The Influence of Social Identity on Disposal Behavior

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Across five studies, we show that consumers’ recycling tendencies are greater when a product possesses a relevant social identity, because possessions linked to a salient social identity are valued more and throwing this possession into the trash threatens one’s identity, a state consumers will seek to avoid.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Given the significant amount of municipal waste that is generated in the US and abroad, it is not surprising that efforts have been made to reduce the need for landfills and incineration by encouraging consumers to dispose of products in a greener fashion (e.g., recycle). Unfortunately, nearly 60% of what is in our landfills is recyclable (EPA 2012) and thus identifying factors that determine whether a product is recycled or trashed may play an important role in helping to conserve the environment.

To date, the majority of research that has investigated consumer disposal decisions and recycling behavior has primarily focused on the influence of individual-related characteristics (e.g., McCarty and Shrum 2001) and the efficacy of different promotional-related strategies (e.g., White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011) on a consumer’s intention to recycle. More recently, Trudel and Argo (2013) investigated the impact of characteristics (i.e., size and form) related to the product itself. They found that consumers are more likely to trash a product that is small (vs. large) and whose form has been distorted (vs. not distorted), as in both of these instances consumers perceive there has been a decrease in the usability of the product. The present research seeks to integrate this past research on recycling with work that explores the role of product meaning and identity in consumption decisions (e.g., Ferraro, Escalas and Bettman 2011) to propose that the extent to which a product possesses an aspect of a consumer’s identity will predict disposal decisions (i.e., to recycle or trash the product).

We suggest that linking everyday products to consumers’ identities may enhance the product’s meaningfulness and subsequently impact consumers’ disposal behaviors. However, unlike the meaningful possessions studied in previous research (e.g., Belk 1988), everyday products are rarely kept, sold, or given away to others after consumption; thus, disposal options for such products typically involve a decision between either throwing the product in the trash or in the recycling. Given that past research has found that products are trashed when they are deemed worthless (i.e., useless; Trudel and Argo 2013), we argue that a decision to throw an identity-linked product in the trash will symbolically represent a threat to the self, as in essence you would be throwing a piece of your “self” in the trash and by extension you must be worthless. As such, when an identity-link is made salient and because consumers are motivated to maintain a positive self-worth (Steele 1988; and by extension, their identity tied to the product), we expect that they will opt for the least threatening means to dispose of an identity-linked product (i.e., recycle as compared to trash).

Across eight studies we provide robust evidence for our theorizing using a variety of everyday product categories (i.e., paper, plastic cups, paper cups, and aluminum cans) and identities (i.e., social-identity at the university- and nationality-level, as well as self-identity at the individual- and brand-level). We demonstrate that when an everyday product is linked to a consumer’s identity it is more likely to be recycled as compared to trashed. Further, we find that the tendency to recycle an identity-linked product increases with the strength of the connection between the consumer and product (or brand). Finally, we show our effects arise due to a motivation to avoid trashing a product that is linked to the self because it is viewed as a self-threat. From a theoretical perspective, this research explores the impact of non-tangible characteristics related to the product itself – the extent to which it has an identity that is important to consumers and thus links the product to the individual. We have shown that identity-links are not exclusive to meaningful (i.e., special) possessions but can also be formed with everyday products, even when they are no longer needed or wanted. Importantly our results suggest that placing these identity-linked products in the trash creates a threat to the self; a situation consumers are motivated to avoid.

REFERENCES