro and Non-metro cities

	<i>Consumer Conformity (Metro city)</i>	<i>Consumer Conformity (Non-metro city)</i>
Mean	34.512	33.22
Known Variance	3.9858	9.2
Observations	250	250
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Z	5.625735065	
P(Z<=z) two-tail	1.8472E-08	
z Critical two-tail	1.959963985	

Table 3 (b): ANOVA table for Consumer Attitude and Consumer Conformity in Metro city

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	1	973.6240944	973.6240944	12816.34741	1.6809E-215
Residual	248	18.83990561	0.075967361		
Total	249	992.464			

Table 3 (c): t - value and p - value for the regression result between Consumer Attitude and Consumer Conformity (CC) in Metro city

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Intercept	0.427572724	0.30157864	1.417781835	0.157509685
CC	9.874964444	0.08722749	113.2093079	1.6809E-215

For finding out the significant difference in means of metro and non-metro city in terms of consumer conformity z-test is applied. Computed z value is coming as **5.63** which falls in the rejection region (at 5% level of significance). This indicates rejection of null hypothesis and acceptance of alternative hypothesis. Hence, null hypothesis of no difference is rejected and alternative hypothesis of significant difference is accepted. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between degrees of consumer conformity (at 95% confidence level) between metro and non-metro cities. Sample result clearly exhibits that mean of metro city is higher than that of non-metro city. Hence, it can be significantly concluded that consumer conformity in metro city are clearly better

(mean=38.84) than non-metro city (mean=33.52).

Table 3 (a) exhibits regression statistics for Consumer Attitude and Consumer Conformity in Metro city. R² value is coming as 98.1% which is an indication of strong predictor model. Standard error is relatively low. Table 3 (b) shows that F-value is significant which exhibits overall significance of regression model. Table 3 (c) exhibits *t - value* and *p - value* for testing the slope of the regression model. Significant *p - value* corresponding to *t - value* is an indication of linear relationship between dependent (consumer attitude) and independent variable (Consumer Conformity) in metro city.

Table 4: Regression Results between Consumer Attitude (Non-metro city) and Consumer Conformity (Non-metro city)

Table 4 (a): Regression Statistics for Consumer Attitude and Consumer Conformity in Non-metro city

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.978184592
R Square	0.956845096
Adjusted R Square	0.956671084
Standard Error	0.6316577
Observations	250

Table 4 (b): ANOVA table for Consumer Attitude and Consumer Conformity in Non-metro city

	Df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	1	2193.95012	2193.95012	5498.739682	2.8676E-171
Residual	248	98.94987966	0.39899145		
Total	249	2292.9			

Table 4 (c): *t - value* and *p - value* for the regression result between Consumer Attitude and Consumer Conformity (CC) in Non-metro city

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	-0.17924249	0.452175124	-0.39640061	0.692150376
CC	10.03462399	0.135322348	74.15348732	2.8676E-171

Table 4 (a) exhibits regression statistics for Consumer Attitude and Consumer Conformity in Non-metro city. R² value is coming as 95.7% which is an indication of strong predictor model. Standard error is relatively low. Table 4 (b) shows that F-value is significant which exhibits overall significance of regression model. Table 4 (c) exhibits *t - value* and *p - value* for testing the slope of the regression model. Significant *p - value* corresponding to *t - value* is an indication of linear relationship between dependent (consumer attitude) and independent variable (Consumer Conformity) in non-metro city.

5. DISCUSSION

The main focus of this study is to identify consumer conformity in general and to explore the degree of difference in metro region and non-metro region. Consumers of these two regions are not same; marketers have to understand this difference and to take competitive advantage and long term sustainability, they have to formulate policies and programs for these two regions differently. This study provides them a conceptual model in order to formulate their policies.

It is clearly evident from Table 2 that consumer conformity or compliance with group norms or susceptibility to group influence for general buying decision score is high for metro city as compared to non-metro city. The reason can be explained as the metro customers have high level of conformity value they tend to make decisions that conform to the expectations of their close social environment as compared to the non-metro customers. Another reason may be the metro people have more impact of interpersonal influence, social comparison and self-consciousness. Miniard and Cohen (1983) have also pointed out the same and explain that the consumers' behavior is influenced by concerns over what others might think of them or how others might act toward them as a function of their product choice and usage. The identification and separation of normative from personal reasons for preferring a product would appear to be quite useful. Marketers in order to affect consumer attitude through consumer conformity have to focus over interpersonal influence, social

comparison influence, public self consciousness, social values, degree of individualism and collectiveness, word of mouth communication, degree of consumer animosity, culture and effective use of internet.

Table 3 (a), 3 (b), 3 (c) and Table 4 (a), 4 (b), 4 (c) exhibits the result of regression (linear) between consumer attitude and consumer conformity for metro and non-metro cities. Regression is performed by taking all ten variables as independent variables and consumer attitude as dependent variable. Regression results between consumer attitude and consumer conformity clearly explain that the higher level of consumer conformity provide higher level of positive consumer attitude among customers of both the metro and non-metro cities. Consumer conformity is undoubtedly a requirement of consumer attitude towards buying decision.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Though we have taken all possible steps to provide the findings in a holistic way but as a natural phenomenon of any research present study is also not free from some limitations. A list of limitations observed on the present study is given as below:

- Due to time constraint we could not cover more metro and non-metro cities. Therefore, the results of this study are not confirmatory as such but rather they give an idea in order to formulating the marketing policies.
- Based on literature in these fields, a research framework was constructed. It is found that consumer display different attitude to the different types of product and services.
- We have explored a list of 9 antecedents. More antecedents could have been explored for a comprehensive study.
- Probability sampling is a better option to have a true representation of the population but due to limited resources it could not be used.

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