Will a Broad Identity Increase Preference For More Advanced Products? the Impact of Identity Breadth on Consumer Choice

Echo Wen Wan, Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Jing Xu, Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, Beijing, China
Ying Ding, School of Business, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

The current research investigates how framing one’s social identity at different breadth levels can influence consumers’ subjective knowledge and its consequence on subsequent product choice. Moreover, we show that the effect of identity breadth on subjective knowledge is attenuated when objective knowledge of the product domain is called into question.

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Ying Ding, Renmin University of China, China
Echo Wen Wan, University of Hong Kong, China
Jing Xu, Peking University, China

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consider one shopping scenario: Peter is choosing among a series of digital cameras including both digital point-and-shoot camera (designed for beginners) and advanced digital SLR camera (designed for semi-professionals or professionals). Which camera will Peter finally choose? And what factors will influence Peter’s choice? It’s widely accepted that consumer decision making is largely determined by how much knowledge or expertise they think they have about the given product. For instance, prior studies found that consumers’ subjective knowledge was an important determinant of product information search (Brucks 1985; Moorman et al. 2004; Rao and Sieben 1992), product information process (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Johnson and Russo 1984) and product choice (Burson 2007).

However, the metacognitive feeling of knowing is not fixed and can be influenced by situational factors (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). We propose that framing an individual’s social identity at different breadth level would influence his or her subjective knowledge, which in turn changes his/her preferences for more advanced products. According to the Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al. 1987), people have multiple social identities which could be organized into a hierarchy representing at three levels of abstraction: 1) The superordinate level corresponds to human beings, 2) the intermediate level of categorization focuses on similarities and differences in social groups, and 3) the subordinate level represented by the personal self, the unique “I.”

By extending this categorization, the current research proposes that social identities can be further differentiated at a spectrum of breadth. As an illustration, a broad identity defines a member in a superordinate group that is an overarching inclusive social category (e.g., professor). In contrast, a narrow identity defines a member in a subgroup that is highly specific and exclusive (e.g., a microbiology professor of science at a university). Given that the salient identity can make its corresponding category of knowledge more accessible for retrieval and usage (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, and Lee 2008; Devine and Monteth 1999), we propose that a broad identity, compared with a narrow identity, can increase the accessibility of a broader category of knowledge. On the contrary, a narrow identity corresponding to a limited and specific knowledge category may create the perception that a person knows little in domains beyond this narrow category.

As a result, we expect that individuals with a broad identity will feel more knowledgeable in general and that this heightened feeling of knowing will be readily applied to the product domain. Because subjective knowledge or expertise in a product domain is predictive of product choice (Brucks 1985; Burson 2007; Raju et al. 1995; Rao and Sieben 1992), we further propose that consumers will exhibit greater preference for more advanced products when they adopt a broad identity than a narrow identity. Because identity shift will not change the level of objective knowledge, we expect that this effect of identity level on preference for advanced products will be attenuated when consumers’ actual knowledge level of the product is called into question.

In order to test the proposed identity breadth effect, three empirical experiments were conducted. In experiment 1, we aimed to provide the initial evidence for the impact of identity breadth on consumers’ subjective knowledge. We employed a one factor (broad identity, narrow identity, no identity priming) between-subjects design. As predicted, participants primed as an employee of Hewlett-Packard Company (broad identity condition) scored higher than participants primed as an employee of the Engineering Management Department which is a subdivision under Hewlett-Packard Company (narrow identity condition) on the perception of knowledge in general ($p < .01$).

Experiment 2 was conducted to further investigate the influence of identity breadth on consumer choice, and employed a 2 (identity breadth: broad vs. narrow identity) x 2 (remind of objective knowledge: yes vs. no) between-subjects design. We manipulated identity breadth by making salient of a broad identity ("which university do you study in?") or a narrow identity ("which specific department/major do you study in?"). Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the broad identity condition (vs. narrow identity condition) were more likely to choose the more advanced software if their objective knowledge was not called into question ($M_{broad} = 3.57$, SD = 1.33 vs. $M_{narrow} = 2.56$, SD = 1.25; $F(1,55) = 8.68$, $p < .01$). But if the participants’ objective knowledge was called into question, the difference in choosing more advanced software between broad and narrow identity became insignificant ($p > .80$, NS).

Finally, in experiment 3, we examined the process that underlyng the influence of identity breadth on consumer choice, and ruled out some alternative explanations. Experiment 3 employed a 2 (identity breadth: broad vs. narrow identity) x 2 (remind of objective knowledge: yes vs. no) between-subjects design and manipulated the identity breadth by the similar procedure as that used in experiment 2. The findings suggested that compared with participants in the narrow identity condition ($M = 2.89$, SD = .94), those in the broad identity condition expressed higher preference for the more advanced camera ($M = 3.54$, SD = 1.04) if there was no reminder of objective knowledge ($F(1,45) = 4.68$, $p < .05$). This effect disappeared when the objective knowledge was reminded ($p > .20$, NS). In addition, a 95% bootstrapping analysis confirmed the mediation role of subjective knowledge (95% CI = 1.25 to -0.9).

To summarize, the present research identifies broad versus narrow identity breadth as one important antecedent of consumers’ subjective knowledge level and investigates its consequences on their decision making. Our findings could make substantial contributions to the related literatures about social identity by providing an initial investigation of the broad versus narrow identity breadth paradigm. Furthermore, the current paper adds evidence to consumer knowledge calibration (Goldsmith and Pillai 2006) by documenting that identity breadth may lead to miscalibration. Importantly, results from the three experiments could provide meaningful implications for marketing practice. To illustrate, marketers can consider activating a broad identity for consumers in order to promote the professional model of products. Conversely, activating a narrow identity may be more effective in increasing preference for the amateur model of products.
REFERENCES