Making Meaning: How Consumers Build Their Identity Into Their Own Creative Outcomes

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Across three studies, we test how identity activation and input constraints influence consumers’ assessments of their own creations. Ironically, we find that while identity may motivate creative behavior, activating a familiar identity can lead consumers to generate familiar ideas. Constraints, however, lead to more effortful search and meaningful outcomes.

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To Be, or Not to Be (Me)? Role of Identity in Creating Custom Products
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Paper #3: When "Valentino" Gets Personal: Is Customization the New Luxury?
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Paper #4: How Cultural Identity Drives the Effectiveness of Mass Customization
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SESSION OVERVIEW

The customization of products is generally regarded as a way to match one’s preferences with one’s identity (e.g., Franke and Schreier 2008; Mugge, Brunel, and Schoormans 2011). When football fans customize apparel with team colors or coffee aficionados create custom coffee blends, the customization literature has considered this mostly a reflection of their identities. However, few studies have considered that consumers’ identities are inherently intertwined with the customization process. The papers in this session take this novel perspective and ask: How do identities interact with and shape the customization process? Specifically, they examine how different aspects of the customization process interact with consumers’ identities, from more micro-level aspects (e.g., whether resources are constrained or examples of customized products are provided, papers 1 & 2) to more macro-level aspects (e.g., the industry or cultural context, papers 3 & 4) of the customization process. Jointly these papers highlight a theoretically and substantively important relationship between identity and the customization process that was previously overlooked.

Herd and Moreau examine how consumers’ creations are affected by salient identities. Products created when a familiar identity is active are seen by consumers as less creative and less meaningful. However, when resource inputs are constrained during the creation process, consumers with activated identities exert more effort and create products that are more meaningful.

Lee, Diehl, and Cavanaugh examine how a consumer’s design decisions are affected by customization examples of other consumers, specifically the identity of the example creator (i.e., close vs. distant social other). Customized examples by a close other suggest that target consumers should express uniqueness. In order to express uniqueness, consumers make customization choices that are actually more dissimilar to close others relative to distant others.

Hieke, Moreau, and Schreier examine customization decisions in the luxury context. When consumers integrate their identities into luxury products, the designer’s identity or essence inherent to the product is diminished. Their findings suggest an optimal self-to-designer-essence ratio, where customized products are perceived as having both the consumer’s essence and the luxury brand’s essence, can maximize purchase intent of customized luxury products.

De Bellis, Hildebrand, Ito, Herrmann, and Schmitt examine how cultural aspects of identity affect customization. Because cultural background influences how individuals think and process information, the choice architecture of customization decisions should be tailored to consumers’ culture-specific processing styles. The findings show that congruence between a customization choice interface and consumers’ culture-specific processing style increases mental simulation of and satisfaction with customized products.

Together, these papers examine how consumer identities are not merely reflected by customization decisions but in fact crucially shape customization decisions. All papers are at an advanced stage of completion with multiple studies completed. This session will provide novel insights to a wide range of researchers, notably those interested in customization, product design, and creativity as well as those examining the role of individual and group identities and identity-based motivation in consumer contexts.

Making Meaning: How Consumers Build Their Identity Into Their Own Creative Outcomes

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When consumers engage in a creative task – whether scrapbooking or customizing a sneaker – often one of their key goals is to develop or reinforce their self-identity and to express aspects of themselves (Dahl and Moreau 2007). However, identity domains are often chronically accessible simply because they are used to guide behavior so frequently. This accessibility can be a detriment in the context of creativity (Aarts and Dijksterhuis 2000; Rietzschel et al. 2006). Because of this possibility, we propose that consumers whose identity is activated will exert more effort and create more meaningful outcomes when resource inputs are constrained. When identity is not activated, however, input constraints will not yield a significant effect on the meaning of the outcome.

In our first study (N = 110), we manipulated two factors between participants: identity prime (present vs. absent) and constraints (high vs. low). All participants were asked to create a desktop wallpaper using Microsoft Paint. Participants in the “identity prime” condition were asked to think about how their design could represent or reflect something interesting or important about them. Those in the “no identity prime” condition were asked to think about the types of products that could have a background wallpaper like the one they were designing. We manipulated input constraints by providing participants with either limited or extensive shape/color inputs. Participants evaluated their drawings on four 7-point scales which captured how much their design reflected who they are, how much it expressed aspects of their identity, how proud they were of it, and how much they would like to show it to others (Richins 1994; α = .91).

The results revealed a main effect of identity prime (M_identity = 3.84 vs. M_no_identity = 2.96; F(1, 105) = 8.88, p < .01) and a significant interaction (F(1, 105) = 5.42, p < .05). When an identity prime was
present, participants designing with fewer inputs created outcomes they judged to be more meaningful than those who had more inputs at their disposal; this effect was attenuated when the identity prime was absent.

In addition to identifying the process underlying the effects observed in study 1, the next study is designed to replicate these effects in a new context and to test a boundary condition: the structure of the task. In the next study (N = 302), three factors were manipulated between-participants: identity prime, constraints, and task structure. All participants received a blank piece of white paper and a closed pencil box containing (either 6 or 15) colored pencils. The identity manipulation was similar to the manipulation used in study 1. In the “unstructured” task environment, participants were not given any specific directions regarding how to approach the task. As in study 1, we simply told them to begin drawing whenever they were ready. In the “structured” task environment, they were provided step-by-step instructions (e.g., “When thinking about your design, you might find it helpful to focus on the specific elements of your drawing such as shapes, colors, lines, symmetry”). The same items used to capture meaning in study 1 were used in this study (α = .85). We also captured self-reported effort. Participants responded to three 7-point scales indicating the extent to which they put a lot of effort into the task, were engaged in the task, and felt it important to create a good design (α = .82).

The results revealed both the expected main effect of the identity prime as well as the predicted three-way interaction on meaning. As in study 1, participants primed with their identity prior to the task rated their drawings as more meaningful than those who did not receive an identity prime (F(1, 294) = 6.28, p < .02). When the creative task was unstructured, the results from study 1 replicated. When the creative task was structured, there were no significant effects of identity prime, input constraints, or their interaction. A similar pattern emerged for effort and moderated mediation analyses revealed that input constraints’ direct effect on meaning was moderated by identity prime and input constraints’ indirect effect on meaning was mediated by effort and moderated by identity prime with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (-.77 to -.02), but not in the no identity condition with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (.12 to .50; Hayes 2012).

In our third study (N = 181) we manipulated identity prime and input constraints. All participants read a news article. Those in the identity condition were asked to think about how that article relates to their identity and how they could integrate those ideas into their drawing; those in the no identity prime condition were asked to think about what came to mind when they read the article and how they could integrate those ideas into their drawing; those in the control condition read the article and no further directions were provided in relation to their drawing. The meaning measure from the previous studies was adapted to fit the context (α = .82). The results revealed a main effect of the prime (F(1, 181) = 10.04, p < .01), which was qualified by a significant interaction F(1, 181) = 3.13, p < .05). Participants in the identity prime condition created more meaningful designs when inputs were constrained (Midentity_low constraint = 3.79 vs. Midentity_high constraint = 4.31; F(1, 181) = 4.54, p < .05), but no significant difference emerged across the other prime conditions.

In this research, we contribute to the growing creativity literature by highlighting the importance of identity activation on consumers’ evaluations of their own creations. We find that while identity may motivate creative behavior, activating a familiar identity can lead consumers to generate familiar ideas. When constraints are introduced, consumers generate more meaningful creations. In doing so, we reconcile the opposing findings across the creativity and customization literatures which have shown that constraints can enhance (e.g., Moreau and Dahl 2005; Sellier and Dahl 2011) or inhibit (e.g., Franke et al. 2010) evaluations of a consumer’s creative outcome.

**Being Unique Makes Us Similar: How Example Designs and Their Creators Influence How We Customize**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

To aid and inspire consumers during the customization process, marketers often provide examples of how other consumers customized their products. Yet, providing such examples can seem incongruous given that a primary reason people customize is to express uniqueness (Lynn and Snyder 2002). We examine how customization examples shape the target consumer’s customization decisions. We particularly focus on the target consumer’s relationship with the example creator, namely whether the creator is a close or distant other.

Previous findings suggest that people often exhibit greater choice similarity with close (versus distant) others as a means of affiliation (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Mead et al. 2010). When consumers learn which product a close (versus distant) other purchased, consumers frequently choose something similar to affiliate with the close other. However, these findings are based on learning about others’ ready-made product choices - products with pre-set designs, unaltered by consumers. We argue that affiliation with close others will manifest differently when encountering custom-made products - products with designs created or altered (i.e., customized) by the consumer.

Customization and expressions of uniqueness are closely intertwined (Lynn and Snyder 2002). Hence, we suggest that encountering examples of customized products highlights the need to express uniqueness. Because individuals want to affiliate more with close (versus distant) others, individuals who see close (versus distant) others express their uniqueness via customization will be more inclined to also express their own uniqueness. This situation parallels findings that when a group’s objective is to be creative and original, people who want to affiliate with the group generate more divergent ideas (Bechtoldt et al. 2010). Hence, unlike the ready-made context, here, consumers will not make the same customization choices as the close other (i.e., choice similarity decreases). Notably, we expect that people want to affiliate more with close (versus distant) others in situations involving ready- and custom-made products, but how this affiliation manifests in their choices differs based on the decision context. When close others customize products on the basis of expressing uniqueness, individuals will affiliate by also expressing uniqueness through making divergent choices.

Three experiments test these predictions. All experiments used product examples pre-tested to have appealing designs to mitigate the possibility that choice dissimilarity with the product example was due to unappealing designs.

**Study 1** (N=290) tested whether example type (ready- versus custom-made) and example creator (close versus distant other) influenced individuals’ propensity to make customization decisions similar to the example. Participants imagined running into either a close friend or distant acquaintance wearing a backpack. They then viewed an image of this backpack (i.e., the product example), which was decorated with eight different patches. The backpack design was held constant, but participants in the ready-made condition were told the backpack was designed by the retailer whereas participants in the custom-made condition were told the backpack was designed by their close friend [distant acquaintance]. All participants then customized a backpack by adding eight of 24 patch options onto their backpack. The number of selected patches that matched those on the example
backpack served as our measure of choice similarity. A significant interaction of example type and example creator (F(1, 286)=9.52, p<.003) was found. For the ready-made backpack example, encountering a close other’s (M=3.87) backpack increased choice similarity with that example compared to seeing a distant other’s (M=3.28; F(1, 286)=5.57, p<.02). However, for custom-made backpack examples, encountering examples by close others (M=3.03) decreased choice similarity relative to distant others (M=3.49; F(1, 286)=3.98, p<.05).

While Study 1 was scenario-based, participants in Study 2 (N=186) actually created and kept their customized products. All participants saw an example notebook customized with emojis. Again, this example was attributed to either a close or distant other. Participants then customized their own notebook with emojis. We replicate our finding that custom-made examples by close others (M=3.04) led to decreased choice similarity relative to examples by distant others (M=3.48; F(1, 185)=6.18, p<.02).

Study 3 (N=802) tested an alternative explanation for our findings. White and Argo (2011) found that people react negatively when their individuality has been compromised (e.g., copied) for high acquisition possessions (e.g., customized products). Thus, participants in our studies may have made dissimilar choices preemptively to avoid potential negative reactions from close others who had customized their products. To test this possibility, we manipulated whether one’s customization decisions (i.e., their product design) were private or public. When others are unaware of one’s customization decisions, individuals will not need to avoid negative reactions (by making dissimilar choices) from close others who customized.

Participants encountered an example tissue box design that was either ready- or custom-made and attributed to either a close or distant other. Before participants customized their own box, they were told that their design (i.e., their customization decisions) would be shared with the example creator, either publicly with their name attached or privately without their name. We replicate our previous interaction effect of example type and example creator (p<.001), but find no difference between the public and private conditions (three-way interaction: F<1). That is, even when designs were private, individuals made more dissimilar choices when the custom-made examples they saw were from a close (M=1.71) versus distant other (M=2.13; F(1, 794)=6.18, p<.02). Moreover, regardless of example type, participants anticipated greater negative reactions for copying distant (M=4.04) rather than close (M=3.76; F(1, 794)=4.86, p<.03) others, suggesting that anticipated negative reactions do not account for our effects.

While marketer-provided examples may seem at odds with customization, providing examples from close others can increase customization as consumers affiliate with expressions of uniqueness.

When “Valentino” Gets Personal: Is Customization the New Luxury?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

New product development in luxury fashion used to be the exclusive responsibility of professional designers. Luxury fashion designers appear to dictate what fashion really is. Moreover, consumers believe designers have some sixth sense about aesthetics and that designers transfer their essence into the luxury products they design. Consequently, consumers highly value this designer essence, as they view the designer as sublime in taste and fashion-expertise. Indeed, Fuchs et al. (2013) found that leaving the designer aside, by labelling luxury fashion products as crowdsourced, can backfire as consumers perceived these luxury products to be lower in quality and fail to signal high status. These findings would then recommend refraining from customization in the luxury sector.

In sharp contrast, innovation is increasingly being democratized and consumers across industries are taking on an active role in the new product development process (von Hippel and Katz 2002). For example, consumers using mass customization technology are enabled to self-design their own products, which the company then produces. Extant research has highlighted the numerous positive effects of self-customization (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010). By designing a product, the consumer’s self-essence is transferred into the product.

This leaves the question of how well self-customization resonates with customers of luxury brands. In order to optimize purchase intent, should brands maximize the designer’s essence or should consumers be able to customize and transfer their self-essence into luxury products? Despite the promising findings in the non-luxury sector, little research has addressed the effects of mass customization for luxury fashion products.

In Study 1 (N=127), a repeated-measures ANOVA revealed that consumers’ purchase intent for Valentino sneakers differed significantly as a function of design source (professionally-designed, self-customized, and crowdsourced; F(2, 125)=49.73, p<.00). This study shows a clear consumer preference for customized products (M_{customized}=5.06) over purely designer-designed, standard products in the luxury fashion context (M_{professionally-designed}=4.32, t=-4.16, p<.00). Additionally, we replicate the findings of Fuchs et al. (2013) with respondents indicating the least preference for crowdsourced luxury products (M_{crowdsourced}=3.23).

Study 2 (N=324) revealed that an increase in solution space (low vs. medium solution space), that is, the range of design options provided to the consumer, results in higher purchase intent (M_{low}=4.25, M_{medium}=4.65). We obtain similar results when treating respondents’ purchase intent for their selected standard shoes merely as a control variable (i.e., adding it as a covariate to a simple ANOVA on respondents’ purchase intent for their self-customized shoes). In contrast to our purchase intent results, an ANOVA on perceived designer essence reveals a significant negative effect of the treatment. Respondents with medium solution space feel that there is less designer essence in their customized shoes (M=4.85) compared to those with low solution space (M=5.25, F(1, 315)=9.07, p<.01). A noteworthy finding is that perceived designer essence is positively related to respondents’ intent to buy their self-customized shoes (b=.22, SE=.09, p<.05).

This raises the question if, besides designer essence, the contribution of the consumer’s self-essence also drives his or her preferences for customized luxury fashion products. Hence, an optimized relation between self- and designer essence might result in an increase in purchase intent.

Study 3 (N=366) builds on these ideas and extends the pattern of results of Study 2 by documenting an inverted U-shape effect of solution space (low vs. medium vs. high). Importantly, this effect was mediated by the ratio of self- to designer essence: the “essence-ratio”. An ANOVA on self- in relation to designer essence (essence-ratio), reveals that the solution space manipulation has a linear effect on this variable (F(2, 353)=38.94, p<.001); respondents in the high solution space condition indicate to perceive more self- in relation to designer essence in the customized product (M=2.66) compared to those in the medium solution space condition (M=2.14; F(1, 237)=4.59, p<.05) who themselves indicate to perceive more self- in relation to designer essence than those in the low solution space condition (M=1.50, F(1,239)=11.03, p<.001). In order to test for the predicted inverted U-shape relationship between the essence-ratio
and the value of self-customization in the context of luxury fashion brands, we ran a hierarchical quadratic regression model. Critically, we find that the addition of the squared term of the essence-ratio significantly increased the explanatory power of the model (change in $F(1, 352)=14.89, p<.001$). As predicted, we find a negative effect of essence-ratio squared ($b=-.58, t=-3.86, p<.001$). Interestingly, this pattern of results does not emerge for either of the two essence measures if analyzed separately.

The theoretical insight here is that at first, an increase in self-essence adds more value than what the simultaneous decrease in designer essence detracts in value. However, further increases in self-essence may add less value as designer essence continues to decrease. Thus, there is a point in the essence-ratio beyond which increases in self-essence negatively relate to preference.

Many of the customization tools currently offered equip consumers with very low levels of design freedom. Our findings indicate that incrementally increasing the solution space might create incremental value for consumers. Critically, managers need to identify the sweet spot on the solution space continuum to allow consumers to imbue enough self-essence into the product while simultaneously maintain enough designer essence; the optimal essence-ratio thus brings about self-customized products that are seen by consumers as both designed by themselves and designed by the luxury brand's designers.

Furthermore, we have shown that perceptions of designer essence are important in understanding consumer preferences. In other words, consumers not only buy luxury fashion products for their superior product quality or to signal high status (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Rucker and Galinsky 2009), but also because they value the designer “being in the product.” Finally, our research qualifies the recommendations made by the extant literature on user involvement in the luxury brand context. While Fuchs et al. (2013) find that consumers are not very excited when other consumers are involved in the design of luxury fashion brands (e.g., “Prada designed by consumers”), our research demonstrates that, under certain conditions, consumers want to see themselves in their custom luxury products.

**How Cultural Identity Drives the Effectiveness of Mass Customization**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

One important factor that shapes people’s identity is the culture they live in (De Mooij and Hofstede 2011). Prior research revealed that one’s cultural background determines how individuals think and how they process information. For instance, Easterners share the belief that different pieces of information coexist interdependently and thus process visual information more holistically, whereas Westerners share the belief that each item exists autonomously and therefore process information more analytically (Nisbett and Masuda 2003). Firms that provide similar user interfaces to consumers across markets do not take these important cross-cultural differences into account and may not market their products most effectively (Haig 2011).

This shortcoming is particularly pronounced for mass customization (MC) systems that allow consumers to express their unique preferences (Simonson 2005). While the popularity of such systems is increasing among consumers, manufacturers still employ nearly identical interfaces around the globe. For example, consumers configuring an automobile at Audi’s country-specific websites in North America, Europe, or Asia always walk through exactly the same configuration process: first they select a model, an exterior color, and their preferred rims, followed by a number of interior features and add-ons. We propose, and find based on both lab and field data, that such attribute-by-attribute customization (Valenzuela, Dhar, and Zettelmeyer 2009) is not uniformly beneficial to all consumers; they may be effective for Western consumers but less so for East Asians, given their habitual, more holistic processing style.

In study 1, which examined whether conventional attribute-by-attribute customization may be suboptimal for East Asian consumers (e.g., Chinese or Singaporeans), we collected field data in cooperation with a large European car manufacturer. The key dependent measure was the conversion rate of customers when configuring a car online. The dataset comprised 31,271,002 unique page visitors who configured their car using the company’s online car configurator in 17 markets. In line with our proposition, we found significantly lower conversion rates for consumers in Eastern ($M=3.11\%$) versus Western markets ($M=6.62\%; t(15)=−3.20, p=.006$), a finding that could not be explained by differences in economic status or familiarity with the interface. These results provide a first hint toward conventional MC systems being less beneficial to East Asian consumers. However, the reported findings have limitations: they are based on correlational data and do not necessarily indicate causation. Subsequently, we examined the effect and underlying process in three follow-up cross-cultural experiments.

Our key hypothesis was that consumers experience greater mental simulation of product use and therefore evaluate their customized product more favorably if an MC system matches consumers’ habitual processing style. To test these predictions, we designed three experiments involving prospective car buyers in Singapore and Germany. In our experiments, participants configured a car using a mock-up configurator of a large European car manufacturer. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two predominant choice architectures: attribute-by-attribute customization versus choosing from prespecified alternatives. In the former architecture, participants customized their car sequentially, selecting an option for each of three attributes. In the prespecified condition, participants chose a car from a set of already prespecified alternatives. We controlled for the overall attribute space such that the prespecified alternatives resembled all possible attribute combinations of the attribute-by-attribute architecture. Before consumers configured their preferred car, they completed the Kimchi similarity task (Kimchi and Palmer 1982) to assess their culture-specific habits of information processing.

In line with our predictions, study 2 ($N=175$) revealed that when Easterners (vs. Westerners) used the prespecified (vs. attribute-wise) architecture, they experienced an increased ability to mentally simulate using the car ($F(1,171)=9.55, p=.002$) and were more satisfied with their choice ($F(1,171)=9.41, p=.003$). As expected, these effects were moderated by consumers’ processing styles such that the influence of a prespecified architecture was amplified for consumers with a more holistic processing style and vice versa ($b=−.10, SE=.04, CI_{95\%}=[−.19;−.03]$). Thus, a congruence between the interface and consumers’ culture-specific processing style proved beneficial.

In study 3 ($N=456$), we tested whether priming consumers with their habitual processing style (i.e., priming Easterners holistically and Westerners analytically using the Navon letters task; Förster 2009) may offset the detrimental effects of an attribute-by-attribute architecture. As indicated by a significant interaction between priming and market for mental simulation ($F(1,448)=8.84, p=.003$) and satisfaction ($F(1, 448)=6.27, p=.01$), study 3 showed that priming Easterners with a holistic processing style before using the attribute-by-attribute architecture increased mental simulation as well as
choice satisfaction. For Westerners, priming them with an analytic processing style before using the prespecified architecture also increased mental simulation and choice satisfaction. In other words, priming consumers with their habitual processing style positively affected their experience with an otherwise poorly matching choice architecture.

In study 4 (N=166), we aimed to replicate the previous findings by employing a more realistic priming technique. We therefore created two 45s videos based on the partner company’s TV commercials. The “holistic video” included scenes that are closely related to holistic perceptions by focusing on overall broad-based characteristics of a car. In contrast, the “analytic video” included scenes highlighting single product items. A pretest (N=84) confirmed the intended priming effect of the videos on the Kimchi similarity task (t(82)=2.17, p=.03). Using these realistic stimuli, study 4 replicated the previous effects as indicated by a significant interaction between priming and market for mental simulation (F(1,162)=10.87, p=.001) and purchase intention (F(1,162)=6.93, p=.009). Hence, the priming of habitual processing styles increased consumers’ mental simulation as well as their intention to purchase the car if they used a choice architecture that is not tailored to their habitual style of information processing.

This research provides evidence that firms can benefit from tailoring the provided choice architecture to customers’ culture-specific processing styles, therefore contributing to the emerging fields of cross-cultural consumer psychology and marketing (Burton 2009). Importantly, we show that consumers’ cultural identity constitutes an important boundary condition for the success of MC systems in international markets. Given the increasing individualization of East Asian markets and the constant rise of MC, the current research provides a new lens on how culture-specific information processing can be aligned with interactive choice environments.

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