Sentimental Social Roles and the Objects That Elicit Them

Lindsay R. L. Larson, Georgia Southern University, USA
T. Andrew Poehlman, Southern Methodist University, USA

We examine social identity evoked from vintage product design and its effect on the idealization of gender-stereotypic behavior. Women report greater idealization of traditional behaviors in response to feminine vintage (as opposed to modern or masculine) design. Primed gender roles also lead women, to prefer gender-stereotypic vintage design products.

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From Encoding, to Protecting, to Retrieving: Understanding the Interplay between Social Identity and Consumer Memory

Chair: Amy N. Dalton, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China

Paper #1: Memory for Advertising: When do Consumers Remember and When do they Forget Social-Identity-linked Ads?  
Amy N. Dalton, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China  
Rod Duclos, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China  
Li Huang, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Paper #2: Savoring through Avoidance: Identity-based Strategic Memory Protection  
Kathryn Mercurio, University of Oregon, USA  
Americus Reed II, University of Pennsylvania, USA  
Mark R. Forehand, University of Washington, USA

Paper #3: Identity Preservation: If I Can Remember It, You Can Have It  
Karen Page Winterich, Pennsylvania State University, USA  
Rebecca Walker Naylor, Ohio State University, USA  
Julie R. Irwin, University of Texas at Austin, USA

Paper #4: Sentimental Social Roles and the Objects that Elicit Them  
Lindsay R. L. Larson, Georgia Southern University, USA  
T. Andrew Poehlman, Southern Methodist University, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

Marketing scholars and practitioners widely acknowledge that an understanding of consumer memory is vital to an understanding of consumer behavior. The literature on consumer memory has convincingly established that consumer behavior is shaped considerably by prior learning, and that consumer decisions are mostly memory-based (Alba, Hutchinson, and Lynch 1991). It has linked memory to diverse responses, including attitudes, preferences, and decisions (Crowley and Mitchell 2003; Neddugadi 1990). Nevertheless, the literature on memory and consumption is dominated by a “cold cognition” approach that emphasizes the mechanics of memory, rather than a social or situated cognition approach, which would emphasize how social context and personal factors influence memory. Consequently, little is known about the interplay between memory and social factors of import to marketers.

One social construct of critical importance to marketers is social identity. Social identities, including gender, age, nationality, or racial group, can be central to consumers’ self-concepts and can be key determinants of preference and choice. Only recently, however, has research begun to examine social identity effects on memory (Mercurio and Forehand 2011). The objective of this special session is to bridge the gap between literatures on consumer memory and social identity. Collectively, the papers ask how social identities affect memory and how memory, in turn, affects identity-related consumption behaviors (including preferences, product disposal, and product evaluation). This exploration into the interplay between social identity and memory results in a series of papers that nicely progress through the stages of memory processes, from encoding, to memory protection, to retrieval.

First, Dalton et al. examine memory encoding. Social identities affect memory by facilitating or inhibiting consumers’ attention to and encoding of identity-linked ads. The second and third papers examine memory protection. Mercurio et al. show that consumers protect identity-linked memories by avoiding further identity-related consumption. Winterich et al. show that consumers who protect identity-linked memories feel safe to sell/donate identity-linked products, but those who fail to protect identity-linked memories will instead throw away their products. Finally, Larson and Poehlman examine memory retrieval. Social-identity-linked products with sentimental value can bias memory for the past and thereby affect current consumer preferences.

As these papers will illustrate, the effects of social identity on memory do not necessarily map on to product evaluation and choice. This fact underscores the importance of studying the unique effects of social identity on consumer memory.

Memory for Advertising: When do Consumers Remember and When do they Forget Social-Identity-linked Ads?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

What makes advertising memorable? One popular approach is to link ads to consumers’ social identities (e.g., gender, lifestyle, race). For instance, sales promotions routinely offer “10% discount to senior citizens” or “1 free drink for ladies” hoping that target-consumers will attend to and remember ads that are personally relevant (and financially beneficial). But despite the popularity of identity-linked advertising (ILA), evidence for its effectiveness is mixed (Reed 2002; Weigl et al.1980; White and Argo 2009). Thus, in the present work, we document when and explain why ILA can either help marketers (by attracting attention, thereby boosting memory for ads and desire for identity-linked products) or hurt marketers (by producing poor ad-memory and product avoidance). To guide our enquiry, we draw on two constructs well-established in identity research: identity distinctiveness (ID) and strength of ingroup identification (SOII).

Identity, or comparative, distinctiveness occurs when a person possesses a characteristic (e.g., a social identity) that differentiates her from others (McGuire et al. 1978; Wooten 1995). Because comparative distinctiveness allows one to feel special, individuals enjoy being part of distinctive minorities (Brewer 1991). Thus, identity distinctiveness is a common tactic used in ILA. For instance, hoping to peak women’s interest, a clothing ad may seek to activate female-identity by featuring a single woman amid multiple men.

As implied earlier, we argue that identity distinctiveness may actually backfire under certain conditions—specifically, among weak ingroup-identifiers. That is, the extent to which consumers connect with a given identity can vary greatly. For some women, being female is a mere social fact bearing little influence on how they define themselves. Other women, in contrast, very much feel and identify as females (Oyserman 2008). We conjecture that strength of ingroup identification (SOII) moderates the effect of identity distinctiveness on memory. Specifically, the stronger (weaker) one identifies with a given ingroup, the more positively (negatively) one should respond to ILAs when that ingroup is distinctive in a social setting.

To test this prediction, three experiments followed an ID (manipulated by altering the relative size of participants’ ingroup) by SOII (measured by Cameron’s (2004) 12-item scale) between-subjects design. Recruited to participate in a study about “media and market-
ing influences,” participants in a distinctive (non-distinctive) identity condition learned that 50 (150) students from their university as well as 150 students from another local university would be surveyed. After viewing 20 retail ads (8 of which were identity-linked: “10% discount for University X students”), participants completed a filler task before recalling as many ads as possible. Then they completed a recognition memory test for the ads. Similar results were obtained across measures, so we report recognition results. As expected, SOII moderated the effect of ID on ILA memory ($t(189)=-6.93$, $p<.001$). Spotlight analyses (Aiken and West 1991) at 1 SD below/above the mean revealed that strong-identifiers recognized more IL-ads in the distinctive than non-distinctive condition ($\beta=-3.54$, $t(189)=-7.08$, $p<.001$) whereas weak-identifiers recognized fewer IL-ads in the distinctive than non-distinctive condition ($\beta=-3.28$, $t(189)=-6.52$, $p<.001$).

To explain the results, we theorized that ID facilitates (inhibits) attention to and encoding of ILA among strong (weak) identifiers. But poor memory is perhaps due to retrieval, not encoding, failure. To address this possibility, study 2 added a third IV: task sequence (control vs. reverse order). The control condition mirrored study 1’s procedure (i.e., ID \(\rightarrow\) Encoding \(\rightarrow\) Retrieval). In the reverse-order condition, the ID manipulation followed encoding (i.e., Encoding \(\rightarrow\) ID \(\rightarrow\) Retrieval). If, per our theorizing, ID affects encoding, study 2 should replicate study 1’s findings only when ID precedes encoding. If, in contrast, forgetting is due to retrieval failure, study 2 should replicate study 1’s results regardless of task sequence. As predicted, SOII moderated the effect of ID when distinctiveness preceded ($t(72)=2.05$, $p<.05$) but not when it followed encoding ($p>.75$). Spotlight analyses in the control condition replicated study 1’s results.

According to our theorizing, ID (e.g., being part of a minority group) makes a social-identity special/important to people who consider ingroup membership integral to the self (i.e., strong-identifiers; Brewer 1991). But for those who consider ingroup membership a mere social fact (i.e., weak-identifiers), being part of a small, under-represented group makes the given social identity unimportant. It follows from this theorizing that if a manipulation could make the ingroup seem more (less) important to weak (strong) identifiers, the effects documented in studies 1-2 should reverse. To this end, study 3 added a third level to the ID manipulation, a majority condition wherein participants learned that 150 students from their university as well as 50 students from another local university would be surveyed. Once again, spotlight analyses revealed that strong-identifiers recognized more IL-ads in the minority than control non-distinctive condition ($\beta=1.97$, $t(186)=2.45$, $p<.02$) but recognized fewer IL-ads in the majority than non-distinctive condition ($\beta=-1.13$, $t(186)=1.53$, $p=.13$). Conversely, weak-identifiers recognized fewer IL-ads in the minority than non-distinctive condition ($\beta=1.99$, $t(186)=-2.50$, $p<.02$) but recognized more IL-ads in the majority than non-distinctive condition ($\beta=1.42$, $t(186)=1.94$, $p=.05$). Mirroring the interactive effects of ID and SOII on old-new recognition of ILAs, study 3 also found that strong (weak) identifiers in the minority (majority) condition were more willing to buy identity-linked products (e.g., a stuffed animal wearing a university t-shirt) than counterparts in the equal and majority (minority) conditions.

This work makes several substantive and theoretical contributions. Aside from showing when and shedding light on why identity-linking leads to better/worse ad memory, our results add to the literature on social identity by suggesting that consumers do not always prefer being part of a distinctive minority. By examining identification strength, this research also furthers our understanding of weak identifiers. Little is known about the factors that affect their responses to identity-linked content. Finally, this work contributes to literature on memory. While most memory research to-date adopts a cold-cognition approach, we adopt a social-cognition approach to understand how social context and personal factors interact to shape memory.

**Savoring through Avoidance: Identity-based Strategic Memory Protection**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Today marketers are keenly aware that our memories of a consumption experience can greatly impact whether we will consume a product or experience again in the future. Yet, there is very little consumer research about how memories of identity-related experiences will impact consumers’ future identity-related consumption choices. We build on the idea of strategic memory protection (Zauber et al. 2008) and propose that consumers will protect identity-relevant memories to help reinforce that identity. The protection of identity-related memories is likely due to the critical role of identity in consumer self-conception. Salient experiences related to one’s romantic identity or friend identity are almost by definition special and valued. Moreover, consumers tend to revisit these memories when the relevant identity is activated, as in “interactions with important others (e.g., friends or loved ones) or momentous events (e.g., graduations, child birth)” (Wildschut et al. 2006). Thus, it should hold that we do not just protect special memories but we protect the memories experienced with special people.

One method consumers use to protect strong identities is to delay new experiences that could potentially weaken the link between memory and identity. Such delays allow consumers to savor the memory and thereby reinforce the identity. Although some consumer research has examined the effect of delayed consumption of products on evaluations of enjoyment through the process of savoring (Chew and Ho 1994; Lovall and Kahneman 2000; Nowlis et al. 2004), and other research has begun to connect identity and memory (Mercurio and Forehand 2011), the identity reinforcement related motivation and process is important yet understudied (Reed II et al. 2012).

To assess whether consumers with strong identities will delay new experiences that might interfere with identity-linked memories, we conducted two studies investigating behaviors related to consumer romantic identities. In study one, we asked married individuals to report the year and destination of their honeymoon and measured their romantic identification. Participants were then asked them to imagine that they were planning a vacation within the next year and had to choose between returning to their honeymoon destination and going someplace new. We hypothesized that both weak and strong romantic identifiers will attempt to reinforce their romantic identity, but will use opposing methods of doing so. Weak romantic identifiers will be drawn to the honeymoon locale to re-establish their identity and this desire should increase as their honeymoon became a more distant memory. In contrast, strong romantic identifiers will try to maintain their romantic by waiting a longer period of time to return to the honeymoon locale in order to not dilute the memory. Consistent with our hypothesis, a binary logistic regression showed a significant closeness (strength of identity measure) x year of honeymoon interaction ($\chi^2(1) = 4.2$, $p = .04$). We interpret this finding that those with strong and weak romantic identities are more likely to want to return to the original location but there may a process difference as to when they want to return and their motivations for returning.

To further investigate when consumers engage in behaviors to build or reinforce identities, we examined how consumers behave
when faced with the choice to re-live consumption experiences tied to specific identities. For example, if a consumer with a strong romantic identity went on a honeymoon trip with their romantic partner to a hotel in Mexico, they may be less likely to want to return to the same hotel for a bachelor party. This protection effect would occur largely because the romantic identity has a stronger association to the self-concept than the friend identity and consumers want to protect and savor the memories experienced when the romantic identity is activated.

In Experiment 2(a) we manipulated who participants went on a trip with to Mexico (friends vs. romantic partner), how special the original trip was (special vs. not special) and who they were returning with on a future trip in 2 years (friends vs. romantic partner). We then asked if they would want to return to the original hotel or to go to a similarly rated new hotel in the same city. We found that after consumers experienced a special identity-linked vacation, they were more likely to choose to go to a new vacation location in 2 years if the return trip was linked to a new identity (F(1, 397) = 10.65, p < .01). We also find that a similar pattern of results whereby participants indicated that the original trip would be tainted if they returned (F(1, 399) = 13.616, p < .01). This suggests that consumers choose to protect their identity-based memories when they are faced with having to return to the same location when a different identity is activated. However, we found that those who had their romantic identity activated during the special hotel trip to Mexico were more inclined to return to the same hotel in 2 years when their romantic identity was re-activated (F(1,380) = 5.031, p < .05).

Experiment 2(b) examined a time variable in order to understand whether those with strong (weak) social identities tend to savor and protect identity-linked memories. Using the same methodology as that used in Experiment 2a, we found that strong and weak romantic identifiers wished to return to their previous “special romantic getaway” at the same rates (presuming the upcoming trip was also for a romantic event). However, we found that those with strong romantic identities wanted to wait longer to return than those with weaker romantic identities (weak identity wait time to return M = 3.2 years; strong identity wait time to return M = 4.73 years; F(1,192) = 25.152, p < .00). This suggests that when an identity-based memory is good and the identity is important to a consumer’s self-concept, consumers are more inclined to savor their memories. However, similar to experiment 1, the results also suggest that consumers who have social identities may want to return more frequently to the place where they created the original memory to recreate the experience and re-ignite the strength of the social identity.

**Identity Preservation: If I Can Remember It, You Can Have It**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Possessions can define the self and become a part of one’s identity even to the extent that the loss of possessions can threaten self-identity (Belk 1988). Given the attachment consumers feel to their possessions, they often struggle to dispose of their possessions (Ferraro et al. 2011; Haws et al. 2012). Yet, little is known about how consumers could be encouraged to dispose of special possessions in a way that allows them to retain the memory associated with the product and minimize any identity threat from giving up their possession. One notable exception is Brough and Isaac’s (2012) work demonstrating that buyer usage intent influences consumers’ selling price when product attachment is high. Selling was the only product disposal method examined, but there are various other disposal methods such as throwing the product away, giving it away (to a friend or family connection associated with the self), and donating it. Not only is it important to understand what may aid consumers in product disposition, but it is also important to understand when consumers will dispose of their product in a method that may be beneficial to others rather than harmful to the environment (e.g., donate or sell versus throw away). Given the extent to which consumers strategically seek to retain their memories (Zauberman et al. 2009), we propose that memory preservation strategies assist consumers with disposal of identity-relevant products. Moreover, engaging in memory preservation will increase disposal through donating or selling items rather than throwing them away.

In Study 1, we examine the effect of memory preservation on product disposal preferences and memorability. Undergraduate participants identified one item they currently owned that was of sentimental value (because it was connected to a specific person or event that was relevant to their identity) and wrote a vivid description about the product and how they would feel if they had to dispose of it due to an upcoming move. Participants then indicated their perceived memory retention: “When you give up the product, how well do you think you’ll be able to remember the event or person associated with the product?” and indicated how likely they would be to give up the product in each of the following ways: throwing it away, trying to sell it (e.g., on EBay, at a garage sale), donating it (e.g., to Goodwill or other charity), and giving it to a friend or family member (1=very unlikely to 7=very likely). Then, participants either engaged in memory preservation by imagining and describing a photograph of the item or described their typical evening (control). Participants then reported their memory retention and disposal preferences again. Results indicated memory retention was greater when consumers engaged in memory preservation ([F(1,63)=2.10, p<.04). For disposition, consumers in the memory preservation (vs. control) condition were more likely to sell their product ([F(1,63)=5.39, p=.02) or donate their product([F(1,63)=3.06, p=.09). However, memory preservation condition did not impact preference for giving away ([F(1,63)=.01, p=.91) or throwing away the product ([F(1,63)=.22, p=.64]. Thus, this study suggests that engaging in memory preservation (e.g., taking a photograph) can enhance the perceived retention of product memories, increasing consumers’ willingness to sell or donate the product rather than giving or throwing it away.

We argue that consumers prefer not to sell or donate the product without memory preservation because they do not want another individual (not affiliated with the self through a friend or family connection) to use their identity-relevant product, as this, in some way, takes their identity. Memory aids do not influence giving to friends or family members because these recipients are already part of the extended self, so there is no concern that part of the self will be “taken” with the product. Memory aids do not influence throwing the product away because there is no risk of losing part of one’s identity when no one else will use the special possession.

In the second study, we replicated this effect and examined an alternative memory preservation method. Undergraduate student participants imagined they had a special college t-shirt that they wore to a memorable football game that reminds them of this special event and wrote down what they imagined the shirt meant to them. Then, participants were informed that they were moving and had to get rid of this t-shirt and were assigned to one of three conditions: personal memory aid (similar to study 1 photograph), memory sharing (attach something to the shirt when they dispose of it to help the next person understand how special the shirt was and their memories associated with the shirt), or control. Participants then indicated their disposal preferences and the extent to which their identity would be preserved depending on if they did or did not have future exposure to the prod-
uct (see the other person wearing their shirt). Results indicated there were no differences between the two memory preservation conditions (personal aid vs. sharing) in disposal preferences such that consumers in either memory preservation condition were more likely to sell ($F(1,217)=11.68, p<.01$) or donate ($F(1,217)=4.27, p=.04$) their product relative to the control condition. However, neither memory preservation condition resulted in differences in giving or throwing away the product relative to the control ($ps>.25$), replicating the result of Study 1. Interestingly, memory preservation type did influence identity preservation when participants imagined future product exposure ($F(2,216)=3.22, p=.04$) such that when participants imagined seeing the other person wearing their shirt, identity preservation was stronger in the memory sharing condition than in either the memory aid or control conditions. There were no differences in when there was no future product exposure.

These studies indicate that memory preservation, either through personal aids or sharing, can increase consumers’ likelihood of selling or donating their possessions. Notably, the type of memory preservation does impact the extent to which the identity is preserved when individuals see another person using their product. These studies open the door for future research regarding product disposal and identity preservation.

**Sentimental Social Roles and the Objects that Elicit Them**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The history of objects as carriers of culture has been noted by anthropologists since the early 20th century (De Saussure 1915) and that objects have a social meaning for their possessors and users has continued on to become one of the central tenets of consumer research (Belk 1988). Objects themselves are known to reflect, elicit and signal identities (Levy 1959; LaBoeuf et al. 2010), prime specific motor movements in muscle (Larson et al. 2012) and elicit social roles by their mere presence (Kay et al. 2004). Further, many objects produced in—or in fashion during—particular eras become associated with the time periods they represent (the “Flapper” dresses of the 1920s, bell-bottomed jeans from the 1970s) and one repeating trend in design is calling back to those eras with vintage design elements. Interesting work (though surprisingly little) has been done by researchers to understand what creates interest in these vintage items (Loveland et al. 2010), but the current work seeks to examine the impact the vintage items themselves have on their beholders. While research on implicit racism (Greenwald et al. 1998) and sexism (Rudman et al. 2001) has implied historical, quasi-anthropological origins for unsavory attitudes, recent research into less politically-charged subjects like North-South distinctions in American behavior (Nisbett and Cohen 1996) and implicit Puritanism in Americans (Uhlmann et al. 2011) has attempted to link current attitudes and behavior with specific historical periods. This work attempts to extend similar insights into the realm of consumer behavior and vintage products (there is no precise definition of terms like vintage, but consensus has formed that vintage design refers to designs under 80 years but over 30 years old).

One striking aspect of the differences between ‘vintage’ era products and modern products is the extent to which they should evoke different (i.e., more traditional) gender roles. In particular, female gender roles have changed enormously in the last 30 years and women now make up the majority of the labor force and college attendants—domains once seen as male-dominated (England 2006). This shift has seen women’s primary social role change from being ‘homemaker’ to ‘breadwinner’ and women are perceived as becoming more agentic in society (Diekman and Eagly 2000). However, men’s roles are generally not seen as modified and society does not expect an opposing move from men into lower-earning, lower-status, feminine roles in the future (Diekman et al. 2004). Together, these attitude shifts allow the possibility that, for women, vintage products might elicit social identity cues tied to the era in which they were produced, and that those cues would be distinct from modern era products. Yet, because men’s roles have not changed as much, they may be unaffected by behavioral cue differences in vintage and modern-era products. The current work, in fact, hypothesizes just this: 1) Because of the more substantial change in societal roles for women in the last half-century, vintage products will be a more powerful eliciting cue for women than for men in terms of idealizing accompanying behaviors. And 2) priming traditional gender identity will lead women, but not men, to enhance valuation of gender-stereotypic products with vintage design features because vintage-design positively biases women’s memory for the past.

In Study 1, we examined the effect of vintage vs. modern product design on how people idealize their behavior. Undergraduates were shown a range of products (either stereotypically feminine—e.g., a mixer—or masculine—e.g., a barware set—verified by pretest data to be gender stereotypic) with either vintage or modern design (pretests confirm this distinction). Following presentation of the products, participants were asked to rate on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all”; 7 = “all the time”) how much they currently did the activity associated with the product (i.e., baked, made cocktails) and then how much they would like to do that activity in their ideal life. The ‘current activity’ score was subtracted from the ‘ideal activity’ score to give an ‘Idealization’ index for every participant. After averaging idealization scores for each of the four product types (masculine vs. feminine; modern vs. vintage), two interactions emerged that supported our predictions. First, with respect to idealization of activities associated with traditionally female products, participant gender and design era interacted ($F(3,173)=5.12, p=.025$) such that women idealized the activities more after seeing a vintage-designed product rather than a modern one, $F(1,173)=12.41, p<.001$. Men, however, did not idealize these activities. Conversely, with respect to masculine consumer products, participant gender and design era interacted ($F(3,173)=12.01, p<.001$) such that women showed more idealization for modern products than vintage masculine products, $F(1,173)=19.12, p<.001$ while men showed no preference for products as a function of design era. These findings suggest that vintage-design products can positively bias memories of times-gone-by and thereby affect current preferences.

Study 2 was designed to test whether gender role activation underlies the effects in Study 1. Using a manipulation from Shih et al. (1999) we primed participants with gender roles. Because we hypothesized these roles are central in vintage product valuation for women—but not men—we expected gender primed women provide better evaluation of, and higher valuation for, vintage products as compared with modern products. We again expected no effect for men. Consistent with our predictions we found, in females, an interaction between gender role prime and preference for products, such that women primed with traditional gender roles evaluated vintage (but not modern) products when they were gender stereotypic (e.g., a mixer), but lower (compared with modern items) when they were seen as generally masculine items (e.g., a cocktail making set; $F(3,65)=3.41, p=.023$). Importantly, we also find that vintage-design makes women remember the past as being more positive for women, and this biased memory for the past mediates these effects. Taken together, these studies provide evidence that products from the same era can evoke different social identities and behavioral ide-
als. Women, who have seen vast role changes since the design era of the vintage products, seem to carry with them two era-specific sets of associations whereas men only carry one.

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