When Do Consumers Bolster Their Preferences in the Face of Threat? the Role of Self-Construal and Collective Identity Activation

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We propose and find that those with more interdependent (vs. independent) self-construals tend to prefer (avoid) an identity-linked product when that identity is threatened. Among interdependents, identity threat primes their repertoire of social identities, which they are able to utilize as a resource that helps to buffer against threat.

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Self-Identity Amplification: When (and How) Situations Promote Identity Congruent Behavior
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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

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Marketers often link their brand with an aspect of consumer social identity. Pepsi attempts to link Pepsi Max with male gender-identity: “Maximum Taste, No Sugar, and Maybe Scorpion Venom.” Pepsi Max, the First Diet Cola for Men,” whereas Secret links its brand with female gender-identity: “Strong Like a Woman.” Although marketers can link products with various aspects of consumer identity, the effectiveness of such a strategy may depend on other contextual factors. Recent research suggests that when consumers experience threat to one aspect of social identity (e.g., their gender identity or nationality), they sometimes avoid products associated with that identity (White and Argo 2009). The present research extends this previous work by identifying instances where consumers will strengthen their connection to, rather than avoid, the identity-linked product in response to social identity threat.

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and self-construal theory (Singelis 1994), we predict that the impact of identity threat on product preferences is moderated by self-construal. The independent self is viewed as being autonomous, unique, and separate from other, whereas the interdependent self is viewed as more collectivistic, communal, and relational (Markus and Kitayama 1991). We propose and find that people with interdependent self-construals demonstrate more positive evaluations of identity-linked products when the social identity is threatened versus not threatened. Our framework proposes that this arises because people who are highly interdependent are particularly attuned to their social identities, and that identity threat primes/activates these multiple social identities. Interdependents are then able to draw on this repertoire of identities as a resource, and feel more positively about their multiple group memberships when under threat. In contrast, those with independent self-construals do not activate their identities in response to threat, but instead are motivated to enhance their individual self (Heine 2001). Consequently, independent people tend to avoid an identity-linked product when their social identity becomes threatened.

In study 1, we examined differences in self-construal by investigating differences between Asian (i.e., interdependent) and Caucasian (i.e., independent) Canadians. We exposed participants to negative (threat condition) or neutral information (neutral condition) regarding their university. Participants then completed the twenty statements task (“I am____”) which was coded for statements related to social identities in general and university-identity in particular. The number of different reported identities were tallied and served as a measure for the degree to which multiple identities were activated. Participants then evaluated products that were matched for price and pretested as being related to university-identity or neutral (university book store vs. a restaurant gift certificate). Asian Canadians evaluated an identity-linked product more positively when threatened versus not threatened. In contrast, Caucasian Canadians evaluated identity-linked products more negatively when threatened (vs. not threatened). These effects were mediated by the differential activation of multiple identities.

In study 2, we used a similar method to study 1, except that we assessed individual differences in self-construal (Singelis 1991) and measured the degree to which participants felt a sense of identification with their multiple social identities. Once again, interdependents (independents) evaluated an identity-linked product more positively (negatively) when threatened versus not threatened. These findings were mediated by feelings of identification to multiple social identities.

Study 3 investigated primed differences in self-construal (Brewer and Gardner 1996). The results support our framework by demonstrating that—in addition to demonstrating more positive evaluations of the focal identity when threatened—interdependents also show this bolstering effect for another aspect of identity, suggesting that multiple identities have been activated for more interdependent people (under threat).

Finally, in study 4 we further examined the underlying process by using a cross-national sample (Hong Kong vs. Canada, to represent interdependents vs. independents) and investigated the moderating role of affirmation type (self-affirmation, group affirmation, or no affirmation). The results show that, overall, interdependents demonstrate identity bolstering responses, whereas independents are more likely to show identity dissociating responses when the particular identity is threatened. Further, Hong Kong participants made more positive evaluations of the university identity-linked products under conditions of group affirmation as compared to conditions of no affirmation or self-affirmation. This suggests that for interdependents, group-affirmation enhances the ability to feel positively about a threatened group membership. Among independents, however, when under threat self-affirmation led to more positive university product evaluations as compared to no affirmation and group-affirmation. Thus, when under threat, independents are only able to evaluate the identity-linked product positively by affirming the individual self.

Taken together, the results across 4 studies highlight the conditions under which identity bolstering can occur and provide support for the notion that among interdependents, identity threat primes multiple identities which can have a buffering effect on social identity threat.

“A Unified Theory of Consumer Response to Self-Threat”
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The self-concept—and its constituent associations—has powerful effects on behavior. Because consumers respond strongly when aspects of their self-concept are threatened, marketers routinely challenge components of the self-concept by introducing new negative information about a self-related group, or suggesting the consumer is an inadequate member of such a group. For example, Apple’s “I’m a Mac, and I’m a PC” ads link computer choice to identity and suggest that PCs—and their owners—are dull, slow, complicated, and trouble-prone. We propose that consumer response to such identity threats depends on whether the threat targets the association of the self with the identity, or the association of the identity with positive valence. In addition, the strength of threat response is moderated by initial consumer self-esteem.
Recent work has shown that threats to the self can produce both identity-approach and identity-avoid behaviors. Consumers threatened with negative information about their social category tend to avoid products associated with that category (White & Argo 2009), avoid threatening social comparisons (Argo et al. 2006) and distance themselves from products related to dissociative out-groups (White & Dahl 2007). On the other hand, when a consumer’s strength of association with a particular identity is threatened, an approach response is more likely as the consumer takes action to rectify threat (DeMarrée et al. 2007; Tetlock et al. 2000) and restore that self association (Gao et al. 2009).

Although these distinct research streams generate contrasting results, they identify processes that are less contradictory than they first appear. The negative information threats employed by White & Argo (2009) target a group associated with the consumer, and such group affiliations often act as resources protecting consumers from threat (Correll & Park 2005; Knowles & Gardner 2008). Although White & Argo provided evidence of this self-protection strategy in consumers for which group affiliation was important, they did not investigate how the negative information affects group associations or the importance of the group to one’s self-concept. Similarly, the self-concept threats employed by Gao et al. (2009) are posited to shake the association of one’s self with a group or attribute, yet these associations and any changes in them were not measured.

The present research develops a single theoretical framework to explain the apparently divergent findings of prior work, and offers predictions about how a variety of self-threat situations will influence consumer behavior. Building on the Unified Theory of Implicit Social Cognition (Greenwald et al. 2002), threat response is explained in terms of three types of implicit associations: self-esteem, self-group, and group-valence. Although prior investigations occasionally reference the importance of one or more of these associations, none of the research to date has actually measured them and assessed their influence on the self-threat response. We hypothesize that initial implicit self-esteem will predict strength of response to self-threat, such that people higher in self-esteem will exhibit stronger approach and avoidance tendencies.

The results of two experiments demonstrate this framework. Using a series of Brief Implicit Association Tests (BIATs), we show that consumers respond very differently to self-concept threats that target the association of the self with a given identity, as compared to threats that target the association of the identity with positivity. When the latter type of threat was encountered, the resultant avoidance effect was mediated by a weakening of the association of the threatened identity with positive valence. By contrast, when the former type of threat was encountered a weakening of the self-identity association mediated the expected approach response.

Together, these findings shed critical light on the processes driving consumer response to self-threat. In addition, the methodology employed in this research can contribute to a better understanding of relationships between the self, social groups, stereotypical attributes, and valence.

“The Moderating Role of Self-Construal in Selective Self-Stereotyping”

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Does it matter if someone stereotypes you? When a stereotype inflicts harm on a target (e.g., denying a promotion, excluding from a social group), the answer is an obvious yes. Prior work has shown that individuals are selective in applying specific stereotypical traits to themselves in order to reconcile the conflicting goals of self-enhancement and group identification (Biernat et al. 1996; Pronin et al. 2004). Research has also shown that the effects of being stereotyped extend to domains where no overt harm occurs, such as by changing how the stereotyped individual views him or herself (Sinclair et al. 2006). The present research investigates the role that self-construal plays in determining individuals’ self-evaluative response to being negatively stereotyped. We propose that self-construal moderates the way individuals address the stereotype and their motivation toward the stereotyper. These responses are reflected in targets’ self-views in the form of selective self-stereotyping (assimilating toward the stereotype) or counter-self-stereotyping (contrasting away from the stereotype).

As stereotypes are multidimensional and contain numerous characteristics associated with a social group, individuals’ self-views do not necessarily have to shift on all aspects of the stereotype. We posit that targets’ self-evaluations change in a selective manner consistent with their self-construal orientations. That is, stereotype targets engage in selective self-stereotyping and leverage the multidimensionality of stereotypes in order to remain consistent with their attitudes toward the stereotyper. Rather than embracing or rejecting a stereotype in its entirety, stereotype targets alter their self-views on subsets of the stereotype. Targets’ responses stem from their self-construals and thus determine whether they selectively assimilate toward or contrast away from the stereotype.

Self-construal refers to how individuals understand and define themselves in relation to the social environment (Markus & Kitayama 1991). People with interdependent self-construals see themselves as closely connected to the people in their social environment, whereas those with independent self-construals see themselves as distinct and separate from others. Research suggests that independent individuals are likely to contrast their self-evaluations away from stereotypes (Bry et al. 2007; Keller & Molix 2008; Stapel & Koomein 2001) and tend to respond in a hostile manner towards those who stereotype them (Pinel 2002; Wout et al. 2009). By contrast, interdependent individuals tend to assimilate their self-evaluations toward stereotypes and compensate for the stereotyper’s negative expectations. In the present work, we find that one’s response to the stereotype and the stereotyper shape how their self-evaluations shift in terms of stereotype-relevant traits.

In Study 1, we examined how interacting with a sexist male supervisor influenced interdependent and independent female participants. As independence increased, participants rated themselves lower on positive feminine traits and higher on negative masculine traits to contrast away from the female stereotype and to remain consistent with hostile feelings toward the supervisor. As interdependence increased, however, participants adopted the opposite strategy and rated themselves higher on positive feminine traits and lower on negative masculine traits. This served the dual purpose of remaining likeable to the supervisor but conforming to his stereotypical views of women.

In Study 2, using the self-evaluations of female participants, we examined whether the traits interdependent participants wish to embody are specific to the affiliation target. As predicted, we found that interdependent participants’ self-evaluations changed depending on the affiliation target. When they imagined interacting with a colleague, interdependent participants increased their self-evaluations on feminine traits valued by the colleague, even though the traits were stereotype consistent. With a supervisor, interdependent participants did not decrease their self-evaluation ratings on masculine traits valued by the supervisor because doing so would compromise their self-image as it pertains to the supervisor. Independent individuals’ self-evaluations, on the other hand, were not influenced by the interaction partner because they are less
motivated to affiliate and less sensitive to the specific preferences of their interaction partners.

Our theory of selective self-stereotyping takes into account how individual differences in self-construal influence self-stereotyping in contrasting interpersonal contexts. This focus departs from previous research, which has generally focused on selective self-stereotyping where stereotype targets view themselves in a positive light. Furthermore, we contribute by examining selective counter self-stereotyping where individuals view themselves more negatively in order to respond to the stereotyper in a hostile manner.

“**The Signature Effect: Merely Signing One’s Name Promotes Identity-Congruent Behavior**”

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__Gerald Häubl, University of Alberta, Canada__

Your signature—the distinctive way in which you write your name—plays a vital role in your life. By simply signing your name on a document, you can commit to marriage, years of mortgage payments, or military service. Despite the importance of signatures, however, the influence of signing one’s name on subsequent behavior has not been examined to date.

People associate their signature with their identity. They craft a signature that is unique (and thus difficult to forge) which they use to represent their identity in writing. We propose that signing one’s name acts as a general self-identity prime, and thus promotes behavior congruent with the specific aspect of that self-identity that is afforded by the individual’s current situation (Gibson 1977). We predict and demonstrate this phenomenon in five studies. In each study, participants were randomly assigned to either sign or print their own name on a blank piece of paper (ostensibly for a separate study about hand-writing) before entering into the focal situation.

The first two studies examine a domain with divergent schemas for women and men—food. As compared to men, women perceive that they are more prone to impulsive food consumption (Fredrickson et al. 1998). We hypothesized, therefore, that signing their name would promote impulsive food consumption among women, but would have no such effect on men. In Study 1, participants were given the opportunity to buy chocolates. Women who had signed their name bought more chocolate than those who had printed their name. By contrast, the amount of chocolate purchased by male participants was not affected by this manipulation. In Study 2, participants were offered free snack foods (carrots and pretzels) during a brief waiting period. As predicted, women who had provided a signature consumed more snacks than those who had printed their name, but male participants’ snacking was not affected by whether they had signed or printed their name. Thus, the first two studies show that people who sign their name behave in a manner congruent with their gender identity.

Studies 3 and 4 investigate the relationship between how closely consumers associate their identity with a product domain and their engagement while shopping in that domain. Consumers who closely associate a product domain with their self-identity are engaged in that domain. Therefore, we hypothesized that signing their name would induce consumers who identify more (less) closely with a product domain to be more (less) behaviorally engaged when shopping in that domain. In study 3, participants searched for product attribute information prior to choosing from a set of products (cameras or dishwashers). As predicted, signing their name led participants who identify more (less) closely with the product domain to examine more (less) product information. In study 4, participants went to a retail store to choose a pair of running shoes. Signing their name induced participants who identify more (less) closely with running to spend more (less) time in the store and to try on more (fewer) pairs of shoes.

The final study tested our theoretical account by examining the effect of signing one’s name on identity-signaling. After signing or printing their own name, participants identified a social group to which they either belonged (in-group condition) or did not belong (out-group condition), and then made choices in 19 product domains (Berger & Heath 2007). As predicted, signing their name promoted greater divergence from out-groups—and greater conformity with in-groups—in identity-relevant domains.

The present research is the first to show that merely signing one’s name influences subsequent behavior in a predictable manner. Because consumers are often required to provide a signature (e.g., in a retail setting), our findings have important implications for both consumers and retailers.