Social Identity Threat and Consumer Preferences: the Role of Self-Protection

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This research examines the impact of social identity threat on consumer preferences and choices. Across three 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 (study 3). Finally, we demonstrate that the tendency to avoid products associated with a threatened aspect of identity among those low in ingroup identification is associated with a tendency to protect (but not enhance) the self.

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MacInnis and Park (1991, 162) define fit as “... consumers’ subjective perceptions of the music’s relevance or appropriateness to the central ad message.” We expect that while the image, whether modified or unmodified, has a function in the ad, the copy of the ad may enhance the effect of that image by causing the image and the product to be more intimately linked to each other. Therefore, we expect that the connotations of art conveyed would be magnified by the increased fit between the image and the message of the ad. In other words, we would expect an interaction of fit and modification such that when fit is high we would expect polarized responses to modification.

Study 1 was a 3 x 2 between-subjects experiment, with 191 undergraduate participants, manipulating modification of the art (original vs. slightly modified vs. highly modified) and relevance (established via the copy of the ad: relevant vs. irrelevant). A fictitious advertisement, using the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci, was created for a real product: Prince Spaghetti Sauce.

Results revealed that general evaluations and perceptions of luxury for both product and advertisement were higher for the unmodified artwork, and the expected polarization caused by the relevance was confirmed by the expected interactions. Also, as expected, the modified artwork was evaluated as more humorous, but did not benefit from the positive connotations of art. Further, luxury perceptions mediated the effect of original art on evaluations of the product and the ad.

Study 2: The Role of Brand Positioning

Study 1 suggests that art in its original form serves as an effective luxury appeal while modified artworks operate as humor appeals in advertising. We extend this result in study 2 to examine the match of ad appeal with brand positioning (luxury vs. value). Prior research has demonstrated that consistency in brand communications leads to more favorable brand evaluation (Park, Milberg and Lawson 1991; Sjödin and Torn 2006). We expect that an original (modified) artwork conveying a luxury (humor) appeal is more likely to be consistent with a luxury (value) brand positioning, and we expect that an inconsistent brand positioning will diminish the favorable influence of art on product and ad evaluation.

The study was a 2 x 2 between-subjects experiment with 122 undergraduate participants in which modification of the art (original vs. highly modified) and positioning of the advertised brand (luxury vs. value) were manipulated. The same images were used as in study 1. Brand positioning was manipulated via ad copy that emphasized luxury (with phrases like “Classic Italian”, “Another Italian masterpiece”) versus value (“Priced-less” and “Why pay more?”). The results replicate the finding that modifying the artwork in the ad caused less favorable evaluations of the product and the ad, and this was moderated by the brand positioning.

In sum, the results of these two studies reveal that art used in its original form connotes a luxury appeal and is best utilized with a luxury brand positioning. Modified artworks, on the other hand, work as effective humor appeals and may be best utilized for brands conveying a value positioning.

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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 three experiments whether exposing consumers to a social identity threat would result in the avoidance of products associated with that identity. 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 (Sigrý 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 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). We propose that when one aspect of consumer social identity becomes threatened, under certain conditions, consumers will become motivated to avoid products associated with that threatened aspect 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. 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. We differentiate self-protection (e.g., the desire to avoid negative consequences for the self) from self-enhancement (e.g., the desire to attain positive consequences for the self), and suggest that the mechanism underlying our effects in self-protection.

In study 1, we 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 student 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 as compared to those who received gender enhancing information or neutral information. No such differences were found for evaluations of products associated with an alternative identity (i.e., university student).

In study 2 we examine self-esteem as a moderator of reactions to social identity threat. While those high in self-esteem are often characterized as being motivated by self-enhancement, those low in self-esteem are often motivated by self-protection (e.g., Baumeister,
Tice, and Hutton 1989; Kunda 1999). Because we believe the avoidance of products associated with a threatened aspect of identity is related to self-protection, we anticipate that this avoidance tendency would be particularly pronounced among low self-esteem individuals. Participants were first provided with information that either threatened gender as a social identity or was neutral regarding identity. They then made a choice between a publication that was either associated with their own gender identity or that was associated with university student identity. 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, but not by other motives such as self-enhancement or self-verification.

In study 3 we investigated the moderating role of ingroup identification because research demonstrates that ingroup identification individuals exhibit self-protective responses to threat. Further, we attempted to rule out alternative explanations for the findings. Because the gender-related products in the first studies were low in perceived intellectual depth, participants may have responded to threats to the self by simply choosing a more intellectually-oriented option, rather than avoiding products associated with a threatened aspect of identity. Second, it is possible that consumers avoid products associated with any identity that is described negatively, not only products associated with an aspect of their own identity when it is threatened. To test for these alternatives, we had female participants receive a threat to their own gender identity, threat to the opposite gender identity, or neutral information, and then evaluate both male and female biographies. In contrast to the two alternative explanations, our conceptualization predicts that females would only avoid female-related products (and not male-related products) when female identity is threatened and not when male identity is threatened or when no threat is present. In addition, we had participants evaluate both positive and negative biographies. If motivated by a need for self-protection, those low in ingroup identification should avoid both positively and negatively valenced products associated with a threatened aspect of identity. Our design allows participants to enhance the self by preferring products with positive connotations related to their identity. Results revealed that, females motivated by self-protection (i.e., those low in ingroup identification) avoided positive and negative female-related products (and not male-related products) when their own gender identity was threatened.

The current research builds on social identity theory by demonstrating a unique response to social identity threat—shifts in product preferences and choices. Taken together the results of three studies suggest that the avoidance of products associated with a threatened aspect of identity is related to the desire for self-protection.

I Know a “Guy”: The Consequences of Using Social Capital to Facilitate Consumption Experiences
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Conceptualization
As the fabric of civilization, social relationships play an important, yet often inconspicuous role in society by binding individuals together and facilitating correspondence and collaboration among them. Because of their inherent function in social interactions, relationships influence many different aspects of human behavior, including those related to consumption. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to investigate consumers’ use of personal relationships to facilitate purchases. Interestingly, the basic questions of whether, how, and why consumers utilize personal relationships to improve their purchase outcomes remain largely unaddressed in the marketing literature. However, given the extent to which consumers are connected to one another, answering such questions becomes important if scholars are to fully understand this novel and intriguing dimension of consumer behavior.

We approach these important questions using a social capital theory framework, which posits that individuals utilize resources embedded in social relationships to create benefits or returns (Coleman, 1988, 2002; Portes, 1998, 2000; Lin 2001). From an individualistic perspective, social capital theory focuses on the resources ingrained in an individual’s social relationships and how using these resources benefits the individual. These resources are considered social because they can only be accessed through direct and indirect ties with others. Common forms of social resources include advice, information, ideas, and support. Ultimately, to possess social capital, an individual must have relationships with others; it is only through social interactions that social capital can exist and benefit the individual (Coleman, 1988, 2002; Portes 1998; Lin 2001).

Given the communicative nature of this phenomenon, it is important to briefly distinguish social capital from word of mouth behavior. Whereas word of mouth typically refers to informal information transmission related to existing products, services, or events, social capital extends this conceptualization by focusing specifically on the nature and the strength of the relationships among those involved in the communication of information. In addition, the information transmission resulting from social capital mobilization tends to be more structured, intentional, and proprietary than that of word of mouth communication. As a result, consumers utilizing social capital to make purchases may intentionally and systematically draw upon their personal relationships to find the right person, place, product, or price, thus enhancing their returns in the marketplace.

Method
As suggested previously, we seek to understand how consumers utilize social capital to make purchases, the benefits of doing so, and the impact of this behavior on the consumption experience. Given that research on this topic is sparse, our research represents an initial stride into this realm. As a result, we utilize grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to extend and refine social capital theory in the context of consumption. We conduct semi-structured depth interviews with 19 U.S. consumers, yielding 72 unique social capital consumption experiences. Participants were selected using established theoretical sampling techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006).