Superordinate Regional Identities and the Salience of Intergroup Rivalry: Effects of Spontaneous Recategorization on Brand Attitudes

Carlos J. Torelli, University of Minnesota, USA
Jennifer L. Stoner, University of Minnesota, USA
Rohini Ahluwalia, University of Minnesota, USA
Shirley Y. Y. Cheng, Hong Kong Baptist University

Under the influence of chronically/temporarily salient identity needs, and when exposed to brands associated with a subgroup nested within the same regional identity, consumers can recategorize at the superordinate regional identity and exhibit more favorable attitudes toward former outgroup brands. However, this effect only emerges under low-levels of rivalry salience.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017846/volumes/v42/NA-42

[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/.
Superordinate Regional Identities and the Salience of Intergroup Rivalry: Effects of Spontaneous Recategorization on Brand Attitudes
Carlos J. Torelli, University of Minnesota, USA
Rohini Ahluwalia, University of Minnesota, USA
Jennifer L. Stoner, University of Minnesota, USA
Shirley Y. Y. Cheng, Hong Kong Baptist University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Social identity is a central concept for explaining consumer behavior. Past empirical investigations of social identity effects on consumption have focused on actual or desired social identities likely to be distinctively represented in memory, such as family identity (Reed 2004), college student identity (Cialdini et al. 1976), or cultural or national identity (Torelli 2013). However, no consumer research has focused on regional (geographical-region based) identities that are represented at a superordinate level of categorization, and therefore, by their very nature are typically not as salient as other basic level categories (Mervis and Rosch 1981). For instance, although in the United States people from a given state may define themselves in terms of a distinctive social identity (i.e., Wisconsinites or Minnesotans), larger regions that share similar cultural, economic, and historic roots can also develop a superordinate regional identity (i.e., Upper Midwesterner, Ostergren 1988). Because these aggregate regional identities consist of subgroups in close geographical proximity, they are often considered to be outgroups, or even rival groups. As such, these identities present unique issues of their own. Specifically, recategorization at their superordinate level might not occur spontaneously and has the potential to bring together rival sub-groups.

What subtle cues can prompt recategorization at this superordinate level? How do these identities guide consumer behavior? What is the role that potential rivalries between subgroup identities play in determining the effects of recategorization on consumer behavior? This research tries to provide answer to these questions and contribute to the literature by showing that regional identities can: (1) be subtly activated by environmental cues, (2) lead to assimilation effects and guide behavior in identity-congruent ways, (3) lead to contrast effects and backfire when rivalries between subgroups are salient.

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1985) posits that people are motivated to identify with their groups in order to reduce subjective uncertainty about who they are as well as to enhance their self-esteem. This self-enhancement motive triggers the more favorable evaluation of ingroup members as well as of things associated with the ingroup. However, ingroup – outgroup boundaries are permeable, as intergroup comparisons often occur within the context of a superordinate category (Turner 1975). Self-categorization can be conceived as a hierarchical arrangement, including social identities (subgroups) that are nested within more inclusive social identities (superordinate groups). People can define themselves in terms of either subgroup or superordinate identities depending on the context, which has profound consequences for their attitudes toward others that might (not) be considered outgroup members. Specifically, when members of different subgroups (e.g., Minnesotans and Wisconsinites) are induced to think of themselves as a single superordinate group (e.g., Upper Midwesteners) rather than two separate groups, attitudes toward former outgroup members can become more positive (i.e., pro-ingroup bias, Gaertner et al. 1993). However, when recategorization at a superordinate social identity becomes a threat to positivity and distinctiveness, such recategorization processes can backfire and increase intergroup bias (Crisp, Stone, and Hall 2006). We propose that, in certain contexts, encountering a brand associated with a subgroup nested within a common superordinate regional identity can trigger recategorization at the superordinate level and result in more favorable brand evaluations (i.e., pro-ingroup bias). This will be more likely to occur when consumers have heightened social identity needs and when ingroup-outgroup rivalries are less salient.

This research demonstrates the contextualization of recategorization at a superordinate regional identity, and the role of rivalry salience and social identity needs in the emergence of pro-ingroup bias toward brands that symbolize a subgroup nested within a superordinate regional identity.
REFERENCES