Identity Shifts and the Decision to Consume

Jane Machin, Wharton

Results from a series of focus groups conducted among women trying to conceive a baby, together with a textual analysis of home ovulation test cartons, provide insights into how identity shifts influence decisions to consume. While, gender identity is initially reinforced by avoiding consumption of home ovulation tests, later, the changing identity is reinforced by consuming such fertility aids. The results also support for the idea that purchase avoidance can be a successful identity reinforcing strategy.

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We conducted two studies to examine the effects of possession loss on attachment to other possessions. American participants drawn from an international Internet survey panel were asked to list three special possessions, one that was reflective of an important relationship, one that was reflective of a personal achievement, and one that was reflective of their cultural worldview. To capture attachment tendency, we measured how much the participants initially valued each of these possessions adapting items from Sivadas and Venkatesh (1995) extended self-scale. We also measured the importance people placed on each of the three possessions. We then asked participants to imagine that the possession reflecting cultural worldview was stolen or lost and could not be replaced and took additional measures of how much value the participants placed on the two remaining possessions.

We found that attachment to the self-esteem and relationship possessions decreased after loss of the cultural worldview possession, with the extent of this decrease moderated by attachment tendency. Importance placed on the remaining two possessions decreased. The extent of this decrease, however, was moderated by attachment tendency. Participants high on attachment tendency exhibited less of a decrease than participants with low attachment tendencies. This result suggests that individuals who tend not to use possessions to define and communicate the self devalue their remaining possessions more so than do those individuals who do use possessions for this function.

In Study 2, we compared responses to losing a special possession to those of two well-known threats to psychological security: a threat to one’s world view and mortality salience (where one’s death is made salient). This study examined whether the loss of a special possession results in a unique pattern of coping, or whether different security threats lead to similar coping mechanisms. This study was almost identical to Study 1 except that two additional conditions were added, one threatening participants’ cultural worldview and the other making mortality salient. The results in the worldview possession loss condition replicate the results of Study 1. Responses to worldview threats and mortality salience mirror those of worldview possession loss.

Our results indicate that after a possession linked to an important aspect of self is lost or stolen, the importance that people place on other special possessions decreases. This suggests that people may be seeking to protect themselves from the possibility of further possession loss in the future by devaluing their remaining possessions. However, the extent of the devaluation is moderated by the overall importance of the possession to self-identity. People high on attachment tendency do not devalue the two other possessions as much as do people low on attachment tendency. People high on attachment tendency rely on their possessions to define and communicate who they are. Thus, the extent to which they can devalue their possessions is limited. Our results also indicate that responses to two other specific types of psychological security threats are consistent with the threat of worldview possession loss.

“Identity Shifts and the Decision to Consume”
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This research examines how shifts in the gender identity of women trying to conceive influence their decision to avoid or to purchase over-the-counter fertility aids. Past research on the relationship between womanhood and motherhood has focused on one of three different groups of women: women who already have children (e.g., Leifer, 1980), women who are pregnant (e.g., Lederman, 1993) or women who are child-free (e.g., McMahon, 1998). How the process of trying to conceive influences gender and motherhood identities has not been addressed. This represents an important gap since the point at which a woman takes active steps to try for a baby is often the first time she has seriously addressed what motherhood means to her. It is also important to consider how this relationship changes the longer she has to wait to conceive since identification with a motherhood role is a gradual process (McMahon, 1998). Furthermore, there is no research on how the consumption of over-the-counter fertility aids influences women’s identity. As these aids are available over the counter and are relatively cheap they represent a viable fertility aid for many more women than new reproductive technologies.

Using a grounded approach, results from a series of qualitative focus group interviews, together with a textual analysis of home ovulation test cartons are presented (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). The focus groups were conducted among women at different stages in the process of trying to conceive. The theoretical foundation used to interpret the data is based on symbolic interactionism (e.g. Solomon, 1983) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It also draws from the literature on female gender and motherhood identities (e.g. Skevington & Baker, 1993) to address the following research questions: (a) what is the gender and motherhood identity for women who are trying to conceive (b) how do these identities shift as the length of time trying increases and (c) how does the shifting identity influence their decision to consume (or not) home ovulation tests. The following is a brief summary of the main findings.

When women first decide to try for a baby, the motherhood identity is not a particularly salient or central aspect of their overall gender identity. Being a working woman, a wife, or a daughter is far more important to their concept of womanhood. They are not yet ready to adopt fully the motherhood identity: in fact, the motherhood identity is viewed rather negatively and as lower status than their current gender identity. These women are aware of home ovulation tests and freely concede the functional benefits of such aids. However ovulation tests also symbolize artificial conception and the desperate mother-to-be who cannot conceive naturally, images that are incongruent with their current gender identity. Avoiding the purchase and use of such fertility aids strengthens their identity both as a woman able to conceive naturally and as a women whose life is not limited solely to children.

As the length of time women try to conceive progresses, however, motherhood becomes more central to their overall gender identity, making the consumption of home ovulation tests more acceptable: these women become very aware that they are in a low status social group (“infertile women”) and they adopt behaviors to address this situation. This primarily consists of reinterpreting negative characteristics in a positive manner, including making comparisons to a new (lower) status group: they now view themselves as women who really want children—motherhood is now seen as a positive identity—and anything that helps them achieve that identity is also viewed positively. Home ovulation tests, symbolizing women who really want children, help to reinforce the motherhood image: by doing everything they can to have children they are fulfilling their socially expected feminine role.

The research also provides support for the idea that purchase avoidance can be a successful identity reinforcing strategy. Achieving congruence between self identity and product identity has been highlighted as an important driver for consumption: consumers are more likely to choose products, brands or stores whose image is highly congruent with their own identity (e.g. Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988). The key motivation in this process is assumed to be one approach: consumers actively choose particular brands, products, services or stores in order to maintain or reinforce a particular identity (e.g. Kleine, Kleine & Allen 1995). In some circumstances however it seems likely that the main motivation is actually avoidance: consumers actively choose to avoid consuming particular
brands, products, services or stores in order to maintain or reinforce a particular identity (e.g., Wilk, 1997).

“Don’t Confuse Me with Them: Identity-Signaling and Product Abandonment”
Jonah Berger, Stanford University
Chip Heath, Stanford University

Cultural tastes (e.g., products, attitudes, and behaviors) can signal identity, but the particular identity they signal may shift based on the identity of the people that hold them. Tastes communicate aspects of people (e.g., what type of person they are) to others and can act as signals within the social communication system (e.g., Levy, 1959). People probably assume that a Harley Davidson rider is tough or prefers beer over wine. But just as tastes often gain such meaning through their association with similar types of individuals, their meaning can shift over time if they are adopted by outsiders. If suburban accountants start riding Harleys in an attempt to seem tough, the meaning of the taste may change and signal different characteristics altogether (i.e., wannabe tough guys).

The paper examines the consequences of shifts in the meaning of cultural tastes. We suggest that when outsiders start to adopt a taste, original taste holders may diverge and abandon the taste to avoid signaling undesired identities. The jocks, for instance, may stop saying a catchphrase once it is adopted by the geeks. Further, we suggest the cost of misidentification will lead people to be more likely to diverge from others that are dissimilar. The more dissimilar out-group adopters are to the current taste holders, the more costly it should be for people to be misidentified as members of the wrong social group. Snowboarders might not want to people to think they are akin to skiers, but they probably prefer that mistake to being thought of as akin to golfers.

In our initial experiment, we first examined whether people would actually abandon a real possession that was adopted by an out-group with which they do not want to be confused. Before they became popular, we sold yellow Livestrong wristbands1 to members of a campus dorm (Target dorm). Separate experimenters then measured the number of dorm members who wore the wristband before and after the same wristbands also were sold to the “geeky” Academic Focus dorm next door. As predicted, almost one-third of Target dorm members abandoned the taste once it was adopted by the geeks. Further, a control dorm on the other side of campus did not show such a significant decline in wristband wearing, allowing us to rule out boredom with the wristband as an alternative explanation. This study provides preliminary evidence that people may abandon products to avoid undesired identity inferences.

The next study examined our prediction that people should be more likely to diverge from social groups that are dissimilar. Students were asked how they would change their use of a catchphrase they and their friend liked saying if it was adopted by various social groups (e.g., business executives, janitors, and suburban teenagers). Separate groups of participants rated the social groups on similarity, liking, or demographic status. As predicted, people reported that they would decrease their use of the phrase if it was adopted by other social groups. Further, while people said they would diverge more from disliked groups, even controlling for liking and relative status, people were more likely to diverge from social groups that were dissimilar.

A follow up study found that divergence from dissimilar groups was mediated by concerns of misidentification. Each participant rated how much they would diverge from each social group, perceived similarity, and desire to avoid being confused as a member. As predicted, people diverged more, and preferred not to be confused with, social groups that were dissimilar. Further, desire to avoid confusion mediated the relationship between similarity and divergence.

If identity-signaling is driving divergence then people should care the most about who they share their tastes with in certain domains, i.e., those that others use to infer identity (e.g. hairstyles and music tastes as opposed to dish soap or DVD players). A final study tests this possibility by investigating whether out-group similarity has a greater influence on divergence in identity-related domains. Student participants were given 10 different taste domains (e.g., music tastes, DVD player, and hairstyles) which varied in how much others used them to infer identity (as rated in a pretest). In a between-subjects design, they were asked to imagine that members of another social group (i.e. Business executives, inner city teens, or Princeton students) had started to copy their tastes in a particular domain (e.g., Princeton students had started adopting their favorite type of music). They then indicated what percentage of the other group would have to adopt the taste for them to abandon it (e.g., would they abandon if 10% of Princeton students had adopted? 50%? Never?). These particular social groups were chosen because they were previously rated as equivalently liked but varied in similarity to the subject population. Results indicated that as predicted, people said they would abandon tastes that were adopted by other social groups. Further, both out-group similarity and the identity-relatedness of the domain influenced the abandonment threshold. Participants required the presence of fewer dissimilar others to abandon a taste, and the abandonment threshold was lower in domains used to communicate identity. Finally, there was a similarity x domain interaction; the similarity of the adopting group only influenced abandonment in domains that people use to communicate identity.

The identity signaled by a possession can shift over time based on the identity of the set of people that hold it. This paper illustrates that to avoid communicating undesired identities, people may abandon tastes that are adopted by other social groups.

REFERENCES

1These wristbands were originally worn by athletes to support Lance Armstrong and his non-profit foundation, and later caught on and spread contagiously throughout the general public.
SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumers’ decisions are often based on a prediction about future emotional states. For example, the decision to book a spa vacation could depend on whether a person thinks that he or she will need a break from work. Recent research suggests that consumers’ affective forecasts are often erroneous. The papers in this session examine mechanisms that underlie affective forecasts, including how thinking about the future impacts present experiences, processes by which individuals anticipate how they will feel about a future event after a certain amount of time has elapsed, reasons why affective forecasting errors persist over time, and ways in which people’s forecasts about the future can be impacted by erroneous memories of the past.

The first paper (Meyvis and Nelson) examines how taking the future into account influences consumers’ current real-time experience. The results suggest that although people believe that they will savor upcoming positive experiences and dread upcoming negative experiences, they actually enjoy the present less when anticipating positive experience and enjoy the present more when anticipating negative experiences.

The second paper (Ebert and Gilbert) distinguishes two psychological processes that underlie forecasts about the future: forward-looking (“How will I feel right when the semester ends, and how will I feel one month after that point?”) and backward-looking (“How will I feel mid-June, and how will my well-being at that point be influenced by the fact that I finished the semester one month before?”). Results suggest that the order in which people consider these two points in time impacts the judgments they make. “Backcasting” (the apparent default strategy) is more likely to lead people to use information about both the impacting event and the future state than does forecasting.

The third paper (Ratner, Meyvis, and Levav) investigates why affective forecasting errors persist over time despite disconfirming evidence. The authors suggest that people’s memories of their initial forecasts are biased by their present experience, and as a result people do not realize that they made a forecasting error. They therefore do not perceive a need to adjust their forecasting strategies in the future.

The fourth paper (Novemsky, Wang, and Dhar) suggests that consumers incorrectly anticipate the decreasing trend of enjoyment from owning a product for products they have not yet experienced. After a short period of experience, consumers overpredict their adaptation to the same product, perhaps because they overpredict their frequency of usage of the product and underweight the interruption to adaptation from intervening experiences.

Collectively, the papers in this session investigate how people form affective forecasts based on an integration of their present affective state and what they recall from their past experiences and predictions. These papers offer a more dynamic view of affective forecasts than is typically discussed in the literature in that they focus more on process than simply documenting the misforecasting phenomenon.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Contrasting Against the Future: The Unexpected Effects of Expectation”
Tom Meyvis, New York University
Leif Nelson, New York University

Although consumers are unaware of many of the context effects that have been documented in empirical studies, they do have an intuitive understanding of contrast effects. In fact, they tend to generalize contrast effects to domains in which they actually do not occur. In particular, consumers believe that they contrast hedonic experiences to other experiences that preceded them (e.g., that a regular meal will taste better when it follows a bad meal than when it follows a great meal). However, previous empirical research has not been able to find strong evidence of these hedonic contrast effects (e.g., Novemsky & Ratner 2003). Does this imply that there is no such thing as hedonic contrast effects?

In this project, we examine the effect of “anticipated” experiences on people’s enjoyment of their current experience and we observe a data pattern opposite to what has been observed for the effect of preceding experiences. Although people do not forecast that future experiences will have a contrasting influence on current experiences, this is exactly what we find. Three studies indicate that negative experiences become more negative when consumers anticipate an unpleasant experience and positive experiences become more positive when consumers anticipate an unpleasant experience.

Of course, this is not the first research to suggest that people’s current affective state may be influenced by the anticipation of future experiences. However, previous research has focused on intuitions about the effects of anticipation rather than the actual experience of anticipation (Loewenstein 1987, Lovallo & Kahneman 2000). Interestingly, people do not seem to intuit contrast effects, but instead expect that the anticipation of an unpleasant event will make them feel bad (dread), whereas the anticipation of a pleasant event will make them feel good (savoring). Consistent with these intuitions, people prefer sequences that improve over time (in contrast to sequences that start out with the best experience), are willing to pay more for a delayed positive hedonic event (a kiss with their favorite movie star) than for the same immediate event, and are willing to pay more to avoid a delayed negative event (a 110 volt shock) than for an immediate negative event (Loewenstein 1987). While we do expect such dread and savoring effects to occur in some actual experiences, our research indicates that many experiences reflect contrast effects instead.

Our first study examined the effect of an anticipated pleasant sound experience on participants’ experience of the preceding negative sound experience. Participants listened to 60 seconds of sound while continuously indicating how irritating the sound was at each moment. Approximately half of the participants were asked to listen to a vacuum cleaner for 60 seconds, the others were asked to listen to the vacuum cleaner for 50 seconds, followed by 10 seconds of pleasant piano music (Glenn Gould’s rendition of the Goldberg Variations). Real-time (and retrospective) irritation ratings show that anticipating the pleasant music made the experience of the preceding vacuum noise significantly more irritating.