So Many Selves: the Effect of Self-Complexity on Attitudes Toward Identity Goods

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The model of self-complexity assumes that self-representations differ in terms of both the number of and distinctions between self-aspects. Multiple studies demonstrate a significant positive effect of self-complexity on attitudes toward identity-consistent goods and provide evidence that the malleability of the self mediates this relationship.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
While previous literature has acknowledged that consumers hold a multitude of identities (Reed et al. 2012), the typical approach to understanding the effect of identity on consumer behavior has examined single identities in isolation. The present research attempts to bridge this gap by introducing self-complexity to the consumer behavior literature. Self-complexity captures the structure of self-representations by assessing both the number of identities and the degree to which distinctions are made among identities (Linville 1985, 1987). Greater self-complexity involves having more identities and maintaining fewer redundancies between them.

We propose that greater self-complexity is associated with a more malleable self for two reasons. First, when an individual holds only a couple identities, the potential variation in the working self-concept is reduced compared to an individual with multiple identities. Second, when there is greater overlap among identities, the ability for the self to vary in a particular context is further limited. Consistent with this theorizing, in their “boundary theory” of roles, Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate (2000) argue that boundaries enable one to concentrate on whatever role is currently accessible. Given that boundaries make it easier to focus on a particular identity and individuals with high self-complexity have both numerous identities and boundaries between identities, these individuals should have a more malleable self.

A malleable self means that there is more variation in the identities that are accessible at any moment (Markus and Kunda 1986). Consumers prefer and have more positive attitudes toward products and brands that are consistent with an accessible identity (Aaker 1999; Reed 2004; Reed et al. 2012). Individuals who have a more malleable self due to higher self-complexity should find it easier to activate and focus solely on the product-relevant identity whereas those with lower self-complexity and thus less malleability may lack the fluidity to focus on this particular identity. In sum, we predict that greater self-complexity will be associated with more positive attitudes toward identity-linked goods and that the malleability of the self will mediate this effect.

Undergraduate business majors (n = 119) began study 1 by completing the measure of self-complexity (Linville 1987). Following a filler task, participants saw a series of goods, two of which contained the logo of the students’ business school and were of primary interest to us, and evaluated each item using the same nine-point bipolar scales (unfavorable/favorable, dislike/like, and bad/good). We found that self-complexity was significantly and positively associated with attitudes toward the identity goods (b = .51, t(117) = 2.36, p < .02). Undergraduate students (n = 212) participated in study 2. Following the same self-complexity measure from study 1, respondents completed a response latency task that served as our measure of self-malleability (Markus and Kunda 1986). Participants judged whether 50 different words (e.g., woman, musician, poet) did or did not describe themselves by pressing designated keys on the keyboard as quickly as possible. We averaged their response time over all of the words. Following the response latency task, participants saw a series of goods, three of which (a highlighter set, a travel coffee mug, and a t-shirt) contained the logo of the students’ university and were of primary interest to us, and evaluated each of the items using the same measures from study 1. Self-complexity was significantly associated with both attitudes toward the identity goods (b = .59, t(209) = 3.30, p < .02) and response latencies (b = .47, t(209) = 2.25, p < .03). The latter result supports our theorizing that people with greater self-complexity have more malleable selves and thus their identities are more accessible to them. Furthermore, response latencies significantly mediated the effect of self-complexity on attitude toward identity goods (95% CI = .0017 to .1775).

In study 3, we examined the moderating effect of an identity threat. Because individuals with low self-complexity have less malleable selves, they should be more likely to fight back against an identity threat. In contrast, individuals with high self-complexity have more malleable selves so they may buffer against a threat by disassociating with the identity. Therefore, we expect attitudes toward identity goods to be lower (higher) in the identity threat condition than in the control condition among individuals with high (low) self-complexity.

Participants (n = 236) began study 3 by completing the measure of self-complexity. Those in the identity threat condition then read either the gender identity threat or a control passage (White and Argo 2009). Next, participants saw items, two of which (a coffee mug and a notebook) were related to the participant’s gender, and evaluated the items using the same measures from the previous studies.

The interaction of self-complexity with identity threat significantly predicted product attitudes (F(1, 230) = 5.80, p < .02). Greater self-complexity was associated with more positive attitudes toward identity goods in the control condition (b = .71, t(230) = 2.46, p < .02), but had no effect in the identity threat condition (b = -.25, t(230) = -.88, p > .37).

To better understand the nature of the interaction we employed the Johnson-Neyman Technique (Spiller et al. 2013). We found that at high levels of self-complexity participants reported higher product attitudes in the control condition than in the identity threat condition (Johnson-Neyman point = 3.6830, alpha = .05). At low levels of self-complexity product attitudes in the control condition were lower than in the identity threat condition (Johnson-Neyman point = 1.6316, alpha = .05).

Across three studies we find that individuals high in self-complexity have more positive evaluations of identity-linked goods than individuals low in self-complexity and that the malleability of the self mediates this relationship. We also show this effect can be reversed under an identity threat, as individuals with low (high) self-complexity react to an identity threat by associating (disassociating) with the identity. In sum, self-complexity presents a novel way to capture the dynamic structure of individuals’ self-concepts. By examining the effect of self-complexity on identity-linked product attitudes, we offer a more comprehensive understanding of how one’s self influences consumer behavior.

REFERENCES