Compensatory Contagion: Social Identity Threat and Celebrity Contagion

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This research examines a novel way in which consumers respond to social identity threat. Drawing on fluid compensation theory, we show that people exhibit a preference for objects previously owned by celebrities who are unrelated to a threatened social identity and that this relationship is driven by contagion.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Drawing on fluid compensation theory (Tesser 2000), we show that people prefer objects previously owned by celebrities who are unrelated to a threatened social identity and that this preference is driven by contagion – the belief that a person’s essence can be transferred through physical contact (Rozin et al. 1994). These findings build on recent research identifying the role of contagion in consumer behavior (Newman and Bloom 2014; Newman and Bloom 2012; Kramer and Block 2014) and provide the first experimental evidence of the relationship between beliefs about contagion and social identity threat. Specifically, we contribute to the social identity literature by demonstrating that people attempt to resolve threat by seeking the essence of a celebrity in an alternate, unthreatened, social identity domain. Furthermore, we contribute to the contagion literature by demonstrating that preference for objects previously owned by celebrities can be positively impacted when that celebrity is unrelated to a consumer’s threatened social identity. Critical to the proposed role of contagion, all celebrity objects across studies were identity neutral and only made relevant to a particular social identity by the person who had previously had contact with them.

Social identity theory argues that a component of one’s self-concept is derived from actual or perceived membership in different social groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). When social identities are threatened, people tend to avoid products related to the threatened identity (White and Argo, 2009) and are motivated to forget identity-linked promotions (Dalton and Huang, 2013). In order to maintain a positive view of the self (Steele, 1988), compensatory responses to threat often take place in an unrelated domain (Sobol and Darke 2013). According to fluid compensation theory, self-goals are organized in a hierarchical structure, allowing for various lower-level goals to be substituted to serve an overarching higher-level goal (Tesser 2000). Given that the purchase of celebrity objects is driven by the desire to acquire the essence of positive figures (Newman et al. 2011; Newman and Bloom 2014), we suggest that this preference will be augmented when the celebrity is associated with a domain unrelated to the source of threat.

In study 1 (N = 61) participants were randomly assigned to one of two manipulations: volunteer identity threat or athlete identity threat (adapted from Coleman and Williams 2013). Participants were asked to recall and write about a time when they failed or underperformed in their role as an athlete or volunteer. Then in an ostensibly unrelated study, participants viewed a product from an online auction. Similar to prior work (Newman et al. 2011), participants viewed a picture of a black cotton jacket and were told that “this jacket was previously owned and worn by Mike Tyson.” A jacket was chosen because it is irrelevant to both the athlete and volunteer identity. Results showed that participants in the volunteer threat condition were willing to pay significantly more for Mike Tyson’s jacket compared to those in the athlete threat condition. This study offered initial support for our basic prediction that social identity threat impacts the valuation of celebrity objects.

Study 2 tested whether two distinct social identity threats would interact with two distinct sources of celebrity contagion. Participants (N = 160) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2(identity threat: athlete/businessperson) × 2(celebrity: Bill Gates/LeBron James) between-subjects design. Procedures were identical to study 1. Results showed a significant interaction. Simple effects revealed that when the sweater was previously owned by LeBron James, participants in the businessperson threat condition were willing to pay significantly more compared to participants in the athlete threat condition. Conversely, when the sweater was previously owned by Bill Gates, participants in the athlete threat condition were willing to pay significantly more compared to participants in the businessperson threat condition.

Study 3 provided a conceptual replication and investigated the role of contagion by manipulating contact. Given that contagion is a heuristic that operates below conscious awareness (Rozin and Nemeroff 2002), we predicted contagion to impact valuations during the presence of cognitive load. Participants (N = 137) were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2(threat: athlete/business) × 2(contagion: low contact/high contact) × 2(load/control) between-subjects design. After the identity threat manipulation, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated study where they provided their valuations of a jacket either owned but never worn (low contact) or owned and worn (high contact) by Sidney Crosby. Results showed a significant 3-way interaction. Simple effects revealed that when participants viewed a sweater that Sidney Crosby had high contact with, only those exposed to the businessperson threat reported significantly higher valuations when they were under cognitive load.

The current research demonstrates one motivational force behind consumers’ preference for products previously owned by celebrities. Specifically, identity threat leads people to value the possessions of a celebrity associated with an unrelated social identity because of the desire for that celebrity’s essence – an effect we refer to as compensatory contagion.

REFERENCES


