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Identity Cues in Product Rating Distributions? the Role of Self-Concept Clarity in Consumer Preferences

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Online retailers often aggregate consumer product reviews into rating distributions. We show evidence that consumers with low self-concept clarity are drawn to bimodal distributions because these products are more identity defining.

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Identity Structure and the Boundaries of Identity Marketing

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Paper #1: Escaping the Crosshairs: Possibilities and Perils in Identity Marketing

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Paper #2: When Do Consumers Prefer Mistargeted Products? The Effect of Structure and Competition on Preference for Identity-(In)Consistency

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Paper #3: Repeated Exposure to the Thin Ideal and Its Implications for the Self: Two Weight-Loss Program Studies

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Paper #4: Identity Cues in Product Rating Distributions? The Role of Self-Concept Clarity in Consumer Preferences

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The powerful influence of identity on consumer behavior has captivated scholars and practitioners alike for decades (e.g., Belk, 1988; Levy, 1959). Identities that are salient (i.e., currently activated by context cues) guide behavior, and research demonstrates that consumers prefer products and messages that match their salient identity (Aaker, 1990; Wheeler, Petty, & Bizer; Reed, 2004). Accordingly, identity marketing has become a cornerstone of marketing theory and practice. But is simply seeking to match consumer identity enough? The present session presents evidence for the role of the consumer identity structure in preference and effectiveness of identity marketing. Specifically, we provide a deeper understanding of identity marketing by investigating the influence of identity clarity and identity structure on consumers' motivation to regulate and protect their identities.

The first two papers examine how features of the self-concept representation itself (specifically its clarity and integration) affect preferences and behavior. Rozenkrants, Wheeler, and Shiv examine the role of self-concept clarity, or the extent to which people have clearly defined identities or self-views. Results show that people with low-self concept clarity prefer products with bimodal rating distributions as opposed to unimodal rating distributions. This is because products with polarizing (liked by some and hated by others) ratings are seen as more self-expressive. Similarly, Saint Claire and Forehand examine inter-identity structure. They show that people approach identity mismatching when they hold an associated (highly integrated) inter-identity structure and inter-identity competition is low or when they hold a disassociated (weakly integrated) inter-identity structure and inter-identity competition is high. Effects are driven by inter-identity associations or by identity-valence associations depending on whether inter-identity competition is low or high, respectively. The latter two papers examine how features of identity marketing (specifically its explicitness and extremity) affect consum-

er preferences and behavior. Bhattacharjee, Menon, Reed, and Berger show that people who have a clear definition of an identity and high identity relevance are turned off by marketing that defines the terms of identity expression. Instead, these consumers prefer identity marketing that merely references their identity and does not threaten their freedom in identity expression. Klesse, Goukens, Geyskens, and de Ruyter examine the structure of current and ideal identities. They show that when women are primed with extremely idealized identities, such as skinny models, they ironically behave in ways that run counter to the ideal, and actually gain weight. These findings suggest that identities that are made salient through exaggeration are seen as unattainable because of the large discrepancy between the current and ideal selves.

Together, these papers¹ emphasize the importance of identity clarity and structure, and provide a more complete and integrative view of how self-concept and identity marketing interact to shape preferences and behavior. Given the fundamental nature of these concepts, we expect that the session will be well attended by researchers interested in branding, advertising, persuasion, social cognition, attitudes, and consumer backlash, as well as in self and identity. In highlighting both the diversity of consumer identities and diversity in the way those identities are represented, our session complements this year's theme of "Appreciating Diversity."

Escaping the Crosshairs: Possibilities and Perils in Identity Marketing

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketing messages often appeal to consumers based on identities they possess. Jif peanut butter targets mothers by suggesting that, "Choosy Moms choose Jif." DirecTV advertises, "If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!" Similarly, Gamefly.com urges, "You call yourself a gamer? You have to have it!" Such approaches are consistent with decades of consumer research suggest that identity marketing leads to increased purchase and deeper loyalty (e.g., Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Levy 1959; Reed 2004).

In contrast, we propose that messages that explicitly connect consumer identity expression to the purchase of a particular product can backfire. Specifically, while marketing messages that merely reference consumer identity (*identity-referencing* messages) are beneficial, we argue that messages that explicitly define the terms of consumer identity expression (*identity-defining* messages) actually reduce purchase. The persuasive intent of identity-defining messages is especially salient, and thus, they may be perceived as an attempt to influence consumers and limit options for identity expression. Because autonomy is especially crucial in the context of identity expression (Deci and Ryan 1985; Kivetz 2005), these messages are likely to backfire. In order to reassert their autonomy, consumers may avoid products that would otherwise naturally resonate with their identity.

Five studies test this theorizing. An initial study sought to assess whether managers can anticipate consumers' need for autonomy in identity expression and craft messages accordingly. We expected that managers would prefer identity-defining messages,

1 All the papers are in advanced stage: either in the last stages of data collection or under review.

since they are more explicit and more clearly intended for the target segment. A panel of actual executives selected one of three messages to advertise an environmentally friendly, biodegradable soap to a segment of “green” consumers: “Charlie’s: A good choice for consumers.” (non-identity), “Charlie’s: A good choice for green consumers.” (identity-referencing), and “Charlie’s: The only good choice for green consumers!” (identity-defining). As expected, managers preferred the identity-defining message ($\chi^2(2) = 7.36, p < 0.03$), and predicted that it would lead to higher purchase than both the non-identity baseline ($t(57) = 7.59, p < 0.001$) and the identity-referencing message ($t(57) = 2.06, p < 0.05$). Confirming our expectations, ratings of explicitness in targeting were highly correlated with predicted purchase and perceived consumer freedom in identity expression ($rs(58) > .67, ps < .001$).

A second study tested the accuracy of managerial predictions by testing these same messages in a consumption scenario. We also tested the mechanism underlying these effects in two ways. If these effects are driven by identity, as we suggest, then they should occur only among consumers whose target identity is salient (e.g., Reed 2004). Accordingly, we primed participants with a green versus neutral identity. Moreover, we tested the proposed mediating mechanism of freedom in identity expression. As expected, message type had no influence among neutral participants. However, among green participants, contrary to managerial predictions, the identity-defining message decreased purchase relative to the identity-referencing message ($t(68) = 6.54, p < .001$) and even relative to the non-identity baseline ($t(66) = 2.24, p < .03$). This effect was mediated by reduced perceptions of consumer freedom in identity expression ($b = -0.29, z = -3.61, p < .001$), supporting our theorizing.

A third study using the same stimuli built on these findings by measuring instead of manipulating identity. We also tested a real behavior: actual choice of a sample of the target versus a neutral soap. As predicted, these effects held for actual soap choice, and were moderated by identity centrality (i.e. the extent to which an identity is deeply important). Message type had a significant effect on soap choice among high-centrality participants ($\chi^2(1) = 9.94, p < .01$), but no effect among low-centrality participants ($\chi^2(1) = 2.29, p > .13$).

A fourth study examined our proposed mechanism using a different moderator: individual sensitivity to constraint (Hong and Faedda 1996). Moreover, to establish external validity, we used a sample of mothers and actual identity marketing messages from the marketplace: “Moms like you choose Jif” (identity-referencing) versus “Choosy moms choose Jif!” (identity-defining). Mothers reacted increasingly against the identity-defining message as individual sensitivity to constraint increased ($\chi^2(1) = 4.49, p < .04$), further clarifying the mechanism.

Finally, a fifth study investigated an instance in which autonomy might be undesirable: when consumers are highly uncertain about what an identity means to them. According to our theorizing, greater identity definition is likely to be preferred in such cases. To test our predictions, we primed parent identity certainty versus uncertainty (Gao, Wheeler and Shiv 2009). While certain parents reacted against identity-defining messages (vs. identity-referencing; $F(1, 142) = 4.59, p < .04$), uncertain parents welcomed identity definition and actually increased purchase ($F(1, 142) = 5.98, p < .02$), supporting our theoretical account.

While the literature has focused exclusively on the possibilities of identity marketing, our findings highlight its perils. Together with the drive to construct and define the self, the need for a sense of autonomy in doing so is one of the fundamental motivations of

the self. Hence, considering consumer autonomy appears particularly crucial in the context of identity expression. Our findings simultaneously offer a caveat to the identity marketing literature and validate the power of the identity construct.

When Do Consumers Prefer Mistargeted Products? The Effect of Structure and Competition on Preference for Identity-(In)Consistency

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A working-parent may prefer work-oriented products or family-oriented products depending on whether her employee or parent identity is active. Although the literature supports the notion that consumers have multiple identities and that priming a given identity can prompt approach toward identity-consistent (and avoidance of identity-inconsistent) preferences and behaviors (Forehand and Deshpande 2001; Forehand, Deshpande, and Reed 2002; Grier and Deshpande 2001; Zhang and Khare 2009), attention to the situations or factors that facilitate such response is sparse. We argue that two critical determinants of preference for identity (in)consistency are 1) The underlying inter-identity structure and 2) The level of inter-identity competition.

Past research within the Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) literature has shown that biculturals with a highly integrated, or “associated,” inter-identity (II) structure demonstrate the typical identity priming effect whereby individuals approach behaviors consistent with the primed identity and avoid behaviors inconsistent with the primed identity. Alternatively, biculturals with a weakly integrated, or “disassociated,” II structure demonstrate a contrastive effect wherein they avoid (approach) identity-consistent (-inconsistent) behaviors (Benet-Martinez et al. 2002; Cheng, Lee, and Benet-Martinez 2006; Mok and Morris 2009, 2010; see also Sacharin, Lee, and Gonzalez 2009; Zou, Morris, and Benet-Martinez 2008). These effects are argued to occur due to the positive and negative valence associations with cultural identity held by high and low BII consumers respectively (Benet-Martinez et al. 2002; Cheng et al. 2006; Mok and Morris 2009).

The above valence-driven effects are well established within the literature on cultural identity. However, it has also been suggested that consumers cognitively organize multiple identities within an associative network where identities may be associated or disassociated in a more benign, valence-neutral way (Amiot et al. 2007; Greenwald et al. 2002; Luna, Ringberg, and Peracchio 2008). As such, spreading activation suggests that priming one identity should inhibit the activation of disassociated identities (e.g., Hugenberg and Bodenhausen 2004) and facilitate the activation of associated identities. In this case, one would expect the typical priming effect in the presence of *disassociated* identities as individuals approach (avoid) the activated (inhibited) identity. Alternatively, when consumers possess associated identities one would expect dual approach of both the activated identity and the associated identity. These novel predictions are contrary to those of BII theory and are driven simply by the inter-identity association rather than by valence.

To reconcile the competing predictions regarding the influence of II structure on preference for identity (in)consistency, we propose that the predictions of BII will hold when II competition is high but not when II competition is low. The valence-driven effects of BII may be especially prevalent when two identities have a high degree of direct competition and associated stressors (Benet-Martinez and Haritatos 2005; Cheng et al. 2006). However, across the broader realm of consumer identities (e.g., student, female,

sister, tennis player), high direct competition need not necessarily be the case. Thus, identities may be associated or disassociated in a more benign, valence-neutral way facilitating the predicted II association-driven effects.

We tested the foregoing predictions in three experiments. Across experiments we used scenarios to manipulate II structure and II competition between undergraduate participants' "student" and "friend" identities. We varied whether participants rated identity-consistent or identity-inconsistent products by priming an identity (student vs. friend) and presenting them with the same product targeted toward a matching or mismatching identity (student vs. friend).

In experiment 1 ($n = 78$), the interaction between Inter-Identity Competition and Identity-Product Consistency was significant ($p < .01$) such that when II competition was high (low), participants in a disassociated II structure had higher (lower) attitude ratings for the identity-inconsistent product relative to the identity-consistent product; $M = 5.78$ vs. 4.92 (5.03 vs. 5.93). This supported the notion that valence-driven BII effects are found under high competition but the novel II association-driven effects are found under low competition. In experiment 2 ($n = 77$) we further explored II structure's influence under low II competition. The interaction between II Structure and Identity-Product Consistency was significant ($p < .05$) such that participants in a disassociated II structure again had a lower relative preference for the identity-inconsistent (vs. -consistent) product; $M = 5.02$ vs. 5.80 . Critically, participants in an associated II structure had no difference in relative preference between products, supporting the proposed dual approach model; $M = 5.86$ vs. 5.35 . Experiment 3 ($n = 109$) further explores the counter-intuitive effect where an associated II structure leads to approach toward identity-inconsistent behavior. The interaction between II Structure and Identity-Product Consistency was significant ($p < .05$). Participants in a disassociated II structure rated an identity-inconsistent product equally to a control product which did not target a specific identity; $M = 5.27$ vs. 5.39 . Participants in an associated II structure counterintuitively rated the identity-inconsistent product higher than the control product; $M = 5.92$ vs. 4.91 . This pattern also held for a measure of purchase intentions ($p < .05$). The effects on preference were mediated by perceived product fit (Sobel $ps < .01$; Bootstrap $ps < .05$). When primed with their friend identity, for example, participants in an associated II structure actually felt that a *student*-targeted product fit their needs. This supports the notion that priming a given identity also activates associated identities and their inherent needs and preferences.

In sum, the present research provides an important update to identity theory by demonstrating that consumer preference for identity (in)consistency depends on both inter-identity structure and inter-identity competition. Under high II competition consumers demonstrate the typical preference for identity-consistency only with an associated II structure; consumers actually counterintuitively approach identity-inconsistency under a disassociated structure. Under low II competition, the typical preference for identity-consistency is found only under a disassociated structure; the counterintuitive approach toward identity-consistency is found under an associated structure. Considering that the broader realm of identity is likely to have low II competition, marketing campaigns should encourage an associated II structure to facilitate approach.

Repeated Exposure to the Thin Ideal and its Implications for the Self: Two Weight Loss Program Studies

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Body image is an important part of our identity (Harter 1999). Through comparing ourselves to others we become aware of our self-image and of how we would (or should) want to look like (Festinger 1954). Nowadays, the media bombards us with models that are considerably thinner than the majority of the female population (Levine & Smolak 1996) and, hence, constitute an ideal out of reach for most women. The consequences of this exposure have been researched abundantly, primarily demonstrating that self-esteem and body satisfaction decrease when dieters are exposed to thin media images (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde 2008).

Surprisingly, existing research on the behavioral consequences has been limited to a single exposure and assessment of eating behavior right afterwards. Our research adds to and advances existing research by taking a goal perspective and exploring how constant exposure to thin models influences dieters' desire to reach a thinner self over time. We believe a longer time perspective is needed during which the motivation to reach the desired ideal and eating behavior is concurrently investigated. Accordingly, we explore over time whether being constantly confronted with the thin ideal motivates or demotivates dieters to obtain a thinner self.

On the one hand, exposure to thin models could motivate dieters to obtain a thinner self. Specifically, research on the non-conscious effects of subtle cues on behavior suggests that primes activate more enduring effects when the prime is perceived as distant from the active self-concept (Sela & Shiv 2009). In this context, a perceived discrepancy between individuals' active self-concept and the cue signals that the goal has not been attained and, hence, functions as a motivator (Dijksterhuis, Chartrand, & Aarts 2007). However, on the other hand, according to the goal gradient hypothesis (Hull 1934) or the 'goals loom larger' effect (Brendl & Higgins 1995) the motivation to attain a certain goal increases as the desired end state approaches. That is, if a goal becomes closer and easier to attain, individuals become more confident (Tubbs, Boeche, & Dahl 1993) and allocate more effort in order to reach the desired end state.

We conducted two weight loss program studies (each lasted for one week) in order to explore whether constant exposure to the thin ideal increases or decreases individuals' motivation to reach a thinner self and fosters goal consistent or inconsistent behavior over time. For both studies we invited female students that wanted to lose weight. They received an eating diary enabling them to note down exactly what they ate after every consumption occasion (i.e., breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks in between). For half of the participants the cover of the diary featured an extremely thin model while for the other half of the participants the cover featured a neutral dieting-related image (study 1) or a moderately thin model (study 2). Participants were weighted at the begin and the end of the weight loss program.

The findings of study 1 ($N = 48$) demonstrate that constant exposure to the thin ideal while trying to lose weight backfires: participants who were exposed to the thin model ($Mt = 4.08$) perceived a thinner self as significantly less attainable than participants in the control condition ($Mc = 5.08$; $F(1,46) = 6.29$, $p < .05$). Further they ($Mt = 1284.75$) consumed snacks higher in calorie content than the control condition ($Mc = 754.15$; $F(1, 46) = 4.92$, $p < .05$) and gained weight ($Mt = -.23$) rather than lost weight as the control condition ($F(1, 46) = 5.24$, $p < .05$; $Mc = .87$)².

2 We express the weight gain/loss not in absolute terms but in relation to participants' initial weight. A negative value implies

In study 2 ($N = 42$) both conditions are exposed to a model. However, while the treatment condition is confronted with an extremely thin model the control condition is exposed to the same but normal-sized (photoshopped) model. This enables us to test whether particularly the exposure to an unrealistically thin model triggers the perception that the thinner self is unattainable and causes individuals to give up. Study 2 reveals a significant difference in weight loss success: while participants exposed to the moderately thin model manage to lose weight ($M_c = .013$), participants confronted with the extremely thin model did not lose weight ($M_t = .003$; $F(1, 40) = 6.56, p < .05$). Following Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) we applied a bootstrap test to establish whether perceived attainability mediates this effect. The results reveal the mean indirect effect to be positive and significant ($a \times b = .0022$), with a 95 % confidence interval excluding zero (.0051 to .0001).

While existing research has demonstrated that exposure to thin models influences dieters' motivation to diet and eating behavior, the assessment was limited to behavioral consequences right afterward. In this research, we show that it is important to explore the consequences of exposure to thin model cues over time: although the omnipresence of thin models in our environment fosters the desire for a thinner self, it at the same time, hampers individuals' attempt to reach this ideal identity. By this, an individual realizes that the thin ideal is, for her, not that easy to attain which results in disengagement from the goal.

Existing research on self-identity has shown that several activities help to build a stock of knowledge about oneself. For instance, individuals develop several self-schemata (Markus 1977), which are specific ideas or pieces of information about the self and its characteristics. In forming these self-schemata individuals think of recent experience of success or failure they have had (Baumeister 2010). We add to this by showing that exposure to thin models changes the importance that individuals attach to certain self-schemata and the willingness to engage in actions needed to obtain their ideal self. That individuals engage in goal inconsistent behavior, i.e. eating unhealthy snacks (study 1), to a greater extent after repeated exposure to a thin model implies that this constant confrontation with their ideal self, decreased individuals' motivation to achieve it.

Identity Cues in Product Rating Distributions: The Role of Self-Concept Clarity in Consumer Preferences

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online retailers like Amazon synthesize consumer reviews in terms of means and distributions of star ratings. Whereas the mean rating conveys the average liking for the product, the distribution conveys the level of agreement among consumers. The present research probes how the shape of rating distributions and levels of agreement among reviewers affect consumer preferences.

Distinctiveness theory posits that people selectively focus on traits that emphasize their peculiar and unique characteristics (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; McGuire & McGuire, 1988). The need to establish distinctiveness is particularly salient when people feel uncertain about themselves (Baumgardner, 1990). Frequently, this uncertainty is addressed by adherence to firm and extreme attitudes (Sherman, Hogg, & Maitner, 2009). Hence, people have a heightened need to achieve distinctiveness and clarify their self-concept when they are uncertain about who they are.

One indicator of self-certainty is self-concept clarity. Self-concept clarity reflects the extent to which people hold clearly defined self-beliefs (Campbell, 1990). Generally, it is the sense of knowl-

edge about who you are and what you stand for. Because lacking certainty and clarity in one's self-views is aversive (McGregor & Marigold, 2003), those with low self-concept clarity are motivated to establish a consistent self-view. Because choice of products with identity-relevant characteristics helps maintain a well-defined identity through time (Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995), one way to rectify a compromised self-concept is to choose products to re-establish and clarify a certain identity (Englis & Solomon, 1995; Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). We propose that another way to satisfy this need is by choosing polarizing products, because products that are not homogeneously liked help consumers differentiate themselves.

The shape of rating distributions signals the degree of consensus regarding product appeal and allows consumers to assess their preferences relative to others. Unimodal distributions are clustered around a particular rating, decline in the tails, and convey a clear consensus on the level of appeal. On the other hand, bimodal distributions have two clusters, with one cluster in the high ratings and the other one in the low ratings. Because bimodal distributions indicate a lack of consensus about a product, products with bimodal rating distributions can make one more distinctive, and hence be more self-defining.

Because preference for products with bimodal distributions suggests disagreement with a larger share of people than in the unimodal condition, people who are motivated to hold a clearer self-view should favor products with bimodal distributions. Thus, we predict that as compared to high self-concept clarity consumers, those with low self-concept clarity should find products with bimodal distributions more appealing.

In experiment 1, we examined people's lay theories about rating distributions. Participants chose the product types (generally liked, generally disliked, or polarizing) that they perceived to be the most informative about one's identity and most self-expressive. These measures created a single factor of identity relevance, with polarizing products seen as the most identity relevant, $\chi^2(2) = 101.87, p < .01$.

In experiment 2, we examined the influence of self-concept clarity and rating distributions on product evaluations. Participants saw a movie poster ("Contagion"), along with the movie synopsis, and were randomly assigned to see the bimodal or unimodal distribution (same mean rating). Ratings of the perceived quality, likelihood of enjoyment, and likelihood of seeing the movie were consolidated into a desirability factor. We measured self-concept clarity using a validated scale (Campbell et al., 1996). A significant interaction emerged, $b = -0.74, t(145) = -2.41, p = .017$, such that participants with low self-concept clarity preferred movies with bimodal distributions, whereas participants with high self-concept clarity preferred movies with a unimodal distribution.

The purpose of experiment 3 was to manipulate self-concept clarity. Participants were randomly assigned to complete a task designed to lower or heighten self-certainty (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffit, 2007). They then completed the self-concept clarity scale. Next, participants were asked to imagine they were considering movie purchase and were provided with ratings (unimodal or bimodal) from previous viewers. This was done to ensure that the use of the specific movie in experiment 2 did not drive the results, because of genre or other confounding factors. This was followed by the experiment 2 desirability questions. Although the certainty manipulation did not have a direct effect on movie preferences, a moderated mediation path was significant, 95% CI [-0.2123, -0.250]. Participants in the uncertainty condition had lower self-concept clarity scores, and this led them to have higher preferences for the movie with a bimodal, relative to unimodal, distribution.

We conducted experiment 4 to explore whether group polarization was driving this effect. To clearly convey polarization, we simplified our distributions into three categories: like, dislike, or neutral. The procedure mimicked experiment 3, except that the feedback from previous consumers was polarizing [neutral], “65% really enjoyed the movie” and “35% really disliked [had neutral feelings about] the movie.” Results revealed a significant interaction, $b = -0.41$, $t(162) = -2.04$, $p = 0.04$. Although participants high in self-concept clarity preferred the movie with the neutral ratings, this effect was attenuated for participants low in self-concept clarity, despite the fact that the polarizing movie had an objectively lower rating than the neutral movie.

Our examination of the role of product rating variance in product evaluation shows an influence of self-concept clarity. Surprisingly, this need to clarify one’s identity persists despite the negativity bias. Adding to the identity driven consumption literature, the results suggest that polarizing products may provide a way for self-uncertain consumers to feel a sense of certainty and assert their identity. This implies that retailers should look to rating distributions to understand their customers, and attempt to appeal to self-uncertain consumers (e.g. adolescents) with polarizing products.