I Show You Only Who I Am If Needed: Identity Signaling As a Result of the Interaction Between Personal Motives and Situational Factors

Hendrik Slabbinck, Ghent University, Belgium
Patrick Van Kenhove, Ghent University, Belgium

In three studies we show that the positive relationship between identity signaling and need for public recognition only exists if need for public recognition is activated by the environment. Identity signaling is the result of the interplay between brands, the explicitness of the brand logo and the environment in which brands and brand logos are presented.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16064/volumes/v38/NA-38

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
based on the reinforcement of the social identity. For instance, we found that although much of the prosumption of bacalhau is done by one person that assumes the role of the host of the dinner everything is done having in mind the rules and expectations of the group; if these rules and expectations are not met ingredients and attitudes are rearranged in order to conform to the groups’ social identity.

In sum, we develop and apply a model that integrates the prosumption process and the theoretical perspectives on role-based identity and social identity to better understand prosumption. It provides novel understanding of the prosumption process especially related to food-related prosumption. Both theoretical and managerial implications are highlighted, and avenues for future research indicated.

References

I Show You Only Who I Am If Needed: Identity Signaling as a Result of the Interaction Between Personal Motives and Situational Factors
Hendrik Slabbinck, Ghent University, Belgium
Patrick Van Kenhove, Ghent University, Belgium

Consumers often make choices that diverge from those of others to ensure that they effectively communicate desired identities. Teens, for instance, regularly want to distinguish themselves from their parents and therefore choose for music styles, clothes, … their parents dislike. Previous studies demonstrate this drive to differentiate from others through product choices to vary across individuals (Snyder and Fromkin 1977) and situations (Byrne and Griffith 1969). Further, research shows that for product categories symbolizing one’s identity, individuals abandon product options which the majority prefers (Berger and Heath 2007).

In addition, identity signaling is partially driven by price and explicitness of brand logos. Consumers, for instance, who strive for broader public recognition like to show others they can afford expensive products. Therefore, they choose expensive products that are well known by a broad range of consumers. They further prefer loud or large brand logos because it helps them broadcasting their desired identity. Very expensive top-class products that are only recognizable by connoisseurs are for these consumers less suitable for identity signaling. (Berger and Ward 2009).

The data of our three studies, however, display a more nuanced pattern. In Study 1, we asked 56 undergraduate students to enumerate brands that are typically bought or avoided by students who strive for broader recognition by showing their possessions to others. When analyzing the product categories, product categories that are seen as symbolic of identity were, as expected, most frequently listed (i.e. clothes (n=36) and cars (n=30)). When analyzing brands, results were also straightforward. In general, the rather expensive well known brands that are still affordable by a rather broad range of consumers were top listed as typical signaling brands. These were BMW (n=16) and Mercedes Benz (n=15) for cars and Tommy Hilfiger (n=11) and Armani (n=6) for clothing. Further and in line with our expectations, lower priced well known brands were enumerated as brands these people rather avoid. For cars, these were Volkswagen (n=5) and Opel (n=5), and for clothing, Esprit (n=9) and H&M (n=5). So far, all results were in line with the existing literature.

In study 2 (n=137), we measured the degree to which undergraduate students strive for broader recognition by showing his/her personal wealth to others. The focal product category was clothing because it was top listed as identity signaling product category in Study 1. Surprisingly, we could not find any relation between the degree for striving for broader public recognition and the percentage of the clothes of signaling brands that the participant had in his wardrobe (r=.07; p>0.05). Based on previous studies as well as the results of our first study, we expected people high (low) in need for public recognition to own relatively more (less) clothes of signaling brands.

These unexpected results indicated that the activation of signaling related behavior is more complex than just the straightforward relationship between need for public recognition and an individual’s number of signaling brands. According to McClelland et al. (1989), behavior is the result of the interaction between motives and the environment. In brief, a person with a certain motive or need will only engage in motive relevant behavior under the presence of appropriate environmental stimuli. Without the presence of these environmental stimuli, motive relevant behavior is less likely to occur. In terms of identity signaling, this means that a consumer high in need for public recognition should be more likely to buy an expensive shirt with a large and loud imprint of a brand logo in a multi-brand store than in a mono-brand store. This because the presence of unwanted, cheap brands in the multi-brand store could act as an environmental stimulus that activates the consumer’s need for public recognition. Once this need is activated, the consumer’s purchase behavior should be channeled towards signaling brands with large brand logos. If this explanation is true, then the relationship between need for public recognition and intended purchase behavior of signaling brands must be higher in the presence of unwanted brands, certainly if the brands have explicit brand logos. To test this hypothesis, we set up a third study (n=131) in which we measured need for public recognition and intended purchase behaviour of two brands (within subjects): a signaling brand (Tommy Hilfiger) and an unwanted brand (Esprit). Signal explicitness was manipulated between subjects. We created two conditions for each brand. In the first condition, all t-shirts had large brand logos. In the second condition, we showed exactly the same t-shirts, but with brand logos erased. Each picture was tagged with a short description and brand name. To assess intended purchase behavior, each participant (all females) got virtually 100 Euros...
which they needed to spend in our online t-shirt shop. Difference tests on Fisher r-to-z transformations fully supported our hypothesis. The correlation, for instance, between need for public recognition and intended purchase behavior for the signaling brand was .41 (p<.05) when both the signaling and unwanted brand had explicit brand logos. This correlation was significantly higher than when both brands had no brand logos (r=.08, p>.1; zdiff=1.98, p<.05).

The results of these three studies add important insights to identity signaling theory. We clearly showed that individual differences and situational factors must be studied jointly instead of separately. As shown in our third study, the effect of individual differences on identity signaling is only activated in a specific situation. In future research, we will incorporate additional situational factors and individual difference variables (e.g. self-esteem). Another interesting avenue for further research concerns the question how identity signaling works for symbolic products that are less visible for the general public (e.g. pajamas, bathroom accessories, …).

Selected References

Who Determines the Ideal Self?: A Comparative Analysis of Non-Verbal Communication
Junko Kimura, Hosei University, Japan
Mototaka Sakashita, Keio Business School, Japan

Extended Abstract
Self-concept must be treated as having two components; the actual self-concept and the ideal self-concept. Ideal self-concept is defined as the image of oneself as one would like to be. The ideal self-concept has been referred to as the “ideal self,” “idealized image,” and “desired self” (Sirgy 1982). Consumers hold their own ideal self images, and often try to alter their appearance by changing their outfits, in order to get closer to those images. Ideal self is the self-concept where an individual puts the highest value (Rogers 1959). Consumers use purchasing in order to approach their ideal self (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988). A desirable self-concept can be created through consumption, and it can also be extended into products. (Belk 1988; Schouten 1991). Most scholars seem to agree that the term “self-concept” denotes the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to him as an object” (Rosenberg 1979). Actual self refers to how a person perceives herself. Ideal self refers to how a person would like to perceive herself. Social self refers to how a person presents herself to others.

Since the concept of ideal self is highly important to the consumers, they independently search for their ideal self-image, and often decide on it. When they decide on their ideal self, their significant others approve it. Significant others are specific others who influence the self-formation of consumers. Parents and teachers can be significant others; also, friends, classmates, and mass media can become such influential people (Mead 1934). They have long proposed that parents are the most influential socializing agents for their children (Cooley 1902; Sullivan 1947; Turner 1962).

Mothers might be significant socializers for their daughters and control them by using social power. Social power consists of reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power (French and Raven 1959). Significant others may not only approve of the ideal self that the consumers decided on, but also occasionally decide on the consumers’ ideal self itself. It seems reasonable to look at mothers as primary socializing agents for the formation of their daughters’ attitudes (Bohannon and Blanton 1999). The ideal self determination process under mother-daughter situation can be described as “coercive,” since the mother has already formed a clear idea of her daughter’s ideal self image prior to the shopping experience. Here, the mother tries to force her daughter to accept whatever ideal self image she has. According to Nobuta and Ueno (2008), in contemporary Japan, identification with mothers does not simply mean identifying with the actual existing mothers. Mothers try to get their daughters to identify with their ideal self.

Female friendships is affective. Women expect their female friends to feel and react in the same manner as they do (Wheeler & Nezlek 1977). Female friends mutually request sympathy from the other party. Sympathy can be created by self-monitoring. Self-monitoring is to observe whether one’s expression, action or self-presentation of one’s self is socially appropriate. In female friendship context, one’s behavior is modified according to the other’s reaction (Snyder 1974). The ideal self determination process under friend-daughter situation can be described as “collaborative,” since the daughter and her female friend are both engage in the daughter’s ideal self determination process.

We set our proposition: a different nature of relationship results in a different ideal self determination process. Specifically, in a mother-daughter relationship, the mother has already decided on the daughter’s ideal self before the actual process starts. The mother then forces her daughter to accept her own idea. This is called a “coercive process”, and the entire process is often omitted. In the friend-daughter relationship, the friend and the daughter act as if they mutually sympathize to the other, and cooperatively decide on the daughter’s ideal self. This is called a “collaborative process”, where they even enjoy spending time together until they reach to the daughter’s desirable ideal self.