Social Identity Threat and Consumer Preferences

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This research examines the impact of social identity threat on consumer preferences and choices. Across four studies we show the conditions under which consumers alter product preferences and choice behaviors to avoid a threatened aspect of their social identity. Further, we examine important moderators of this tendency including trait self-esteem (study 2) and ingroup identification (studies 3 and 4). Finally, we demonstrate that the tendency to avoid products associated with a threatened aspect of identity among those low in ingroup identification is mitigated when consumers are able to engage in self-affirmation.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13895/eacr/vol8/E-08

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Using social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1979) as a theoretical framework, where social identity refers to the component of the self-concept that is derived from actual or perceived membership in social groups, we tested across four experiments whether exposing consumers to a social identity threat would result in the avoidance of products associated with that identity. In exploring this issue the present research contributes to the marketing and psychology literatures in several notable ways. To our knowledge, this is the first research to examine how consumer preferences are influenced by social identity threat. Second, this research extends previous findings that consumers often demonstrate preferences that are congruent with self-perceptions (Sirgy 1982) and primed self-identities (Mandel 2003; Reed 2004). Third, we build upon social identity theory by highlighting a behavior that is unique to the consumption context—the avoidance of products associated with a threatened identity. Fourth, the present research demonstrates that this avoidance tendency is related to a desire for self-protection and not related to other motives such as self-enhancement and self-verification. Finally, we identify key moderators of this avoidance tendency—self-esteem and ingroup identification.

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) proposes that identity is comprised of two components: personal identity (i.e., identity related to a person’s individual sense of self) and social identity (i.e., identity related to groups to which a person belongs or is affiliated). The theory further purports that situational demands can activate one particular component of identity which will, in turn, impact the way an individual thinks, feels, and behaves. We propose that when one aspect of consumer identity becomes threatened, under certain conditions, consumers will become motivated to avoid products associated with that threatened aspect of identity and will instead prefer products associated with an alternative identity. This notion differs from a priming account of shifts in consumer preferences which suggests that priming activates relevant concepts in memory and increases the accessibility of related information when making judgments (Srull and Wyer 1980). Thus, priming often leads consumers to prefer products that are consistent with currently activated concepts. In the present research, we suggest that when consumers are motivated to protect the self from identity threat, they will prefer products that are inconsistent with the threatened aspect of identity.

In study 1, we set out to provide preliminary evidence that consumers will avoid products associated with a threatened aspect of identity. Participants were either presented with information that threatened their gender identity, enhanced their gender identity, or was neutral with regards to their gender identity. Participants then evaluated films that were either related to their own gender identity or that were related to their university as an identity. As predicted, participants who received threatening information about gender as a social identity showed a significantly weaker preference for films associated with their gender than films associated with an alternative identity. Those in the enhance and control conditions did not report more negative evaluations of the gender than the intellectual films.

In study 2, we examine self-esteem as a moderator of reactions to social identity threat. Participants were first provided with information that either threatened gender as a social identity or that was neutral regarding identity. They then made a choice between a publication that was either associated with their own gender or that was associated with being intellectual. People low in self-esteem tended to avoid choosing a product associated with a threatened facet of identity, whereas product choice was not influenced by social identity threat when people were high in self-esteem. This effect was mediated by a desire to protect the self.

In study 3, we investigated the moderating role of ingroup identification. Participants’ gender identity was either threatened or not threatened and they were asked to choose between a publication that was associated with their own gender identity or that was neutral with regards to gender identity. In addition, participants completed a measure of ingroup (i.e., gender) identification. When social identity threat was present consumers low in ingroup identification were more likely to choose a neutral product over a gender related product, but when no social identity threat was present these consumers selected the gender related product. In contrast, those participants high in collective self-esteem maintained their preferences for the gender related product regardless of the presence of a threat.

Finally, in study 4, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, a threat to a new identity was examined—nationality. Participants either received threatening information about their nationality or neutral information about their nationality. In addition, participants were either given or not given the opportunity to affirm values that are important to the self. Past research shows that such a task enables people to deal with threat, and thus not use other means to cope. Participants then reported their consumption intentions regarding National Hockey League teams that were either highly associated with a Canadian identity or not. Finally, participants completed a measure of ingroup (i.e., Canadian) identification. Those participants who did not self-affirm showed less of a preference for a Canadian option when they were low as compared to high in Canadian identification. However, when participants were given the opportunity to self-affirm those low and high in Canadian identification showed a similar preference for the Canadian option.

The current research builds on social identity theory by demonstrating a unique response to social identity threat—shifts in product preferences and choices. Consumers who were low in self-esteem and low in ingroup identification were particularly likely to avoid products associated with a threatened identity, whereas those consumers high on these two traits were more likely to prefer the product associated with a threatened identity. The implications for both theory and practice are discussed.