Identity-based consumer behavior

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A B S T R A C T
Although the influence of identity on consumer behavior has been documented in many streams of literature, the absence of a consistent definition of identity and of generally accepted principles regarding the drivers of identity-based behavior complicates comparisons across these literatures. To resolve that problem, we propose a simple but inclusive definition of identity. Identity can be defined as any category label with which a consumer self-associates that is amenable to a clear picture of what a person in that category looks like, thinks, feels and does. Building from this definition, we propose the following five basic principles that can help researchers model the process of identity formation and expression: (1) Identity Salience: identity-processing increases when the identity is an active component of the self; (2) Identity Association: the non-conscious association of stimuli with a positive and salient identity improves a person's response to the stimuli; (3) Identity Relevance: the deliberative evaluation of identity-linked stimuli depends on how diagnostic the identity is in the relevant domain; (4) Identity Verification: individuals monitor their own behaviors to manage and reinforce their identities; and (5) Identity Conflict: identity-linked behaviors help consumers manage the relative prominence of multiple identities. To illustrate the potential usefulness of these principles for guiding identity research, we discuss new avenues for identity research and explain how these principles could help guide investigations into these areas.

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1. Introduction

It is a fundamental human drive to understand who one is, what one believes and what one does. Therefore, pointing out that consumers like products, brands and consumption behaviors that are linked to category labels with which they self-associate is rather uncontroversial. For example, if consumers view themselves as “athletes”, they are likely to behave in ways that are consistent with what it means to “be” an athlete. This general drive produces a wide range of “identity driven effects”, including increased attention to identity-related stimuli (these consumers are more likely to notice and evaluate athletic products), a preference for identity-linked brands (a preference for athlete-focused Gatorade over brands like Vitaminwater that have no obvious link to athletes), more positive reactions to advertisements featuring spokespeople who possess the desired identity (pro athletes are preferred to award-winning actors), the selection of media catering to the identity (ESPN over CNN), the adoption of behaviors linked to an identity (wearing equipment such as a distance-running watch to signal their interest in running) and biased attention toward identity-consistent memories (increased ease of recalling past athletic triumphs). These types of identity-driven behaviors have been observed across numerous identities, and an increasing interest in these effects has emerged in the academic marketing literature over the last two decades (see Fig. 1).

2. The three goals of this paper

Although six decades of research on constructs such as the self-concept, identity, and attitude functions has provided clear evidence that identity often drives behavior, the common processes underlying the influence of identity on behavior are often obscured by differences in the terminology that is used in these different streams of literature. In a recent review, Oyserman (2009) took a first step toward unifying these disparate streams of research by arguing that identities can be cued outside of conscious awareness, that identities are sensitive to situational factors, and that identities drive many decisions. Similarly, our first objective in this article is to present an inclusive definition of identity in which identity is defined as any category label to which a consumer self-associates that is amenable to a clear picture of what the person in the category looks like, thinks, feels and does. We hope that this definition will subsume various discipline-based approaches to identity-based behavior that originated in social psychology (Oyserman, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986),
Consumer Culture Theory (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), and sociology (Callero, 2003; Howard, 2000); as well as the approaches that arose from more specific investigations of identity in areas like impression management (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000) and implicit social cognition (Greenwald, Pickrell, & Farnham, 2002).

A second objective of this article is to identify a series of important “identity principles” that connect the various streams of literature and to thereby provide a more refined structure for the important processes and mechanisms that have emerged from this literature up until the present time. These principles are the following: (1) Identity Salience: identity processing increases when the identity is an active component of the self; (2) Identity Association: the non-conscious association of stimuli with a positive and salient identity improves a person’s response to the stimuli; (3) Identity Relevance: the deliberative evaluation of identity-linked stimuli depends on how diagnostic the identity is in the relevant domain; (4) Identity Verification: individuals monitor their own behavior to manage and reinforce identities; and (5) Identity Conflict: identity-linked behaviors help consumers manage the relative prominence of multiple identities. It is beyond the scope of this project to review all of the research that supports these principles, but a summary of the most notable research support for these principles is provided in Fig. 2.

The basic identity principles reviewed in this article are the foundations upon which researchers can build to further examine the theoretical underpinnings of identity-based consumption. The final objective of this paper is to extend these principles into avenues of future research on identity that hold great promise (see Kirmani, 2009) and that may, in particular, be critical areas of inquiry for research in consumer behavior. From a substantive point of view, the basic principles can also serve as points of departure for future research to achieve a better understanding of how an identity perspective can address important managerial and public-policy problems. The goal in these sections of the article will be to illustrate the usefulness of these principles for guiding and illuminating future identity research in marketing and consumer behavior. We selected current trends that we deemed unprecedented in human history (at least in scale and pace) and that also have wide-ranging implications for identity-based consumption as they relate to the five aforementioned identity principles.

Every issue that is discussed to illustrate the way the identity principles can be applied relates either to globalization or to technological progress, especially in computer-mediated communication. Globalization refers to the increasing interconnection of economic, social and technological processes across regions and countries. Although rapid globalization did occur in some earlier historical eras (e.g., the late colonial period), the current scale and pace of globalization are unprecedented. Globalization has wide-ranging consequences for both psychological processes (Arnett, 2002) and for consumer responses to market offerings (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999). Importantly, globalization often requires consumers to make difficult trade-offs and to hold potentially conflicting beliefs (e.g., Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2012; van Ittersum & Wong, 2010). This opens up many exciting new areas of research. One of the major engines of globalization, in present times as in the past, is technological progress. In particular, improvements in computing and communication technology are radically changing people’s lives by introducing new ways of working and communicating and by leading to a reassessment of established behaviors. Furthermore, improvements in information technology, transport, and other forms of technology make it possible for more and more people to interact and to join an integrated world economy. By creating a “global village” (McLuhan, 1964), computer-mediated communication channels (social networks, email, and any Internet-based communication platform) are changing the way people around the world relate to each other. These trends have important ramifications for identity processes (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). For example, the possibility for a person to develop a “digital self” (Schau & Gilly, 2003) that can differ in important respects from the person’s “offline” persona opens many exciting new research questions. These trends are already impacting...
identity-based consumption patterns in myriad ways, both large and small, and the pace of change is still increasing. For each of the basic principles discussed earlier, we review one particular application and the open theoretical questions that are associated with it. Given the breadth of topics, the applications are obviously not intended to exhaustively cover the range of implications for future research. Instead, they serve as illustrative highlights.

3. A parsimonious definition of identity

Our definition of identity starts with the idea that consumers can potentially identify with a nearly limitless array of different category labels. Accordingly, we define an identity as any category label to which a consumer self-associates either by choice or endowment. The category label invokes a mental representation (i.e., a clear picture) of what “kind” of person looks like, thinks, feels, and does (Oyserman, 2009). Some of these identities are relatively stable and “objective” (e.g., mother, daughter, friend, African-American, etc.), while others may be more transitory, fluid, and “subjective” (e.g., Republican, athlete, lawyer, Mac-user, etc.). Although consumers can potentially self-identify with (or in opposition to) every possible category label, not all category labels will be central to the consumer’s self-definition (Kihlstrom, 1992). The important point here is that a category label becomes an identity once the consumer has begun to incorporate it into his or her sense of who he or she is and has initiated the process to become that kind of person. For example, when individuals transition from voting for a candidate from a particular political party to viewing them- selves as members of that political party, they shift from being unaffiliated individuals who happened to be in a certain way to being individuals who embrace a full-fledged political identification. Once that political identification is formed, the individuals will begin looking for internal and external feedback to reinforce their identity (e.g., self-perception processes as well as opportunities to signal their new identification to others). It is at this point that the identity principles we will propose across various literatures become important.

3.1. Definition properties: group agnostic, bounded and operationalizable

In our view, this definition has three desirable properties. First, it relaxes the assumption that identities must be indexed to a specific group of individuals. As a result, there is no need to create different terms such as “social” identity versus “self” identity versus “personal” identity because each of these is effectively the same concept applied to a slightly different domain. The key distinction becomes not whether an identity has its origin in a social or personal sphere, but rather how individuals process feedback about all their identities in their “reflected appraisal” of how well they are enacting those identities (Lavezie, Kleine, & Kleine, 2002). For example, individuals often appraise their standing across multiple identities simultaneously (e.g., a working parent is likely to concurrently appraise her standing as a mother, a colleague, a supervisor, and a spouse even though all these identities exist at different levels of abstraction). This definition also embraces research suggesting that the “self-concept” is multidimensional and made up of numerous identities. This approach helps to reduce the surface conflict between the different “types” of identities that have been studied across various literatures. Although some slight definition-based differences exist between concepts like “role identity,” “social identity,” and “self-identity,” the underlying associative basis of each is largely the same.

Building on this point in our proposed definition, identities can be “anchored” in different types of referents: objective membership groups (e.g., gender or family, as discussed in Epp & Price, 2008), culturally determined membership groups (e.g., ethnicity and religion, as discussed in Dong & Tian, 2009), abstracted role ideals (e.g., mother, friend, philanthropist), groups premised on association with a known individual (e.g., a graduate advisor), with an individual who is not known personally (e.g., Tiger Woods), or with dimensions of self that are indexed by an imagined other (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995). Although there are many types of identities (as described above), it should be noted that a single identity term can bridge various classifications. For example, the term “mother” can refer simultaneously to a person’s status as a member of an objective group or as an abstracted role ideal, and it is premised on an association with a known individual (i.e., the focal person’s child or children). To provide a more comprehensive sense of the types of identities that this definition encompasses, Fig. 3 provides a typology with explicit examples and illustrative features.

Second, the definition we adopt here is broad enough to cover the various terms and definitions that have been used in different research domains, but it is also concrete enough to differentiate between what is and what is not an identity (see Cohen, 1989). For example, Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv (2009) demonstrated that consumers pursue products related to a self-conception if that particular “self-view” has been threatened. Based on our definition, such a self-view can certainly rise

Fig. 2. Research foundation for identity principles.
to the level of an identity if a consumer’s behaviors related to that particular self-conception become part of how the individual labels himself or herself, a process that is likely to occur if such behavior is embraced by a referent social group, a specific individual, or an abstracted ideal. However, identity is not equivalent to a self-view because identification involves more than the mere existence of some positive association between a concept and the self. Meaningful identification requires the adoption or an endowment of a category label that can represent a rich and clear picture of the type of person to whom the category label applies, even if such identification is never expressed publicly or consciously perceived. As a result, self-views can be identities, but that is not automatically the case.

Third, the definition can be easily represented, as shown in Fig. 4. Once an identity becomes central to the consumer’s self-conception (I), many secondary associations may also gain prominence in the individual’s self-conception (Oyserman, 2009). For example, individuals may integrate attitudinal and behavioral norms (Cohen & Reed, 2006; Oyserman, 2009), emotion profiles (Verrochi-Coleman & Williams, 2012), and a variety of other identity-linked concepts in memory (Mercurio & Forehand, 2011). These elements structurally define the normative beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behaviors that define what that type of person is likely to think, feel, and do. They are also the building blocks that allow the focal individual to generate a firm mental representation of that identity and to assess his or her progress toward enacting it. We depict these various elements as a bundle of associations (A). Each unique identity has (X) number of these associations.

3.2. Definition implications: time and the relationship between associations across identities

There are three important implications of the definition we have proposed. First, the specific associations for different identities may change over time as cultural and social factors dictate. In this sense, cultural and socialization factors serve as meta-constraints on the types of category labels (and their respective content) that people can learn about as their self-concepts form, change and evolve over the course of their lives. For example, gender identity elicits very different sets of attitudinal and behavioral norms across cultures (e.g., Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008), and the notion of being a “father” changes over time as a person’s relationship with his children evolves from the time of their childhood to their adulthood. The second important implication is that one or more unique identities may have different degrees of “overlapping” associations (Deaux et al., 1995). For example, being “aggressive” may be associated with a person’s professional identity as a Wall Street trader; but it may also be associated with the person’s identity as a “weekend warrior athlete”. In this sense, the degree of overlap may create correlations between identities and may play a role in maintaining a sense of “consistency” within the self (a notion we will explore in more depth below). The flip side of this is the third implication, namely the possibility that some of an individual’s identity-linked associations may interfere with other associations that are linked to another identity the person wishes to possess. Because both identities may be desirable to a person, the possibility that the associations of one identity may interfere with the associations of another identity may produce identity conflict. This is an important principle that we will discuss in greater depth below.

4. Unifying the literature: Five identity principles

4.1. Identity salience

4.1.1. The identity salience principle

Identity salience exists when an identity is readily accessible to a consumer and, similar to activation, exists on a continuum from low accessibility to high accessibility. The latter condition is often referred to as “chronic accessibility” (Forehand, Deshpandé, & Reed, 2002). Although identity salience is not a strictly necessary condition to observe identity effects (Laverie et al., 2002), the probability of observing identity effects increases as identity salience rises (Puntoni, Sweldens, & Tavassoli, 2011; Reed, 2004) or with general shifts in the active self-concept (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007).

Identity salience principle: factors that increase the salience of a particular identity within a person’s self-concept will increase the probability that the identity will have a subsequent influence on the person’s attitudes and behavior.

Moving beyond this basic principle, it is important to identify the precursors to identity salience (Reed & Forehand, 2012). One factor that clearly influences momentary identity salience is the chronic association between the self and the identity domain, which is often referred to as the “strength of identification” (Stayman & Deshpandé, 1989). This kind of association produces a stable and enduring sensitivity to identity-related information (Reed, 2004).

A second factor that may influence identity salience is the composition of an individual’s environment. Distinctiveness theory (McGuire, 1984; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujoka, 1978) argues that the salience of personal traits and identities (e.g., gender, race) depends on the numerical distinctiveness or relative rarity of the traits. The salience to individuals of their specific memberships depends on how “distinctive” or unusual the trait that is the basis for the specific membership appears in the immediate environment. For example, Cota and Dion (1986) placed female participants in groups that varied in their gender composition and observed an increase in the salience of participants’ gender identity when females were a minority. Similarly, the literature on self-categorization (Oakes, 1987) argues that a personal characteristic is more likely to be the basis for self-definition when it distinguishes those who have that characteristic from others who do not.

Third, research has found that identity salience increases in response to a wide variety of stimulus cues including reference group symbols (Smith & Mackie, 1995), symbols relating to out-groups (Forehand et al., 2002), out-group members themselves (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Rijnsman, 1988), and even visual images and words (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000).

4.1.2. Illustrating the salience principle: English and global consumer culture

The identity-salience principle asserts that increases in the salience of an identity within a person’s self-concept increase the likelihood of subsequent identity-driven attitudes and behavior. Because language is intimately related to culture, language cues are one means of increasing the temporary salience of a cultural identity and of thereby increasing the influence of that culture on cognitions and behavior. Among biculturals, exposure to words in a particular language activates the mental frames of the culture with which that language is associated. A growing body of work demonstrates that bicultural individuals think differently when they speak different languages (Chen & Bond, 2010; Luna et al., 2008; Ogunnaike, Dunham, & Banaji, 2010; Pavlenko, 2005).

The potential influence of language on identity salience is highlighted by the emergence of English as today’s lingua franca. An increasing number of messages in English (brand names, slogans, product package information, etc.) reach consumers who are not native English speakers. For example, in many countries a very large percentage of advertising messages feature at least some words in English (e.g., Gerritsen, Korzilius, van Meurs, & Gijsbers, 2000; Lee, 2006). More research is needed to explore the influence of English being used in marketing messages in countries where English is not the native language of most consumers (e.g., De Langhe, Puntoni, Fernandes, & van Osselaer, 2011; Puntoni, De Langhe, & van Osselaer, 2009).
Another important consequence of globalization is the creation of a global consumer culture and a large group of consumers for whom a cosmopolitan identity constitutes an important part of their self-concept (Alden et al., 1999; Grinstein & Wathieu, 2012—this issue). Whereas much literature in this area focuses on individual differences and conceptualizes global and local consumer culture as the opposite ends of a single bipolar continuum, identification with a local culture and identification with a global culture are best understood as separate processes that are at least partially independent (Steenkamp & de Jong, 2012). Many individuals are likely to endorse both a local and a global culture, at least to some degree, and to have stood as separate processes that are at least partially independent (Alden et al., 1999; Grinstein & Wathieu, 2012).

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consumer culture, in contrast to what one might predict strictly on the basis of the salience principle (cf., Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). This discussion provides an example of how the identity-salience principle is constrained by other identity-based mechanisms. We will return to the issue of identity conflict later in the paper.

4.2. Identity association

4.2.1. The identity association principle

The first way that salient identities may lead to identity-driven effects is through a simple associative transfer. For example, recent research on implicit partisanship and implicit egotism has shown that individuals automatically react positively to in-group individuals and to stimuli associated with the in-group because of the transfer of positive affect from the self-concept to these newly associated stimuli (Greenwald et al., 2002; Pinter & Greenwald, 2004; Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005). Other research has shown that the strength of these effects increases in accordance with the positivity of the individual’s self-esteem (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Becker, 2007; Perkins & Forehand, 2012). For example, if an arbitrary number (the stimulus) becomes associated with an individual’s name (a representation of the self) a person’s response to that number and to people linked to that number improves (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004). If such automatic effects are possible with abstract numbers, the association of identity dimensions with the self should produce even more pronounced positive effects.

Identity association principle: when stimuli become associated with a positively regarded identity, those stimuli will receive more positive evaluations and can acquire other identity-related content independent of any explicit processing of the association.

Mercurio and Forehand (2011) recently documented such identity-driven associational learning and transfer in research on the effects of identity cuing on recall of advertising messages. Building from traditional associative network models (Anderson & Bower, 1973), they found that identity activation at the time of encoding and retrieving information influenced the association of the new content to the identity and thereby influenced the participants’ subsequent responses. Given the power of identity to shape the encoding and retrieval of information, it is logical that identities can influence association transfer in the same way that a person’s overall self-concept does. Taken together, these results suggest that associating new stimuli with an identity can automatically encourage the transfer of affect and other associations from the identity to the stimulus.

4.2.2. Illustrating the association principle: ‘not me’ identities

The identity association principle states that objects and concepts contextually associated to an identity gradually acquire corresponding meanings and evaluations. Brand names, for instance, that are systematically processed in the context of a particular identity will gradually be perceived as connoting the identity and its evaluative meaning. The associative learning process will be largely nondeliberate, gradually be perceived as connoting the identity and its evaluative affect from the self-concept to these newly associated stimuli (Greenwald et al., 2002; Pinter & Greenwald, 2004; Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005). The associative learning process will be largely nondeliberate, and will be greatly facilitated if the associated concepts are part of the meaning. The associative learning process will be largely nondeliberate, and will be greatly facilitated if the associated concepts are part of the meaning.

Facebook systematically processes in the context of a particular identity will gradually be perceived as connoting the identity and its evaluative meaning. The associative learning process will be largely nondeliberate, and will be greatly facilitated if the associated concepts are part of the meaning. The associative learning process will be largely nondeliberate, and will be greatly facilitated if the associated concepts are part of the meaning. The associative learning process will be largely nondeliberate, and will be greatly facilitated if the associated concepts are part of the meaning. The associative learning process will be largely nondeliberate, and will be greatly facilitated if the associated concepts are part of the meaning.

Interestingly, Facebook also offers opportunities to gather in oppositional communities against people, practices, or particular companies (e.g., the ‘I hate Starbucks’ group). By creating a structured environment for discourse and associative learning, social media platforms might create ways to shape oppositional or ‘not me’ identities (Hogg, Banister, & Stephenson, 2009), just like they do ‘me’ identities. Whereas desired selves allow many opportunities for people to join collectives defined around a common goal or common means to achieve a goal (e.g., products or brands), undesired selves by themselves might not offer the impetus for group identification or for the formation of a stable identity. People who dislike, avoid, or even hate something do not necessarily have any goals in common that could allow them to easily find each other or to find a common language to communicate with each other.

We propose, however, that oppositional communities on social networks like Facebook have created unprecedented opportunities for ‘not me’ identities to take shape in the same way as affirmative identities do. On Facebook, users with a shared dislike can easily find each other, engage in frequent conversation, and thereby develop a joint vocabulary. We suggest that the online activity of members of ‘not me’ groups in social media will lead to the emergence of a common vocabulary. The availability of a common language will in turn facilitate a common understanding of how visceral, emotional and cognitive reactions to the ‘not me’ entity (e.g., Starbucks, and its customers) are interrelated. Making sense of one’s personal oppositional experience as part of a group of like-minded individuals would then facilitate the adoption of a ‘not me’ or oppositional identity.

It would be useful to investigate the role of the identity-association principle in the relative stability of ‘not me’ identities as shaped by activity on social media platforms, as well as the marketing implications of these identities. Intuitively, it might seem that the most stable identity-shaping ‘not-me’ communities bring the most damage to the opposed entity. However, we suggest that the opposite is quite plausible. If the discourse of poorly integrated groups spreads outside the oppositional community, or if it is picked up by mainstream media, it can bring reputational damage to the attacked ‘not-me’ entity (e.g., the opposed public figure or company), but it might not allow the owner of the ‘not me’ entity to react or counteract. From a marketing perspective, the attacked entity may actually be better off with social media opposition that is well organized and has a coherent discourse. Such well organized groups and their identifying members will be well differentiated from other groups (the ‘not-not-me’ groups). Marketing may then react either by taking action to satisfy the members of the oppositional (not me) groups or by increasing their attractiveness towards the ‘not-not-me’ groups in the population.

4.3. Identity relevance

4.3.1. The identity-relevance principle

At a conscious level, stimuli often become linked to identities when they symbolize the consumer’s own personality traits (Aaker, 1997), reflect a desirable self-image, or embody the “type” of person that the consumer aspires to think, feel and be like (Belk, Mayer, & Bahn, 1982). In these situations, the consumer’s identity is the motivational impetus that drives him or her to form, hold, and express identity-oriented beliefs and behaviors that connect or separate him or her from real or imagined others (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

These identity-based attitudes and behaviors not only help consumers classify themselves but also may come to embody the target reference group itself (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; White & Dahl, 2007). For example, a strong association of the self with an “American” identity not only encourages a positive attitude to patriotic US symbols, but can also create a prototype of what a “true American” is. In that regard, consumers who possess an “American” identity can use what they believe it means to be “American” to facilitate product choices that will reinforce the identity (e.g., purchasing a domestic automobile or avoiding French brie). These identity-based attitudes are quite resistant to counter-persuasion (Bolton & Reed, 2004), and
this resilience is at least partially attributable to their shared acceptance within a network of similar others (Visser & Mirabile, 2004).

The influence of deliberately processed identity information depends directly on the applicability of the identity to the domain of evaluation (e.g., an “athlete” identity would be relevant to evaluating athletic shoes, but is unlikely to be relevant to evaluating kitchen appliances) and the degree to which identity-related information allows discrimination between options (e.g., an “athlete” identity might help discriminate between a pair of Nike shoes and a pair of Keds shoes, but may not help discriminate between a pair of Nike shoes and a pair of Adidas shoes). These criteria are broadly influenced by five forms of relevance: object relevance, symbolic relevance, goal relevance, action relevance and evaluation relevance.

Object relevance exists when the object being evaluated is part of the symbolic constellation of products that define an identity (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Reed, 2004). As a case in point, a consumer who perceives herself as a working mother may be more favorable to an automobile that emphasizes safety and practicality. These evaluations are particularly common with brands that come to symbolize particular user groups or “fit” with a particular identity (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratchawar, & Sen, 2012—this issue).

Identity relevance principle: when identity information is deliberately processed, its influence will be greatest on stimuli that possess object relevance, symbolic relevance, goal relevance, action relevance or evaluation relevance to the identity.

4.3.2. Illustrating the relevance principle: anthropomorphism and social robotics

The identity-relevance principle argues that an activated identity will influence judgment and behavior to the extent that the identity is relevant to the domain at hand. This influence is not just associative and automatic, but deliberately motivated by the identity. Relevance is typically understood in terms of an instrumentality relationship between the identity holder and the identity-relevant object. Using sophisticated kitchen appliances, for instance, may serve as a means to develop and strengthen the identity of an amateur chef, and the “amateur chef” identity will drive the evaluation of the appliances’ tool-value. This in turn allows marketers to present products as tools to enact an identity.

It is interesting to consider the consequences of the rapid technological developments that bring artificial intelligence into consumers’ lives. Robotic appliances for household tasks like lawn mowing or vacuum cleaning have already found their way into the market. Further developments will inevitably lead to the appearance of products with an ever-increasing level of autonomy and a capacity for learning and independent decision making. More generally, rapid technological development in many product categories is transforming the effectiveness and functional boundaries of consumer products. For example, anglers today can buy a wide selection of hi-tech products—from sonar fish-finders to computers that estimate optimal bait—that make recreational fishing vastly more effective. What are the likely consequences of this increasing autonomy and effectiveness of products? On the one hand, products will increase their identity relevance by becoming ever more useful tools. On the other hand, the increasing autonomy and effectiveness of products are likely in some cases to undermine key aspects of what it means to perform a certain identity. For example, going back to the case of high-tech fishing tools, “if you are going to use GPS to take you to a location, sonar to identify the fish and a lure which reflects light that humans can’t even see, you may as well just go to McDonald’s and order a fish sandwich” (The Economist, 2012). In these cases, the products’ effectiveness may ironically cause them to loose identity-relevance. Many recreational fishermen would be unwilling to adopt certain high-tech devices such as sonar fish finders.

Another interesting issue relating to artificial intelligence and autonomous machines arises from the fact that in many cases such machines adopt anthropomorphic features. Robot scientists speculate that android robots, which in appearance and behavior should be nearly indistinguishable from humans, will be best suited for assuming roles that require individual social relationships such as nursing, teaching, or intimate companionship (Duffy, 2003). A successful social robot will invoke a relational context in which the boundary between its nature as an instrument and its social identity as a person may become entirely blurred. Although the widespread availability of android robots lies in a relatively distant future, many of the more autonomous and intelligent machines available today already have anthropomorphic features. Examples include GPS navigator systems that speak with a human voice and website shopping aids like Anna, IKEA’s “online assistant”. Extending the discussion about identity relevance, the anthropomorphism of such advanced technologies invites questions about social comparison. Because our current pre-robotic machines do not have a personal identity, we do not feel threatened if they happen
to be stronger or faster than we are, or if they have better memories and sensory capacities. Anthropomorphic intelligent machines, however, may be more likely to trigger disadvantageous social comparisons. These machines are not constrained by our physical and mental limitations, so their anthropomorphic features may highlight our inadequacies. Thus, anthropomorphic intelligent machines may have the paradoxical consequence of making consumers feel less confident and empowered. This may already be happening to anyone who, upon taking the wrong turn against the advice of the navigation system, seems to detect a hint of condescension in the GPS speaker’s voice.

4.4. Identity verification

4.4.1. The identity-verification principle

Once an identity has become salient, consumers will actively monitor the extent to which they have stayed true to the identity. In this way, a sought-after identity operates very similarly to an “ideal” self (Higgins, 1986). Higgins argued that as the perceived distance between a consumer’s actual and ideal selves increases, the consumer’s motivation to exert effort to reach the ideal also increases. To the extent that a specific identity becomes a cornerstone of a person’s ideal self, aspiring to that identity can become a core driver of behavior. For example, many consumers aspire to be thin and can imagine what it would be like to achieve a “thin and healthy” identity. This desire can provide the motivation to diet, to exercise, or to select products and services linked to a “thin” identity (McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2009). One prominent example is the tendency of consumers to frequent retail outlets whose clothing sizes are shifted downward from the industry average. Although the consumer’s physique is presumably identical at every retail establishment, the consumer is drawn to clothing that claims to be a smaller size (Hoegg, 2012). By wearing this clothing, the consumer is able to move his self-conception one step closer to his aspirational “thin” identity.

A great deal of advertising and mass-media communication also appeals to these aspirational self-conceptions by presenting models that symbolize what the consumer wishes to be (Kless, Goulens, Geyskens, & de Ruyter, 2012—this issue; Richins, 1991).

The development of an idealized set of identifications can also increase a consumer’s desire to accurately convey these identifications to the self and to others. This identity pursued is driven by a self-verification process in which individuals strive to be seen by others in the way they see themselves (Swann, 1983). The desire to verify one’s identification becomes particularly pronounced when one’s identification is threatened (Avery, 2012—this issue; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007). In fact, recent research has shown that casting doubt on how consumers view themselves in relation to various attribute dimensions can lead to choices that reinforce the challenged attributes (Gao et al., 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008).

Identity-verification principle: feedback from the external environment will be introspectively processed to determine progress toward the ideal representation of an identity.

However, there are motivational limits to the efficacy of a discrepancy between the actual representation of a consumer’s identity and the ideal. Research has shown that when individuals do not feel they have the power to achieve an identity ideal, their motivation to persist in their pursuit of the ideal declines (Chan, Karbowiak, Monty, & Perlmuter, 1986; Norman & Aron, 2003). This suggests that brands should be careful not to highlight imagery that is aspirational but unattainable (Klesse et al., 2012—this issue).

The assumption that a person’s self-concept contains multiple identities raises a challenge because it introduces complexity in how people “manage” these different (moving) parts of who they are. Validation of an identity begs the question of what exactly is being validated and on what criteria. We assume here, based on typical models of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1998), that consumers constantly engage in a reinforcement monitoring process in which they retrospectively inspect associations within their identity to make sure that they are behaving in a consistent manner when enacting that identity.

4.4.2. Illustrating the verification principle: exploring identities

The identity-verification principle asserts that individuals seek validation on how they are enacting a particular identity and that a person’s progress toward the ideal representation of that identity is evaluated relative to the environment. One way in which technology dramatically influences this verification process is by offering individuals an opportunity to present themselves to others in ways that differ from what is possible or feasible for them in normal, real-life interactions. Online, a person can be literally anything. The Internet offers a variety of forums for identity expression, including avatars in online gaming and virtual realities, personal web pages and blogs, personal profile pages on social networks, and endless chat rooms and related channels of communication. A rapidly growing body of research investigates self-presentation in online environments such as personal webpages (Schau & Gilly, 2003), dating sites (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008), and social networks (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012—this issue). Less attention has been paid to the intrapersonal consequences of identity expression in computer-mediated communication. In particular, computer-mediated communication may bring about important changes on the identity verification process.

Online environments offer people new channels of communications (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In particular, computer-mediated communication makes it possible for individuals to belong to groups that are not accessible in real life, even if such belonging is only virtual and for a limited time. For example, a runner who can no longer practice the sport because of an injury can nevertheless interact with other runners online and belong to a community by posting messages and being active on websites. This social contact can help individuals reaffirm, and hence verify, their identity. Connecting this discussion to globalization, computer-mediated communication offers people in far-away places an easily accessible way to verify and express their cultural identity. We hypothesize that online identity verification may therefore have important implications for the acculturation processes of migrants and ethnic minorities. More generally, the real-life behavioral consequences of this online identity verification process are also an important area for future research. For example, acting like a younger person online may have assimilative consequences for how a person feels in his or her real life (i.e., acting younger online could lead people to feel younger in general—e.g., dressing differently) but perhaps also contrastive consequences (i.e., acting younger online may in fact underline the discrepancy between one’s hopes and reality), leading to faster adoption of the undesired identity.

Perhaps most interestingly, computer-mediated communication can offer individuals a way to experiment with alternative identities in a safer environment. Identities are often held and developed through a trial-and-error process (Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Wurf, 1987). The anonymity of computer-mediated communication offers unprecedented opportunities for people to express ideas and enact behaviors with little concerns about accountability and the ramifications of their behavior for their real-life social relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2003). The Internet removes barriers and lowers the cost of the trial-and-error processes that are involved in identity verification and identity construction, especially for identities that present individuals with difficult trade-offs between inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, online platforms have important consequences for people’s ability and motivation to identify with identities that mainstream society considers deviant or undesirable, such as extreme political and alternative sexual identities (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). The greater likelihood of adopting a stigmatized identity that participation in online forums can lead to has
implications for consumption (e.g., magazine subscriptions) and, more generally, for marketers (e.g., minority targeting and media planning). This discussion is also relevant for consumption-based communities that place consumers outside of the mainstream, such as the “persecuted” Apple Newton community (Muñiz & Schau, 2005).

4.5. Identity conflict

4.5.1. The identity conflict principle

Following from the previous discussion, the final principle that is addressed in this article relates to the fact that any given identity is not possessed in isolation; instead, each identity is one of many held identities that must be integrated into a person's overall self-conception. Research on the interplay of multiple identities generally suggests that individuals seek to maintain harmony between their various identities (Amiot, de la Sablonnière, Terry, & Smith, 2007; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Consumption can often lead to identity conflict, or provide ways to resolve it. This is most likely best exemplified by the stream of interpretive marketing research that shows how the process of developing and enacting a person's identity is “marked by points of conflict” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871). For example, a company's attempt to gender-bend a masculine brand can create a threat to males who identify with the brand and can trigger a range of coping responses (Avery, 2012–this issue).

Research has suggested that individuals typically adopt one of two specific identity structures to achieve harmony among their held identities. Harmony is greatest when an individual's various identities suggest norms for behavior that are consistent with one another (Amiot et al., 2007; Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). However, when the norms of the two identities conflict with one another individuals may resolve the conflict by using a variety of self-regulatory processes.

Identity conflict principle: individuals are motivated to reduce conflict across multiple identities and can do so by managing the relative salience of their various conflicting identities.

One self-regulatory process that can help reduce conflict is to maintain balanced salience between the potentially conflicting identities. Evidence for such a balancing process is apparent in research on bi-cultural individuals. Research has found that priming one component cultural identity in bi-cultural individuals prompts behaviors consistent with the primed cultural identity and avoidance of behaviors consistent with the second cultural identity, but this pattern applies only when the two cultural identities are integrated. When cultural inputs from the two cultural identities conflict with one another, cultural primes may, instead, prompt avoidance of the primed cultural identity and pursuit of the second cultural identity (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Mok & Morris, 2005, 2010; Zou, Morris, & Benet-Martínez, 2008). For example, after being primed with an Asian cultural cue, Asian-American consumers whose Asian and American cultural identities are not well integrated pursue more American behaviors including an increased propensity for internal attributions (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Zou et al., 2008), uniqueness-seeking, and extroversion (Mok & Morris, 2009). This response pattern has been attributed to a desire to keep the component identities in balance and to avoid overt conflict and the dissonance that would result from that conflict.

4.5.2. Illustrating the conflict principle: aging and lifespan of identities

The identity-conflict principle argues that individuals seek to reduce conflict across multiple identities and that conflicts that are difficult to resolve will often invoke self-regulatory processes to restore balance. In this paragraph, we consider the potential for identity conflict that is inherent in the current trends that have accompanied the aging populations. The adoption of healthier lifestyles, together with technological progress, has resulted in an increase in the life expectancy enjoyed by consumers in many countries. People live longer, but, equally important, they also live better. Technology makes a fundamental contribution to the continuing increase in “quality-adjusted life years.” Examples include healthcare procedures (e.g., knee-replacement surgery), monitoring devices (e.g., emergency alert devices), transportation systems (e.g., personal vehicles), and diagnostic tools (e.g., devices for measuring blood pressure). People today can expect to continue enjoying a high quality of life until an age when few people in earlier generations would have been alive.

Identification processes are affected by the passing of time, either because a particular identity is directly linked to a life-stage (e.g., grandparent identity, youth identity) or because aging affects the possibility, or even the appropriateness, of engaging in activities that are associated with the identity (e.g., sport-related or work-related identities). By affecting the way people transition away from identities that are central to a particular maturity phase in a person's lifespan, the emergence of a healthier population of elderly people has implications for consumer identification with identities that are associated with the later stages of life. For example, an athletic baby boomer can expect to continue enjoying mountain hiking trips into her seventies. As a result, she will be able to maintain her identity as an athletic and outdoorsy person until late in her life. The identity conflict principle argues that people are motivated to monitor and reduce the perceived conflict between identities. The longer life span and improved quality of life enjoyed by older people today means that it is becoming more likely that individuals approaching old age will perceive an inconsistency between the identities they are used to (and that they can continue to endorse) and the identities that society expects people of their age to endorse. This may lead people to seek ways to combine or amalgamate identities to reduce the perceived conflict, similar to the bicultural identity integration observed among ethnic minorities (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002). For example, people may try to “reconstruct” their idea of what it means to age by contesting the association between wisdom and family support on one hand and, for example, reduced physical activity on the other. However, given the prevalence of negative stereotypes about aging and elderly people (North & Fiske, 2012) identity conflict may often simply result in a generally lower level of identification with identities that are assumed to be typical for later life stages. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that some youthful-looking baby boomers recoil at being called “grandma”.

Although the elderly stereotype tends to feature many undesirable associations, it is also associated with positive concepts such as wisdom, family orientation, and support (Hummert, 1990; North & Fiske, 2012). A focus on nurturing goals and on building meaningful emotional connections with others, especially with younger relatives, is often a key feature of identities associated with late-life stages (e.g., a grandparent identity). In many countries, for example, older individuals make an important contribution to family life by helping with child care. If people perceive an expansive (vs. finite) time horizon until later in life, they will also tend to adopt goals typical of elderly people at a much later stage in their lives (Carstensen, 2006). This may have important repercussions for intergenerational relations because identity conflict may motivate aging individuals to identify later, or to a lesser degree, with identities associated with late life stages, and this may make them less inclined to offer support to younger family members. This, in turn, might make it less likely that younger relatives will be willing to provide care and support later, when such care is needed. Therefore, whereas the late adoption of identities associated with late-life stages is likely to lead to greater life satisfaction for individuals in their “young old age”, it may lead to a reduction in life satisfaction later in life. Although these considerations are speculative, intergenerational relations represent an increasingly important area of research because of the dire state of many countries’ public finances and the increasingly skewed age distributions. It is also an area that

5. Concluding remarks

Our sense of who we are has a large influence on our thoughts, feelings and behavior. While a variety of labels can be associated with the self, chronically or in specific situations, a self-label becomes an identity as soon as it becomes sufficiently central to a person’s self-concept that he or she starts striving to “be” that type of person. This perspective on identity (“what identity is for”) unites the conceptualizations of identity that can be found in many different streams of research. Whatever the source of the adopted label that constitutes one’s identity at any moment or in any context, the downstream consequences of identification can be summarized in five principles that characterize identity-related behavior.

Once a category label is adopted or endowed by an individual as an identity, factors that increase the salience of this identity will increase the likelihood that identity-based consumer behavior will be observed (the salience principle). The adoption of a self-label allows for the—even non-deliberative—transfer of meaning and affect to objects and concepts that are experienced in association with the self-label (the association principle). Moreover, once an identity is adopted, the surrounding environment and the people and objects in it are evaluated for their relevance with respect to the identity, and a person will think, feel and behave consistently with the identity whenever it is deemed relevant in that situation (the relevance principle). People are motivated to behave consistently with their identities, which become the subject of goal striving and will drive corrective action or thought whenever the identity is at stake (the verification principle). Finally, because people may hold multiple identities, while each of the identities is not always consistent with all the others in its implications, identities may conflict. This in turn will motivate cognitive activity and behavior that aim to resolve such conflict (the conflict principle) either by active attempts to create a harmonized personal identity or by compartmentalizing identities into separable partitions of one’s life experience.

We proposed that these five principles can serve as useful points of departure for examining identity-related aspects of important open research questions in marketing and consumer research. To illustrate the potential of this approach, we deliberately selected future research opportunities in two domains, namely the implications of technology development and of globalization, that are transforming consumer behavior at the micro (individual) level as well as the macro (societal) level and for which an identity perspective holds much unrealized potential. Thus, we sought to illuminate how thinking along the lines of any of the five identity principles discussed in this article can inspire new and relevant research questions for anyone who tries to understand how consumers and marketers will react to the developments in these areas. Our selection was meant to be illustrative, rather than limiting. We suggest that this parsimonious view of identity, with its focus on trying to understand how people implicate their identities in their responses to their outside worlds, will allow a better understanding of emerging trends in the marketplace, both from a consumer perspective and from a marketing perspective.

References


Defending the markers of masculinity: Consumer resistance to brand gender-bending

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ABSTRACT

I study the Porsche Cayenne SUV launch to ethnographically analyze how men consuming a gendered brand respond to perceived brand gender contamination. The consumers’ communal gender work in a Porsche brand community is analyzed to uncover brand gender contamination’s effects on the identity projects of consumers, the brand as an identity marker, and the prevailing gender order in the group. Through the pro-mulgation of gender stereotypes, Porsche owners stratify themselves along gender lines and create an ingroup that is sharply defined by masculinity and an outgroup that is defined by femininity. The construction of social barriers limits access to Porsche’s meanings to those who achieve masculine ideals and causes the SUV owners to resort to hyper-masculine behaviors to combat exclusion. The consumers’ gender work reverses the firm’s efforts to gender-bend the brand, reinstates Porsche as a masculine marker, and refines particular definitions of masculinity in the community.

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1. Introduction

"It’s a boy!” claims Volkswagen in the 2012 relaunch of its Beetle. The Beetle’s more aggressive design was devised to bring men into the female-skewed customer base. Harley-Davidson once claimed that it made “big toys for big boys”; today, the company is trying to attract women. Marketers are gender-bending their brands, taking products that had been targeted to one sex and targeting them to the other. In the postmodern era, both men and women have engaged in gender-bending consumption, co-opting the consumption practices and products of the opposite sex to play with definitions of gender and support new ideologies. Consumer researchers argue that we are in a post-gender period in which the stark lines that have historically divided men’s and women’s consumption are blurring (Firat, 1994; Patterson & Elliott, 2002). Have we finally reached a time when gender does not matter in consumption? Can brands transcend their gendered roots and become neither masculine nor feminine, but an androgynous mixture of both?

Throughout history, our consumption has been gendered and consumers have relied on gendered products and brands as props to perform their gender identities. In 1994, Fischer and Gainer (1994: 101) hypothesized that gendered consumption was ubiquitous and enduring:

If we find…that most consumption domains are gendered, and not particularly susceptible to revision in this regard, we will begin to have a better appreciation of the ways that consumption practices are shaped by and support other mutually reinforcing social practices that contribute to the current gender order.

Gender still takes center stage in many brand narratives, and brands often find it difficult to attract the opposite sex to brands associated with one sex. Pepsi and Coke launched new brands to attract men to diet soda after their efforts to sell Diet Pepsi and Diet Coke to men were unsuccessful. PepsiMax, Coke Zero, and Dr. Pepper Ten work hard to distance themselves from feminine diet sodas by claiming that they are the “diet cola for men” and “it’s not for women.” When entering the more feminine body wash category, Gillette infused its advertising with masculine images of power tools and footballs and encouraged men to “wash like a man, feel like a man,” while Dove for Men featured men in traditional roles, acting as a protector and lifting weights, reassuring men that their masculinity would be preserved if they used the product. Despite consumers’ gender-bending consumption, gender appears to remain an important organizing construct in branding.

In this article, I analyze consumers’ lived experience and collective response to the gender-bending of their brands by exploring consumption in situ to understand the role that gender plays in today’s postmodern world. I explore two research questions: How do consumers respond to the appropriation of their brands by the opposite sex and how does their response affect the brands’ potency as a gendered identity marker? I first illuminate how consumers use brands to enact gender and why the gender contamination of brands occurs. Then, I describe my design for the study of consumers’ response to the gender-bending of Porsche via the launch of an SUV that attracted women to the masculine brand. I outline the SUV’s identity threat and analyze the existing owners’ collective impression management.

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practices. I show that the consumers who rely on a brand’s gendered identity respond to gender-bending by fighting for their brand rather than discarding it. In fighting, the consumers strengthen the brand’s gendered meanings, paradoxically increasing its potency as an identity marker as the other sex encroaches. The consumers’ gender work reverses the firm’s efforts to gender-bend the brand, reinstates the brand as a masculine marker, and reifies the particular definitions of masculinity in the brand community. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of gender-bending branding.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Enacting gender through consumption

Our most salient and central identity in the multitude of identities that define us is our sense of ourselves as being male or female. We rely heavily on gender to define ourselves and to classify and understand others (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). Gender, unlike sex, is not biologically determined; instead, it is a socially accomplished, culturally constituted ongoing construction project. We are not granted a gender at birth; we perform our gender through situated, symbolic social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). We construct gender in social interactions by tailoring our actions to conform (or not) to the normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity that exist in our culture (Gherardi, 1995) by choosing from a cultural repertoire of gendered behaviors (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). These practices, in turn, create a social gender display that reinforces (or resists) the prevailing conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1994). Although many different forms of masculinity and femininity exist concurrently in a particular culture (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985), one form is held as the taken-for-granted hegemonic standard. All people might not adhere to the hegemonic definitions, but these definitions inform people’s actions and how others interpret them (Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

Gender display is often accomplished through the use of props (Lorber, 1994). We create, enhance, and accomplish our gender identities through consumption and, thus, our possessions function as symbolic gender identity markers. Penaloza (1994) suggests that there are separate masculine and feminine consumer cultures that define what is appropriate (and inappropriate) for each gender to purchase and consume, while others support that possessions, brands, and consumption behaviors and practices are gendered (cf. Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Sherry, Kozinets, Duhachek, et al., 2004; Wallendorf & Arnold, 1991). Gendered brands contain either masculine or feminine identity meanings that are socially shared among the members of a culture. We adorn our gender displays with these brands as tangible markers; gendered brands help materialize gender, enlivening who we are as men or women. Brands populate the universe of choices that we make to express our gender, and men and women generally prefer and choose brands, possessions, and activities that reflect their gender identity (as reviewed in Palan, 2001; Stern, 1988).

2.2. The constraining forces of gendered consumption

The gendering of brands constrains what we buy, given the strong polarization of gender in many cultures, where what is feminine is understood to be the antithesis of what is masculine (Bem, 1993). When we do gender “appropriately” through consumption, our practices sustain and reinforce the prevailing roles (Fischer & Gainer, 1994; Gherardi, 1995) and people understand who we are or would like to be. When we engage in gender-bending practices by co-opting the products of the opposite sex, we are often called to account and our gender identity is questioned (Kramer, 2005). Through our performative acts, we reinforce the regulative gender discourses (Butler, 1990) the cultural narratives that outline proper behavior (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2004).

The political nature of gender has a differential effect on men and women. Androcentrism reigns in most cultures, where masculinity is more highly valued and is seen as normal, while femininity is deviant from and less than masculinity (Kramer, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity in many cultures has been defined as misogynistic and patriarchal (Connell, 1993) and includes “the dread of and the flight from women,” (Donaldson, 1993: 645). Women and women’s things signify not only femininity but also a lack of masculinity. The most important rule of manhood is to not be like a woman; real men “must never, never resemble women, or display strongly stereotyped feminine characteristics” (Brannon, 1976: 14). Most men manage their masculinity through consumption to ward off fears that others will see them as effeminate or gay (Carrigan et al., 1985; Kimmel, 1996). For men striving to achieve masculinity, success largely depends upon renouncing the feminine (Conway-Long, 1994; Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994), and this constraint circumscribes male consumers’ choices to those that fall within the regulative boundaries (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2004; Rinallo, 2007).

Research suggests that using feminine brands carries a greater stigma for men than using masculine brands does for women. While both men and women prefer brands that express their own gender identity, women are more likely to purchase masculine brands than men are likely to purchase feminine brands (Fry, 1971; Vitz & Johnson, 1965; Worth, Smith, & Mackie, 1992). Penaloza (1994: 366, 374) attributes this preference to differential power dynamics at work:

Because most of those with money and power are men, the crossing of women into the male domain by wearing clothes associated with the masculine is viewed as rational and is naturalized, whereas for men, to cross into the feminine domain by wearing clothing associated with the feminine is to willingly pursue its stigma and downward mobility, which is viewed as irrational and it goes against individual male privilege and the male dominated culture.

2.3. Gender-bending consumption and gender contamination

First and second wave feminists appropriated men’s consumption symbols to fight for gender equality by tossing aside the vestiges of femininity (Hollows, 2000; McCracken, 1988) and adopting short haircuts, cigarette smoking, and masculine fashion styles. Even the most masculine of enclaves, the Harley-Davidson brand community (Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006) and The Citadel, the all-male military college (Addelston & Stirrett, 1996), were infiltrated by women, many of whom used the oppositional tension generated by their consumption to create alternative femininities.

The emergence of the metrosexual discourse in the 1990s appeared to usher in the deconstruction of gender and a move toward the androgynous consumption that was promised by postmodern theory in which bricoleur consumers circumvent constraining categories by composing a multifaceted and creative self through their consumption (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The metrosexual was a media-proliferated masculine ideology (Simson, 1994) that emerged as an alternative to traditional masculinity and gave license to men to pursue consumption activities that were never before deemed acceptable. Young, urban, heterosexual men began buying products that had been associated with women or homosexual men (Bordo, 1999; Crane, 1999). Through their countercultural consumption, metrosexuals redefined the boundaries of masculine consumption by disarticulating practices that were previously associated with women and homosexuals and resignifying them as appropriate for heterosexual men.

However, given the political and power disparity that still exists between men and women, women’s gender-bending consumption
might be more dangerous to men than men’s gender-bending consumption is to women. The gender contamination of brands might occur as men searching for masculine distinction work to avoid brands that are used by women and/or abandon previously masculine brands that have been infiltrated by women (McCracken, 1988; Tuncay & Ottes, 2008). Anthropologists have documented gender-related totems and talismans from multiple cultures and historical periods that are associated with men, which women are forbidden to see, touch, or use (Herdt, 1981). Addelston and Stirratt (1996) documented a contemporary masculinity marker, the Citadel graduation ring, that is contaminated by the touch of a woman.

The symbolic interactionists (Mead, 1934) theorized that the meaning of a symbolic gesture, such as the use of a brand, is a social product revealed in an audience’s response to it. Meaning is dynamic and socially constituted. The fact that a brand’s identity meanings are common knowledge is a necessary condition for the use of the brand as an identity marker; consumers not only have to interpret the brand’s identity meanings for themselves, but they have to know that other people in their relevant social audiences will interpret them in the same way.

Gender contamination threatens this shared interpretation of a brand’s meaning, and people might find it more difficult to create their identity through consumption as the practices, products, and brands that are traditionally associated with masculinity or femininity are appropriated by the opposite sex. Gender-bending branding might generate reflected appraisals that are inconsistent with the message that the brand’s customers are trying to send. People feel “out of face” (Goffman, 1959) when their reflected appraisals do not reflect who they want to be. Feeling out of face is psychologically uncomfortable and motivates identity practices to alleviate the incongruence (Burke, 1991). Distress increases when the identity in question is a central part of the person’s overall identity and when the person is highly committed to the identity, as is often the case with gender (Burke, 1991; Swann & Ely, 1984). Saving face (Goffman, 1959) involves practices designed to influence the audience so that their reflected appraisals move back into congruence with the desired identity.

Under identity threat, people tend to immerse themselves in social environments in which their desired identities are supported, and they isolate themselves from the environments in which they are not (McCall & Simmons, 1966). Research on the Star Trek (Kozinets, 2001), Apple Newton (Muniz & Schau, 2005), and Hummer (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009) brand communities shows that consumers look for the collective support of their brand brethren to defend against stigmatizing brand meanings. In today’s world, saving face is likely to be both an individual and a collective practice undertaken in a brand’s communities.

3. Method

Through a multimethod design, I analyzed existing consumers’ phenomenological response to the gender-bending of their brand. This design allowed me to analyze the consumers’ construction of their identity using brands as the brands moved through two moments of cultural production, following methods used by cultural historians (Denning, 1987; Ilouz, 1997; Radway, 1984) and brought to consumer research by Holt and Thompson (2004). First, I observed the consumers’ construction of identity through brands as it intersected with mass cultural discourses, which serve as a repository of masculine meanings that are available for use. Second, I observed the consumers’ construction of identity as it was enacted in day-to-day consumption practices.

3.1. Natural experiment of observation

Porsche shocked the world when it announced the launch of the Porsche Cayenne SUV, the first non-sports car in its seventy-year history. This event was chosen for this study based on the following criteria. First, the Porsche brand serves as a strong example of a gendered brand, with a positioning described by prior researchers as “extreme masculinity” (Stuteville, 1971). Cars are an important part of many men’s extended selves, and Belk (2004: 273) has claimed that “extreme identification with automobiles is a predominantly male fascination... There are few possessions as important to many adult American men as their cars.” Some men experience their cars as a sexual extension of themselves (Belk, 2004; Lane & Sternberg, 1985). Sports cars, in particular, can serve as phallic symbols (Thompson & Holt, 2004), which increase the probability that identity concerns will be triggered if the gender meanings associated with a sports car brand are altered. Finally, the press surrounding the launch of the Porsche Cayenne suggested that the brand’s gender identity meanings were changing, “Porsche goes soccer mom... Has Porsche lost its soul?” claimed Forbes, while The New York Times found, “There may be no vision more heretical to a testosterone-poisoned 911 owner than that of a suburban mother loading groceries into the back of her Porsche after dropping her children off at soccer practice.”

3.2. Cultural discourse analysis

For some brands, especially those that have achieved the status of a cultural icon, gender identity meanings are reflected in and/or emerge from the mass mediated image that the brand enjoys in the culture (Holt, 2004). To understand brand meaning as conveyed by mass media depictions of the brand, one must understand the cultural stories in which the brand performs a supporting role by interpreting the symbolism of the brand’s products as presented in cultural texts (Hirschman, 1988; Holbrook & Grayson, 1986). To understand Porsche’s gender identity meanings, I conducted a cultural analysis of the Porsche brand in popular culture. I analyzed major American movies and television programs over a forty-year time period (see Table 1) that featured Porsche vehicles and extracted the identity characteristics shared by the characters driving them. I began my analysis using lists constructed by the brand community members and supplemented them with information from an online movie database.

3.3. Brand identity meaning elicitation experiment

To better understand Porsche’s existing gender identity meanings as well as the new gender identity meanings brought by the SUV, I conducted an experiment. First, I elicited Porsche brand and SUV category gender identity meanings from consumers using an unaided elicitation task: “describe the type of person who drives a Porsche (an SUV).” The elicited meanings formed the basis of a study administered to MBA students at a large U.S. business school. The study consisted of a randomly assigned, between-subjects design that manipulated which portion of the Porsche product line was shown. Thirty-nine participants (sports car group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the sports cars in the Porsche product line. Thirty-four participants (SUV group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the SUV. A between-subjects design was used to manipulate which portion of the Porsche product line was shown. Thirty-nine participants (sports car group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the sports cars in the Porsche product line. Thirty-four participants (SUV group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the sports cars in the Porsche product line. Thirty-four participants (SUV group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the sports cars in the Porsche product line. Thirty-four participants (SUV group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the sports cars in the Porsche product line. Thirty-four participants (SUV group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the sports cars in the Porsche product line. Thirty-four participants (SUV group) were given the Porsche brand logo and the photographs and names of the sports cars in the Porsche product line.
**Table 1**

Cultural analysis of Porsche identity meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie/television show</th>
<th>Porsche (Actor or role)</th>
<th>Identity characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Quiller Memorandum (1966)</td>
<td>356 George Segal</td>
<td>British spy, loner, unorthodox, dangerous, deadly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downhill Racer (1969)</td>
<td>911 Robert Redford</td>
<td>Quietly cocky ski racer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Mans (1971)</td>
<td>911 Steve McQueen</td>
<td>Race car driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Theft Auto (1977)</td>
<td>911 Christopher Walkin</td>
<td>Snotty rich boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie Hall (1977)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Jeff Dugan&quot;</td>
<td>Radio station manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Guys Wear Black (1978)</td>
<td>930 Chuck Norris</td>
<td>Ex U.S. army commando</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Benjamin (1980)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Heini Alan Tremont&quot;</td>
<td>Wealthy, self-absorbed, handsome, adulterer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Age Crazy (1980)</td>
<td>928 Bruce Dern</td>
<td>40, having affair &amp; mid-life crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Gigolo (1980)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Bad guy pimp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs of War (1980)</td>
<td>356 Christopher Walken</td>
<td>Mercenary, revolutionary hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur (1981)</td>
<td>924 Dudley Moore</td>
<td>Wealthy, Lazy, playboy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Problems (1981)</td>
<td>911 Dabney Coleman</td>
<td>Shady, egotistical author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Romance (1981)</td>
<td>911 Albert Brooks</td>
<td>Jealous, self-centered, single, successful film editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condoman (1981)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Bad guys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Soldier (1982)</td>
<td>930 Ken Wahl</td>
<td>Anti terrorist soldier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 Hrs. (1982)</td>
<td>Speedster Eddie Murphy</td>
<td>Foul-mouthed slick convict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risky Business (1983)</td>
<td>928 Tom Cruise</td>
<td>&quot;daddy's car&quot;, smart, sexy, naive, wealthy, Princeton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarface (1983)</td>
<td>911 Al Pacino</td>
<td>Cocaine dealer, unhinged, tough, violent, ruthless, savvy, mob boss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Big Chill (1983)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Yuppies, midlife crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathless (1983)</td>
<td>356 Richard Gere</td>
<td>Slick Las Vegas hustler with a good side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class (1983)</td>
<td>911 Rob Lowe</td>
<td>Suave, sophisticated, wealthy, mischievous rebel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flashdance (1983)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Nicky&quot;</td>
<td>Construction company boss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Party (1984)</td>
<td>911 Tom Hank's rival</td>
<td>Trust Fund Baby, Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixteen Candles (1984)</td>
<td>944 &quot;Jake Ryan&quot;</td>
<td>High school jock, sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA Law (1986)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Arnie Becker&quot;</td>
<td>Sleazy, womanizing divorce lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlander (1986)</td>
<td>356 Connor Macleod</td>
<td>Romantic action hero, great powers, strength, immortal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Gun (1986)</td>
<td>Speedster Kelly McGillis</td>
<td>Powerful, smart, pretty, in charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hidden (1987)</td>
<td>928 &quot;Good aliens&quot;</td>
<td>FBI Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Than Zero (1987)</td>
<td>911 Andrew McCarthy</td>
<td>Ivy League preppy, wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three for the Road (1987)</td>
<td>911 Charlie Sheen</td>
<td>Steals it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Man's Land (1987)</td>
<td>911 Charlie Sheen</td>
<td>Wealthy, thief, party-guy, icy smooth, risk taker, unhinged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystic Pizza (1988)</td>
<td>911 Charles Gordon Windsor</td>
<td>Wealthy, uber-WASP, rebellious law school drop-out, pretty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bull Durham (1988)</td>
<td>911 Tim Robbins</td>
<td>Star pitcher, sweet but stupid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tequila Sunrise (1988)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Mac&quot;</td>
<td>Drug dealer, evil, handsome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Rotten Scoundrels (1988)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Wealthy, suave con man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her Alibi (1989)</td>
<td>356 Tom Selleck</td>
<td>Writer of bad novels looking for love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Fugitives (1989)</td>
<td>911 Martin Short</td>
<td>Steals it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seinfeld (1989–1998)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Jerry&quot;</td>
<td>Wannabe owner, urban, funny, nerdy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Simpsons (1989–pres)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Krusty the Clown&quot;</td>
<td>Scary, crazy clown, criminal, boozed, gambler, dirtbag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Destiny (1990)</td>
<td>550 James Belushi</td>
<td>Mid-life crisis, unhappy, powerless man relives youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Knocks (1990)</td>
<td>911 Dana Carvey</td>
<td>Joy ride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Heights (1990)</td>
<td>911 Michael Keaton</td>
<td>Manipulative, deadly man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father of the Bride (1991)</td>
<td>911 Steve Martin</td>
<td>Upper middle class dad in mid-life crisis when daughter leaves nest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlander II (1991)</td>
<td>911 Connor MacLeod</td>
<td>Romantic action hero, great powers, strength, immortal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey (1991)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Bill and Ted&quot;</td>
<td>Steal it for a joyride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doc Hollywood (1991)</td>
<td>Speedster Michael J. Fox</td>
<td>Hot shot big city doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriot Games (1992)</td>
<td>911 Anne Archer</td>
<td>Doctor, mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Player (1992)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Trying to pick-up girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal Bliss (1992)</td>
<td>928 Luke Perry</td>
<td>Affluent, handsome single guy fighting over a girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Hood (1993)</td>
<td>928 Patrick Swayze</td>
<td>Small time criminal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Specialist (1994)</td>
<td>968 James Woods</td>
<td>Manic villain, psychotic hired gun with a vendetta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angels in the Outfield (1994)</td>
<td>911 Danny Glover</td>
<td>Baseball manager, skeptical, heart of gold, father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly Hills Cop 3 (1994)</td>
<td>968 Eddie Murphy</td>
<td>Rebel, irreverent scammer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor Thy Father and Mother (1994)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Young, kills parents, buys 911 with insurance money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine Months (1995)</td>
<td>911 Hugh Grant</td>
<td>Commitment phobic single psychiatrist becomes a dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinner (1995)</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Dusk till Dawn (1996)</td>
<td>964 George Clooney</td>
<td>Bank robber on the lam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Time to Kill (1996)</td>
<td>356 Sandra Bullock</td>
<td>Energetic, ambitious, razor-sharp law student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingpin (1996)</td>
<td>993 &quot;Stan&quot;</td>
<td>Bad guy, goon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiss The Girls (1997)</td>
<td>911 Morgan Freeman</td>
<td>Detective and author, father, cool and professional, widower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing God (1997)</td>
<td>356 David Duchovny</td>
<td>LA surgeon on drugs joins the mob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batman and Robin (1997)</td>
<td>550 &quot;Batman&quot;</td>
<td>Handsome hero, rich, brave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Life Less Ordinary (1997)</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Action (1998)</td>
<td>911 John Travolta</td>
<td>Lawyer, desires material success, goes into ruin to help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Work (1998)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Bill Lumberg&quot;</td>
<td>Snotty rich guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Space (1999)</td>
<td>911 &quot;Joey&quot;</td>
<td>Single actor who pretends it is his to pick up girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends (1999)</td>
<td>996 Craig Bierko</td>
<td>Young dancing scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Thirteenth Floor (1999)</td>
<td>911 Ashley Judd</td>
<td>Female serial killer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the Love of the Game (1999)</td>
<td>993 Kevin Costner</td>
<td>40 y/o pitcher in mid-life crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deuce Bigalow, Male Gigolo (1999)</td>
<td>996 Bruce Willis</td>
<td>Debonair gigolo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disney's the Kid (2000)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>High powered image consultant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued on next page)
was used to reconstruct a longitudinal netnography designed to capture the existing consumers’ response to the SUV. The four-year longitudinal design allowed for the capture of consumers’ responses in real time, rather than retrospective reflection, and permitted the observation of both the immediate and the longer term responses. The tenets of netnographic community selection (Kozinets, 2002) were used to identify a specific Porsche online community for study. Rennlist, an international community of Porsche enthusiasts, was chosen because it is the largest automotive special interest website on the internet, enjoying over 36,000 participants talking with each other on the web forums, while their conversations were being read by an observer ethnographic data to the analysis, following the participant observer method pursued by Muniz and Schau (2005). Finally, I conducted five three-hour member check interviews with Porsche owners to confirm and refine my understanding of the online conversations.

4. Results

4.1. Porsche as a marker of masculinity

My cultural analysis of the brand yielded shared identity meanings that are evident across all of the characters driving Porsche vehicles in American movies and television programs. Porsche drivers are overwhelmingly male: 91% of the characters portrayed were men. Porsche helps men express their masculinity by tapping into two strains of masculinity that are present in contemporary culture and summarized by Holt and Thompson (2004): the “Breadwinner” and the “Rebel.” Contemporary men often use their consumption practices to tacitly shape their masculinity into a new gender ideology that exhibits a combination of the two, the man-of-action hero. Breadwinner masculinity is characterized by a man who “pursues organization success by following rules, [and who is] responsible, respectable, rational, reserved, [a] community pillar, safe,” while rebel masculinity is characterized by a man who “pursues

Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie/television show</th>
<th>Porsche</th>
<th>(Actor or role)</th>
<th>Identity characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Psycho (2000)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Kevin Bacon</td>
<td>Yuppies, Urban, Wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollow Man (2000)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>Tom Cruise</td>
<td>Heroic, brave, smart, risk taker spy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Impossible 2 (2000)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>Morgan Freeman</td>
<td>Retired detective/psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space Cowboys (2000)</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>Clint Eastwood</td>
<td>Hot shot test pilot, astronaut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Along Came a Spider (2001)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Johnny Depoe</td>
<td>Cocaine smuggler, poor roots, wealthy, party-animal, addict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blow (2001)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>&quot;Jack Geller&quot;</td>
<td>Dorky middle aged father, lawyer, inappropriate comments, Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannibal (2001)</td>
<td>Boxster</td>
<td>Ray Liotta</td>
<td>FBI Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Dean (2001)</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>James Dean</td>
<td>Sexy, dangerous, rebel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legally Blonde (2001)</td>
<td>Boxster</td>
<td>Reese Witherspoon</td>
<td>Beautiful ditzy blonde sorority girl law student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life as a House (2001)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Lex Luthor</td>
<td>Rich teenager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smallville (2001)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>&quot;Zao&quot;</td>
<td>Trust fund, evil criminal, mindend, angry, vengeful, playboy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enough (2002)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wealthy wife beater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything Else (2003)</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>Woody Allen</td>
<td>Paranoid, odd professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intolerable Cruelty (2003)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>George Clooney</td>
<td>Wealthy, has it all, LA divorce attorney in midlife crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old School (2003)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Craig Killborn</td>
<td>Boyfriend who fous around with the waitress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spy Game (2001)</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>Robert Redford</td>
<td>Retiring CIA agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellular (2004)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td></td>
<td>Obnoxious, smarmy lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Good Company (2004)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Tophet Grace &quot;Carter&quot;</td>
<td>Young, business school prodigy, dumped by his wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Cool (2005)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Harvey Keitel</td>
<td>Sleazy record label executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bewitched (2005)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>Will Ferrell</td>
<td>Self-absorbed actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Transporter 2 (2005)</td>
<td>Cayenne</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;bad guy&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Momma’s House 2 (2006)</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>Martin Lawrence</td>
<td>Wife pressures To give up 911 for SUV, cross dressing FBI agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sopranos (2006)</td>
<td>Cayenne</td>
<td>&quot;Carmella&quot;</td>
<td>Mob boss’ wife, soccer mom, suburban, Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sopranos (2006)</td>
<td>Boxster</td>
<td>&quot;Rosalie&quot;</td>
<td>Mobster’s wife, newly single, Italian, suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars (2006)</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>&quot;Sally Carrera&quot;</td>
<td>Porsche as anthropomorphized woman, lawyer, rebel’s love interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
autonomy by defying institutional rules, [and who is] creative, confident, self-directed, potent, youthful, dangerous” (Holt & Thompson, 2004: 437). The Porsche brand encompasses many of the expectations associated with masculinity that underpin the breadwinner and the rebel myths, such as “No Sissy Stuff” (anti-feminine), “The Big Wheel” (wealth and power), “The Sturdy Oak” (toughness and dependability), and “Give 'Em Hell” (aggression and rebellion) suggested by Brannon (1976), the “Playboy” or “Macho Man” suggested by Lindsey (1997) and Osgerby (2001), and the “Peter Pan” (childlike and irresponsible) summarized by Register (2001).

Wealthy, professional white collar men drive Porsche sports cars. These men are doctors, lawyers, scientists, and businessmen, living successful breadwinner lives. Their Porsche sports cars are external markers of their success and wealth. A darker side to Porsche is also evident that helps the brand to express rebel masculinity. Villains, such as cocaine smugglers, hustlers, and criminals drive Porsche sports cars, giving the brand a risky, dangerous edge. These Porsche men are cocky, irreverent, rebellious, risk-seeking loners who buck the traditional establishment. Tough “good guys” drive Porsche sports cars, including detectives, military men, CIA operatives, and spies. Porsche men are sexy and sexual, both in appealing and not so appealing ways, as adulterers or womanizers. These men are often egotistical, narcissistic, or spoiled brats and coping with midlife crises during which they engage in irresponsible behavior. Movies illustrate the symbolic value of a Porsche as an antidote for aging and the resolution of mid-life crises. They also use it as a symbol for the loss of manhood associated with marriage and family in which characters feel pressured to give up their Porsche sports car for a more sensible family car.

I compared the findings of the cultural analysis with my netnographic analysis of the brand community to see if the lived experiences of the consumers were consistent with the mass mediated brand meanings surrounding masculinity and to understand how the identity meanings of Porsche contained in the mass culture discourse are interpreted by men in everyday consumption practice, following Holt and Thompson (2004). The brand community frequently engages with mass culture discourses in their communal discussions of their brand, creating a discursive field fueled by both the mass mediated meaning and their own consumption situated personalized meanings. In conversations, the movies that contain Porsche cars are dissected, and media-incited stereotypes are identified and then grounded by personal stories.

The brand community revels in the masculine exclusivity of Porsche, and masculine ideologies are often at the crux of the consumers’ stories about their ownership experience. The members frequently remind each other that 85% of Porsche owners are men. To the members of the brand community, buying a Porsche is often seen as an assertion of one’s manhood, whether it is the physical mastery of the machine, which requires its drivers to handle Porsche, can get a Honda or something. (Flying Finn)

Earlier this week I took whifey for a spin in the [Porsche] 930 and whilst sitting at a traffic light she suddenly exploded...”Them bitches!” she said, pointing at the two hotties in the Honda next to us checking out the Porsche and making eyes at me... Hell, I didn’t even notice them before. Now, I’m not a man who screws around. Quite happily married for 17 years now. But I must admit, getting the old ego stroked at intersections reminds me of high school and kinda makes me feel like a real stud...Oh shit, is this what they call a “midlife crisis”? (Pierre Martins)

There’s super hot women everywhere, ignoring us. Keep in mind, I don’t exactly fit in with the more well dressed clientele at this establishment as I am mostly very happy in a nice t-shirt and a pair of jeans. Anyway, tons of hotties, no love (and in some cases a bit of attitude and contempt) from any of them, until we decided to leave. We walk outside and head across the street to my [Porsche] 996. When it is apparent as to which car we are going to, I hear, ‘Mr. bald guy, where are you going, come back’ from a group of about 10 absolutely drop dead beautiful, tightly clothed, amazingly sexy women. These very same woman only moments before were not paying us any attention. (mastermind)

Mastermind’s story demonstrates the transformation of an emasculated man who is failing to keep up with the men who surround him due to his attire and his balding pate. His Porsche becomes a magical transport, bringing him back into the game and enabling him to capture the attention of women.

A Porsche’s technical performance, including its power, its speed, and its handling, is a source of pride for Porsche owners. The brand community revels in the fact that driving a Porsche requires a higher level of skill and that women (and lesser men) have difficulty in driving them. This attitude is evidenced in the following post that argues that only “real men” can handle the car. Driving a Porsche involves the physical mastery of the machine, which requires its drivers to be strong, powerful, and mechanically skilled, traits strongly associated with the cultural definitions of masculinity (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Moore-Striegel, 1987).

Man, that’s basically what Porsche is all about! Porsches & especially the early ones were made for REAL drivers, not every ‘average Joe’ out there. There are plenty of cars that are easy & boring to drive and requires almost no driving skills at all. So one who can’t handle Porsche, can get a Honda or something. (Flying Finn)

Hence, prior to the launch of the SUV, in the media and in the situated use in the lives of consumers, the Porsche brand serves as a strong marker of masculinity for its owners.

4.2. The gender contamination of the Porsche Cayenne SUV

Merely 9% of the movies and television programs that I analyzed in the cultural analysis featured female Porsche drivers. Two of the women drove the Porsche Cayenne SUV. Carmella in The Sopranos is a middle aged, suburban housewife married to a mob boss, while Kim Basinger plays a middle aged teacher who is kidnapped and fights to save her family in Cellular. These two roles suggest that the SUV is bringing new identity meanings to the brand, which include middle aged, suburban motherhood, indicating that the Porsche brand might be becoming gender contaminated.

To confirm that the Porsche Cayenne SUV brought new gender identity meanings to the Porsche brand, I used a one-way between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to analyze the data from the brand identity meaning elicitation experiment, using all of the 28
items as dependent variables. The descriptive statistics for each of the 28 items by condition are contained in Table 2. A multivariate test of the full model showed that these 28 dependent variables were significantly affected by the experimental condition (Wilks’ lambda = .002, F (56, 160) = 2.194, p < .001). While Porsche sports cars and the Porsche Cayenne SUV share some identity meanings, the tests of between-subject effects showed that they differ on eleven, including seven that are closely tied to sex or gender identity (Male/Female, Masculine/Feminine, Soccer Mom, Playboy) or that are correlated with gender identity based on commonly accepted gender stereotypes, (Dangerous/Cautious, Reckless/Safe, Car Lover), (Bem, 1974; Edelbrock & Sugawara, 1978; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Porsche sports cars owners are perceived to be more male, more masculine, more like a playboy, more dangerous, more reckless and more of a car lover than the Porsche Cayenne SUV owners, who are perceived to be more female, more feminine, more like a soccer mom, more cautious, and more safe. The absence of differences for the remaining items indicates that some of Porsche’s identity meanings, particularly those related to economic status, self-esteem, and social display behaviors, remain intact with the SUV launch.

Consistent with the findings suggested by the cultural analysis and the experiment, my analysis of the netographic data from the Porsche brand community indicates that the launch of the Porsche Cayenne contaminated Porsche as a marker of masculinity and threatened the masculine gender display of the existing Porsche owners. Across the myriad of conversations in my dataset, I uncovered a dominant theme that discussed the alternative gender identity meanings brought by the Porsche Cayenne SUV, their threat to the masculine meanings previously associated with Porsche, and their stigmatizing impact on the members of the brand community. Many of the existing owners lamented that the Porsche Cayenne SUV not only feminized the Porsche brand but also introduced alternative, subordinate versions of masculinity to it. The brand community’s analysis expresses alarm over the femininity of the brand extension.

Table 2
Porsche identity meanings (sports cars vs. SUV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sports car mean SD</th>
<th>Sports car mean SD</th>
<th>SUV mean SD</th>
<th>SUV mean SD</th>
<th>Sig.(b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soccer mom</td>
<td>6.41 .798</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.822</td>
<td>***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playboy</td>
<td>2.86 1.378</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.507</td>
<td>***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car lover</td>
<td>2.51 1.387</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.785</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuppie</td>
<td>2.51 1.070</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.208</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status oriented</td>
<td>1.81 .995</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/female</td>
<td>2.24 .630</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.404</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young/old</td>
<td>4.35 1.949</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>1.196</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single/married</td>
<td>3.35 1.207</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>1.379</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/suburban</td>
<td>3.43 1.642</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>1.533</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor/rich</td>
<td>4.69 0.559</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>.633</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has kids/has no kids</td>
<td>5.05 1.201</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.642</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wants to fit in/wants to stand out</td>
<td>5.51 1.146</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>1.223</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip/mainstream</td>
<td>3.76 1.722</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.169</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous/cautious</td>
<td>3.30 1.024</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1.364</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting/boring</td>
<td>2.97 1.142</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun loving/serious</td>
<td>3.05 1.290</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.141</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discriminating tastes/follows the crowd</td>
<td>3.68 1.811</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.258</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool/uncool</td>
<td>3.16 1.259</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.142</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stylish/unstylish</td>
<td>2.70 1.222</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrogant/humble</td>
<td>1.78 .621</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>.955</td>
<td>†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showy/modest</td>
<td>1.76 .683</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>.776</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snobby/down to earth</td>
<td>2.38 0.953</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>.961</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure/secure</td>
<td>3.00 1.291</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>1.046</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical/impractical</td>
<td>5.41 1.066</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>1.170</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferiority/superiority complex</td>
<td>3.84 1.500</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.022</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follower/leader</td>
<td>4.22 1.357</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.929</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine/feminine</td>
<td>2.68 0.944</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.395</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reckless/safe</td>
<td>3.59 .985</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.080</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a For first five single items, 7-point Likert scale, 1 anchors “agree” and 7 anchors “disagree”; for all remaining items, 7-point scale, 1 anchors first trait of pair and 7 anchors second trait of pair.

\(b\) \(p < .10, * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, \text{and } *** = p < .001.\)

I am actually excited about seeing them [the Porsche Cayenne SUV] driving around on the roads, but I’m not excited at all about seeing who’s driving them. Hopefully I will see a competent-looking driver, but I know I’ll see a soccer mom like I see in every [Hummer] H2 around here. It just gives me a heeb. Like this morning, I was behind a BEAUTIFUL brand new [Porsche] 911 turbo for like 10 minutes! I flipped my shit and couldn’t take my eyes off it. Then I passed by at a light when it turned, only to find a 50 year old-ish looking woman with poofy fake looking hair driving it… I had to hold back the tears. Anyone else feel this way when they see out-of-place Porsche drivers? Like people you KNOW right when you look at em — that they don’t give a shit about having the privilege to drive a precision engineered German sports car!!! (Tarheel 944S)

You guys forget that you have the wrong hormones flowing through your veins to understand why Porsche is putting out this SUV. My wife would snatch one up in a heartbeat. Someone mentioned the worst scenario would be soccer moms driving these. Well, get ready to meet your nightmare. It’ll be sitting at a stop light near you. (Bart)

I heard a rumor that Porsche was devoting their entire racing budget to the Cayenne Challenge, an event that pits homemen against each other in a challenging obstacle course. …events include: 1000 metre grocery dash. Drivers launch from a starting stand and drive furiously to a simulated shopping center where 4 bags of groceries are loaded before the driver hurtles their 2 + ton vehicle back to the start/finish line…. Mutatisking behind the wheel…. Drivers negotiate a difficult city street simulation while talking on a cell phone, cradling a Grande Non-Fat, No-Whip Mocha in their lap, and applying mascara or lipstick. (H2ON00)

Porsche’s marketing efforts confirm the existing owners’ suspicions that the Porsche Cayenne SUV is targeted toward women. Many of the early photographs released by PAG depict women drivers, local Porsche dealerships advertise special “soccer mom promotions,” and PAG sponsors women’s professional tennis. These marketing efforts further the feminization of the brand and causes consternation among the Porsche men.

They say that they are aiming this at 42 to 47 yr old males with porsches…but, all the photos ive seen have girls driving it and that putz shwab [President of Porsche North America, Fred Schwab] says that its great for the alpha female/wife. (RobertG)

It is not merely the introduction of women to the brand that alarms the existing owners; it is that Porsche has introduced its first non-sports car with the introduction of the SUV. SUV’s are perceived by the brand community as “practical vehicles” that are popular with mainstream consumers, while Porsche sports cars are valued for the fact that they are fun, frivolous, and rare. The introduction of the SUV weakens the association between the brand and its masculine sports car heritage. Porsche owners begin to fear that the launch of the Porsche Cayenne SUV opens the door for future non-sports car models from Porsche that will push it into even more feminine categories, such as minivans or station wagons, which open the brand to a broader audience, thereby diminishing its mystique.

If this trend keeps up — Porsche will be building station wagons to compete with the Subaru Outback and then Minivans to compete with the Chrysler. (DoubleNutz)

Yeah, I can’t wait for the day when Porsche offer a car for each group of buyer. A van for the soccer mom, a Lexus like porsche sedan for those who prefer comfort over performance, a porsche hatchback for the younger buyers who can’t pay a lot. Yeah, everybody’s driving a porsche and they are all happy and some
of them will one day drive a [Porsche] 911... but wait, what does a 911 mean to them anyway? We are all driving porsches, and my porsche van is better than your 9 what? So much for the porsche mystique. (Cloud964)

Finally, while some SUV brands, such as Hummer and Jeep, function as masculine markers and convey their masculinity with off-road adventure mythology and an aggressive physical design, others are associated with more feminine imagery. The brand community largely finds the Porsche SUV to be less masculine than the Hummer, Jeep, and Range Rover SUVs, and labels it as more reminiscent of a station wagon or a minivan, both of which are vehicles that are associated with women. In the following posts, the brand community members connect competitive SUVs with masculine themes (Lamborghini = sex, Hummer = military tanks, Suburban = cowboy) but are unable to do the same for the Porsche SUV.

A truck/SUV should look like a truck–large in dimensions and boxy, with a strong upright grille–lots of right angles. Rugged... I identify with SUV's like the Suburban (we used to call them Cowboy Cadillacs)... Also, the Cayenne looks very feminine to my eyes, which doesn't jive with my sense of a traditional, rugged SUV. (Anir)

Mr. Lamborghini said to his engineers... I want you to build a car that when I say to my wife 'I'm going out to buy cigarettes', is so good looking that first good looking lady will come with me to the hotel, and is so fast when I'll come back, my wife says: 'that was fast honey!'... Little different than what boys at [Porsche] told their designers... we want to have a car, that... every soccer mom likes, but 25 year old hotties couldn't care less and has so much cargo space that we can fit 30 grocery bags easily. (Flying Finn)

Even though I personally do not like the Hummer, I believe it is selling well because of its tough, masculine image. It appeals to those who want the biggest, baddest, Schwartznegger-ish truck on the planet. OTOH, the Cayenne is actually a bit feminine in its lines. It looks more like a minivan or tall station wagon than a traditional truck. (Anir)

Many of the brand community members fret that the Cayenne is feminine, citing features of the vehicle that suggest that the SUV was designed for women: its automatic tiptronic transmission, its cupholders, and its feminine design. The automatic transmission obliterates the physical challenge of mastering Porsche's difficult handling, while the cupholders add unnecessary weight to the vehicle, heretical in a race car. Both of these features decrease the product's masculinity quotient by distancing the SUV from Porsche's sports cars, as evidenced in a race car. It pains me to see what was one a no nonsense pure race car now plagued with useless extra weight and soft suspensions to make that trip to the grocery store more comfy. (Flying Finn)

And a 6 speed [manual transmission]? You know, soccer moms don't want to shift — it may interfere with their quality cell phone time :rolleyes: (mpm '95 C4)

The introduction of the Porsche Cayenne SUV threatens the masculine identity of the brand's users. The owners voice their concerns that the buyers of the SUV are incongruent with their desired masculine identity. The excerpts from the brand community conversations below are indicative of the negative emotional response that this incongruence elicits and are indicative of the out-of-face emotional disturbance that the identity threat brings. The owners experience the SUV as a personal affront, a “slap in the face” or an “ugly sister” that reflects badly on them:

And it is impossible for me to dispassionately talk about this slap-in-the-face soccer-mom-tank-barge from the accountants who now run Porsche. To find that Porsche is now selling SUV's, and soon pick-ups, toothbrushes, and maybe perfume, is atrocious. They have destroyed the brand and killed its mystique. My days of reading the race results from Le Mans to figure out how many of the top positions were Porsches is long dead — and the accountants and marketers at Porsche are dancing on the grave, while they try to figure out how to make more money from the brand name. I'm sick... (mike_la_jolla)

The Cayenne remains the 'ugly sister', a necessary blemish on, an up to now, un tarnished marque. (Robbo 66)

While research has suggested that physical damage to a man's car can represent castration (Belk, 2004), the Porsche brand community shows that symbolic damage to a man's car brand can be just as painful.

4.3. Defending masculinity markers through collective identity work

In the sections below, I describe the collective face-saving identity work that the brand community engages in as a defensive justifying practice (Schau, Muniz, & Arnold, 2009) to alleviate the gender identity crisis brought on by the SUV. This identity work involves attaching derogatory gender stereotypes to SUV owners that psychologically and socially establish an ingroup/outgroup. This behavior is consistent with social psychological research on stereotyping, which shows that group threat leads to the stereotyping of others and a prejudicial affect toward them. Stereotyping places others into categories, and this categorization leads to the construction of boundaries among groups and the creation of ingroup/outgroup social structures (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in which people surround themselves with others who resemble them and distance themselves from those who do not as a way of declaring who one is (and who one is not).

4.3.1. Collective gender stereotyping

In their online conversations, the brand community members stereotype Porsche Cayenne SUV owners, claiming that the product is purchased by people who are very different from the existing owners, specifically “soccer moms” who are looking for a trendy SUV to avoid driving a minivan to the grocery store, shopping mall, and school playgrounds, “poseurs” who are interested in obtaining the image of a Porsche but who are not true car enthusiasts and cannot properly handle
the cars, and “yuppies” who are merely seeking a status symbol. The gender significance of each of these stereotypes is discussed below.

As observed by Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander (2006) in their study of female Harley-Davidson owners, women who purchase symbols of masculinity engage with and co-opt masculinity discourses through their consumption of these products. Through the gender stereotyping that links the Porsche Cayenne SUV to a derivative soccer mom stereotype, the existing Porsche owners block this transfer of masculinity to the women who buy the SUV by supplanting positive masculine associations with negative feminine associations, thereby making the product less attractive to women for gender experimentation. At the same time, the linkage of the SUV to a feminine ideology further diminishes its attractiveness to men because it strips the product of its masculinity, thereby limiting the product’s appeal and its lifespan in the marketplace. The following post is an example of the usage of the “soccer mom” stereotype.

... My GOD say it ain’t so! I keep telling myself that if I wish and hope and pray hard enough... that it won’t happen. That this SUV thing is all just a bad dream.... And you were there, Auntie Lame, and Uncle Killporsche... That perhaps this is all just an elaborate hoax and coverup for what is really going to be the greatest Porsche since the [Porsche] 956. That maybe Porsche Marketing will point at everyone and laugh saying, C’mon... You “really” believed all that CRAP about SUVs?! This is Porsche for cry’n out loud. We’re proud Germans! We don’t make jokes! We make race bread and race WINNING sports cars! NOT MINI Vans! I can just see it know... Some rich Soccer Mom driving the damn thing to pick up her kids with a bumper sticker that reads, Proud parent of honor student and a Baby on Board sticker next to the Barney stick on sunshade with a baby seat in back... NO! WAIT! The ULTIMATE killjoy! Porsche adds a fold down babyseat standard in each one! ...Oh the humanity! ...I wonder how many cup holders it will have??? Just shoot me now! (Doc)

The “soccer mom” stereotype gains cultural resonance from its connections to the cultural discourses surrounding the identity meanings attached to SUV owners. The New York Times columnist Bradsher (2002) connects SUVs to an emerging social group defined as “soccer moms” in the cultural vernacular, calling them the vehicle of choice for women who are trying to escape the stigma of driving a minivan. This description, ironically, transfers the negative associations of the women that were trying to avoid in the minivan category to the SUV category. “Soccer mom” is a pejorative term for third wave or post-feminist, upper class motherhood and homemaking. A soccer mom is an affluent homemaker, often very highly educated, who has left behind a successful professional career to voluntarily stay home and take care of her children. The soccer mom stereotype hearkens back to the housewife and Stepford Wife stereotypes berated by second wave feminists such as Betty Friedan (1963), who depicted the home as a prison in which women were subjugated to servitude to meet their family’s needs and who depicted the housewife as a passive, dehumanized robot. Updated in contemporary television shows such as Desperate Housewives, today’s soccer moms are portrayed as boring, bored, frustrated, and depressed, with no identity of their own and with few responsibilities or achievements outside of those of their family.

The soccer mom ideology emerged in American culture during third stage feminism, a movement characterized by Faludi (1992) as a backlash against the definitions of success put forth by the second stage feminists. “Opting out” of the public sphere and an identity built around professional success, soccer moms returned to the home and embraced voluntary domesticity and the traditional roles of wife and mother, encouraged by alternative versions of femininity offered by media celebrities such as Martha Stewart and Nigella Lawson who celebrated women’s roles in the private sphere (Bransdon, 2006). Given that these soccer moms had grown up during three decades of feminist critique against the traditional definitions of femininity and the subjugation of women in the home, opting out was often accompanied by strong feelings of guilt and regret about giving up their hard earned professional identities, of accepting less than their mothers, and of surrendering the ground won by second wave feminists (Hollows, 2006).

The attachment of the soccer mom stereotype to the Porsche Cayenne SUV associates the vehicle not only with femininity but with a particular feminine ideology that is not attractive to men or women. The women who purchase the SUV must contend with being labeled a “soccer mom,” a stereotype that prevents them from gaining access to the masculine meanings that are traditionally associated with Porsche. Through the use of the “soccer mom” stereotype, the existing Porsche owners relegate the Porsche Cayenne SUV owners to the bottom of a gender power structure. By linking the product to negative conceptions of domesticity and motherhood that hearken back to an era when women had significantly less power and were relegated to the private, rather than the public sphere, the existing Porsche owners increase the power distance between the Porsche sports cars and the SUV and, hence, between themselves and the Porsche Cayenne SUV owners.

The “poseurs” stereotype has existed in the Porsche brand community since its inception. Throughout history, following the launch of controversial Porsche vehicles, the brand community has engaged in debates in which the members argue over whether the owners that the new product brings to the brand are “real” Porsche men or mere poseurs. Brand community members depict the “poseurs” as deviant from the traditional definitions of masculinity and emasculate them by referring to their lack of understanding of the technical workings of the car, their inability and/or unwillingness to push the car to its limits, or their lack of appreciation for the brand’s illustrious racing heritage. It has been shown that automobiles can be regarded as sacred objects by their devotees (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), with rituals devoted to caring for them, to showing them off to others, and to driving them in a manner deemed appropriate by the brand’s evangelists (Belk, 2004). As Leigh, Peters, and Shelton found in their study of MG owners (2006), being accepted as an authentic member of a brand community requires much more than just buying the brand; it requires driving (and respecting) the brand in the appropriate way. Porsche owners adhere to similar rituals and demean those who do not follow them. SUV owners are considered inauthentic: they do not drive in the appropriate manner, driving too slowly or carefully; they do not care for their vehicle in a respectful manner, letting it get dirty or parking it too close to other cars; and they do not respect the heritage of the brand and its racing roots. The post below is an example of the “poseurs” stereotype in the brand community conversations.

That’s why they’re making Cayenne... There are plenty of people (with money) who only want to drive Porsche because there is a badge on the hood. These people would be driving happily Honda Civic’s w/ the Porsche badge & hefty price. They don’t care/know what good handling is, why ignition key is on left, what’s so great about going over 160 and hearing that wonderful flat six ‘singing’ behind you etc. Only thing they care is that name. They’re cruising around 20 mph and that’s it for them. Irony is that they want to drive Porsche because of that name, mystic etc. that has come from Porsche being true sportscar company, winning LeMans etc. Now, making this change (to a wrong direction), that mystic, name that they want to show off to their buddies, might not be like that in future. It soon might be just another car company. To many people, I’m sure, it’s just an transportation to go from A to B & to show it off, but for me, it’s not just a car, and that’s why this bothers me. (Flying Finn)

The poseurs’ stereotype indicates that one cannot merely buy masculinity through the purchase of a Porsche; rather, to “grab the phallus” (Thompson & Holt, 2004), one must embody the masculine ideals of the
brand. The decision of whether one is worthy of Porsche’s gender identity meanings is adjudicated by the members of the Porsche brand community, who designate which owners belong in the group and which do not. Although one can aspire to masculinity via the purchase of a Porsche, it is only through acceptance by the brand community that one rises above the rank of poseur (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Through brand community discussions that label the SUV owners as poseurs, the Porsche sports car owners further disassociate themselves from them.

The “yuppies” stereotype also has subcultural resonance in the Porsche brand community because it is a stigmatized identity that has been linked with the brand since the 1980s. During the 1980s, Porsche became the car of choice for “yuppies”: young, upwardly mobile professionals. It is interesting to notice in the post below how the “yuppe” is depicted as deviant from the traditional definitions of masculinity and feminized by referencing the yuppies’ preoccupation with fashion and taste for feminine beverages.

The Cayenne started life a few years ago with 450 BHP from its 4.7 litre V8... And what do they do with this modern masterpiece of engineering? They put the bloody thing in a glorified tractor. 90% of which are used to convey their Armani-suited owners to shopping malls to order cafes “& # * + $! latte or “% $ + !” chardonnay or very occasionally some seriously rough stuff on the driveway to the + " & % !%1", golf club! AAARRGGHHH. Words fail me! Oh life! Deep drives thy sting... This thing makes a joke of us. (ColinB)

While the “yuppe” stereotype contains breadwinner masculinity, as noted by the upper class references contained in above post (Armani, country club), it is deficient in rebel masculinity, leaving the men who purchase the Porsche Cayenne SUV lacking the blend necessary to achieve hegemonic masculinity through Porsche ownership.

Through stereotyping, the members of the Porsche brand community thwart the SUV owners’ efforts to “grab the phallus.” Both men and women who purchase the SUV are labeled with stereotypes that distance them from the existing sports car owners, designating them as “the other.” These stereotypes are summarized in the following post that uses humor to paint SUV owners as lacking in masculinity. Specifically, Cayenne owners are linked to such feminine consumption practices as wearing fashionable and precious clothing, having a manicure, drinking designer coffees, embracing feng-shui design, and attending a spa.

101 Projects for Your Cayenne... 1. Adding air to the tires on your own. Cost: $27 ($5 tip to gas station attendant to instruct use of air hose; $20 dry cleaning for rustic-looking wool gabardine pants; $2 for latex exam gloves to protect manicure). 2. Getting Coffee While Someone Else Changes Your Oil. Cost $125 (Visit to doctor’s office to ensure you are OK after having learned that you consumed non-designer brand of coffee in the waiting room = $120, Bottle of Pepto Bismol = $5). 3. Modifying Cup Holder to Accommodate Mega Grande Latte. Cost = $700 (Porsche Upgrade Coffee Holder Kit = $300, Custom fitted overalls with embroidered Porsche crest = $200; Neiman-Marcus signature screwdriver set = $100; Massage Therapist to massage aching limp wrist = $100). 4. Installing Floor Mats. Cost = $450 (Porsche Factory Mats $200; Feng-Shui Consultant to assist with color choice and alignment = $250). 6. Upgrading GPS Software: Cost = $600 (Worldwide Starbucks’s locations Software = $120; Spa Locator Software = $200; Polo Club Registry Software = $100). 7. Installing Lacrosse Stick Holder: Cost = $675 (Porsche Techequipment Lacrosse Stick Holder Kit = $500, Neiman Marcus Signature Screwdriver Set (exclude if already purchased for cup holder project) = $100; Color coordinated calfskin mechanic’s gloves = $75). (Rich911E, Tumalo)

Psychologically constructing a barrier between themselves and the women (and feminized men) who join the brand community through the purchase of an SUV, the existing Porsche owners resolve the identity dissonance associated with the SUV by viewing themselves as very different from the new Porsche owners who do not live up to their version of masculinity. This separation allows them to psychologically renew their commitment to the Porsche brand as a masculine identity marker without accepting its dilution. Because the stereotyping is a communal practice that is achieved through public conversations and is thus not confined to the minds of individual consumers, its inculation has social effects. The stereotyping clearly specifies the characteristics and practices that define a real Porsche man, establishing norms of behavior for the members of the brand community. Through these acts, the meanings associated with the Porsche Cayenne SUV that challenge the traditional definitions of masculinity are suppressed and contained.

In summary, the Porsche owners’ gender stereotyping of the SUV owners stratifies the Porsche brand community along gender lines; the existing Porsche sports car owners populate the ingroup and enjoy access to Porsche’s masculine identity meanings, while the Porsche Cayenne SUV owners and the feminine identity meanings that are attached to them populate the outgroup. Symbolically, the Porsche sports car owners construct a gated community around themselves where the gates that mark the boundary between them and the SUV owners impede the transfer of masculine identity meanings from the Porsche sports cars to the Porsche SUV and, more importantly, impede the undesirable transfer of feminine identity meanings from the Porsche SUV to the Porsche sports cars. Importantly, the ingroup is sharply defined by and dedicated to hegemonic masculinity, while the outgroup is defined by femininity and subordinate masculinities. Hence, Porsche’s masculine meanings are protected from dilution through the incursion of undesirable others by acts of containment; through stereotyping, Porsche owners psychologically and socially keep the masculine identity meanings in and the feminine meanings out. Through their actions, the Porsche owners thwart the desire of the firm to open the brand to women, reverse the evolution of the brand’s gender identity meanings, and reinstate Porsche as a masculine identity marker. The angry backlash among the existing customers of the brand more firmly defines Porsche as a symbol of masculinity and strengthens the ties between “real men” and the brand.

Despite the fact that brand communities are often conceptualized as egalitarian, populist, and operating outside of the constraints of the external culture’s status system (Cova & Cova, 2002), most brand communities exhibit well-defined and rigid status hierarchies that reflect the members’ different levels of adherence to the ethos of the community (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The members earn status through their participation within the group, their level of ownership, their idiosyncratic knowledge and experience with the brand or the community, and their allegiances with status-endowed others. Researchers have conceptualized this status structure as a series of concentric circles, at the center of which are the “hard-core” consumers (Fox, 1987). It is these hard-core consumers who play the major role in creating and arbitrating brand meaning (Fox, 1987; Holt, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). By collectively responding to the identity threat of the Cayenne, the existing Porsche owners leverage the status system of their brand community and create new status distinctions that place Cayenne owners at the bottom of the hierarchy. Social stratification limits the contamination of the Porsche brand by reinforcing gender distinctions and boundaries and circumscribing the Porsche Cayenne SUV to contain its feminizing influence.

The emergence of a social hierarchy strengthens the ties among the privileged members (sports car owners) and perpetuates their own interpretations of the brand’s meaning, thereby increasing their commitment to the community and facilitating the identity projects that they are pursuing through use of the brand. Concurrently, the ingroup/outgroup social structures increase the social distance among the member subgroups, as the less privileged groups (Cayenne owners) are ostracized, precluded from participation in rituals and practices, and denied access to the brand meanings that they need for their own
identity work. Hence, the less privileged members are not able to derive social benefits from their brand ownership, losing the communal and identity benefits of being part of a brand community.

What makes the Porsche activity different from other settings in which car club participants exclude replicas or reproduction cars from participating in their activities (Belk, 2004) is that the Porsche SUV is an authentic Porsche. As Leigh, Peters, and Shelton remind us, “When brand communities and subcultures are operative in a brand’s ‘meaning’ ecology, managers no longer solely own the brand, its associations, or the right to position it for strictly commercial purposes.” (2006: 492). Now, it is the Porsche brand community that wields control.

4.3.2. Trying to fit in through hyper-masculinity

Some men in the brand community purchase the Porsche Cayenne SUV, and the negative stereotyping and status stratification practices of their fellow owners force them to do identity work of their own to save face within the group with regards to their purchase. Male Porsche Cayenne SUV owners engage in hyper-masculine behaviors to compensate for their purchase and to gain entry into the ingroup, similar to the practices observed in men who do not conform to hegemonic definitions of gender in the occupational, athletic, or personal spheres, such as male clerical workers, gay athletes, and men with physical disabilities, who negotiate social acceptance through reinterpreting their masculinity in other spheres (Anderson, 2002; Gershick & Miller, 1995; Henson & Rogers, 2001). Male Porsche Cayenne owners try to combat the anti-masculine stereotypes, positioning themselves as fellow enthusiasts and citing other Porsche sports cars that they own to claim legitimacy. They tell stories about how they take their SUVs off-road, use them to tow their race cars or their boats, or use them to access adventure sports such as skiing, hiking, hunting, and fishing, thereby tapping into other markers of masculinity. These owners refer to their SUVs as sports cars, speaking about them using sports car terminology.

I drive around all winter, up and down canyons, go skiing, into remote lakes on dirt roads and get paged to sprint back to the hospital all the time... Would I love cruising around in a cayenne knowing that if it dumps while I’m up at snowbird that I’ll safely and surely make it back home or to the hospital no matter what and if it doesn’t that I’ll be able to push down those awesome twisty roads in little cottonwood? Definitely... Just so you don’t think I’m trolling or have no experience with porsche... I have [Porsche] 996t, used to have 84 [Porsche] turbo with upgraded turbo etc., had 81 [Porsche] euro 911 sc before that and have been reading everything I could get my hands on about them since I was 12. I love the car and think they’ve brought something new to the SUV/multipurpose car category with the cayenne turbo with its offroad abilities, handling and performance... I think the cayenne will get me most of the places this takes me (except one remote lake and MOAB trails) and get me home with more handling and zip.

The male Porsche Cayenne SUV owners brag about the technical performance of the vehicles and tell stories about beating sports cars at track events. With aggressive posturing, many of these men put down the other Porsche models. This behavior is an example of masculine one-upmanship, where men fighting to achieve status and recognition within a social group attempt to demonstrate their masculinity by conquering or dominating the weaker members of the group (Jaccoue, 2005). Sensing an opportunity for one-upmanship, given the Porsche brand community’s longstanding ostracism of the Porsche Boxster and 944/951 owners, the Porsche Cayenne SUV owners pit themselves (and their vehicles) against these weaker owners in an aggressive show of force to curry favor with the Porsche 911 owners who reign at the top of the status hierarchy.

The base Cayenne is still a 350 hp v8, and it definitely faster than a [Porsche] 944 is... And you’d be rather surprised at the Cayenne on a real track! There was an S model out at Sebring and the thing was blowing by [Porsche] Boxsters and [Porsche] 930s, and yes, [Porsche] 951s... Like I said, go drive one. It’ll surprise the hell outta you. (dave120)... on a real track, smart stuff, it will eat your [Porsche] 951 alive.

Welcome to the 21st century, where the technology now has surpassed your and my 1980s technology... You continue to emit garbage, and until you go experience one of these ‘school busses’ for yourself you can’t say what it is or is not capable of. Go, drive, believe. Till then shut your hole about oh the cayenne is a mistake this, and oh if I ran porsche things would be so much better... You seem sure that its faster than a [Porsche] boxster, I’m sure yours will edge it out, but still, faster than many sports cars. How many companies offer of road performance and blistering track times from the same vehicle? One. Porsche. The cayenne is here to stay, so why whine. (ERAU-944)

Despite this show of hypermasculinity, the Porsche sports car owners deny the Porsche Cayenne SUV owners entrance into the ingroup and pull their previously maligned Boxster brethren closer in a show of sports car family support.

No way, no how, could the Cayenne S beat the [Porsche] Boxster S on any smooth road or track. Absurd. It won’t even begin to handle with it, won’t begin to accelerate with it, has a lower top speed, and 60% more weight on a far higher center of gravity. I have driven the Cayenne S, it has neither the handling nor power of an Audi S6 Avant, and I can tell you the S6 won’t catch a Boxster S anywhere either. (NMoore)

The technical performance of the Cayenne is largely irrelevant to the existing owners, who focus on the illegitimate owners who are trying to steal the sports cars owner’s masculinity marker. In this post, the Cayenne is portrayed as a “strap-on for soccer moms and effeminate stockbrokers,” illustrating its illegitimacy as a false phallus.

Porsche screwed the pooch on the Cayenne. It’s great that it handles well... it’s great that it goes fast... blah friggin blah. 99% of these abortions will be owned and driven by people who have no business with a fast anything, the only thing that will save them is that it can actually handle. The real issue is that Porsche was a company with a tremendous heritage of building one-off race cars for the street. It’s entire existence is almost contrary to the last 40 years of Porsche history. How can you say, Porsche, there is no substitute about a vehicle that is so obviously nothing special? I can tow more with a Chevy, I can carry more in a [Ford] Expedition. Who cares how fast I can go, if I am going camping with a boat on the back? Only a fucktard would haul ass with his family in the car. I can get more luxury from Lexus in the LX470, I can get more bing in a [Mercedes-Benz] ML55. I can go further offroad in a Jeep, or even an International Scout. So what’s left? An expensive strap-on for soccer-moms and effeminate stock-brokers. (Water944)

In summary, the face-saving practices of the Cayenne owners highlight that these mistreated owners try to validate their ownership and their place in the group by closely adhering to the group’s masculine identity standards. Facing exclusion, the men who purchase the SUV and who are relegated to the outgroup resort to a display of hyper-masculine behaviors to try to gain entry into the ingroup. These actions further reinforce the standards for masculine behavior in the brand community. The act of defining the ingroup causes the groups of consumers who previously saw themselves as heterogeneous (Porsche 911 and Boxster owners) to come together and celebrate their similarities. Adding gender diversity to the
community counterintuitively makes the group more homogeneous and devoted to the traditional notions of masculinity. The managers' attempts to gender-bend the Porsche brand paradoxically spur the brand community to solidify and defend the brand's status as a masculine identity marker.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical contributions

First, this research shows that gender continues to exert a significant force on people in their choice and usage of brands. Despite the claims that we are living in a postmodern era of gender experimentation, the men in this study continue to value and protect the masculine identity meanings of their brands. When sufficient numbers of women appropriate a brand that is being used as a male identity marker, it disrupts the men's identity performances. Rather than making the brand "gender neutral" as suggested by Fischer and Gainer (1994) or "opening up the possibility for diverse gestures and characteristics" as suggested by Butler (1997), this inversion initiates collective self-presentation practices that solidify the brand's male-ness. Female gender contamination, initially recorded in ancient civilizations, is as potent today as it was in the past.

While instances of people using gender-bending consumption to experiment with their identities abound in the popular and academic literature (cf. Martin et al., 2006), this research shows that when male-gendered brands target the opposite sex, their male consumers can and do fight back. The fight over Porsche could reflect the greater battle that men are fighting to maintain their dominant position in the broader social hierarchy. When the boundaries between groups of unequal status and power become more permeable and when status hierarchies become unstable, the members of high status groups become motivated to maintain the status distinctions, increase ingroup identification, and increase outgroup discrimination (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1991). In contemporary society, these conditions are in place; the boundaries between men and women are becoming more permeable in the workplace, in the home, and in consumption, and the prevailing patriarchal power structure is under attack from women, gay men, and alternative definitions of manhood. Kimmel (1996) claims that rather than becoming more androgynous in response to the movements that are blurring gender boundaries, men, in an angry response to a world in which the attainment of hegemonic masculinity remains out of reach, are regressing toward behaviors that reinforce the traditional definitions of masculinity. This behavior makes gendered consumption more important today than it was in times when gender roles were less blurry. Masculine and feminine identity markers are more valuable to consumers when gender roles are permeable, making gendered consumption a powerful force in the postmodern era.

Second, these findings illustrate how consumers in brand communities engage in gender production. The consumers' communal response to gender-bending produces and reproduces the gender distinctions and hierarchies. The gender-bending of the Porsche brand, rather than blurring gender lines and contributing to a less hierarchical gender order, strengthens the gender distinction by reifying and reproducing hegemonic masculinity and solidifying its position at the top of the social hierarchy in the brand community. The reinstatement of the Porsche brand as a masculine identity marker shows that identity-driven consumption contributes to the regulative gender discourses that constrain both men and women in contemporary society. Gender-bending brands that are used by consumers for identity purposes ignite a discursive process, marked by power, that determines the gendered meaning of the brand in culture and reinforces the prevailing power structures. This process shows how the normative and ideological beliefs perpetuated by brand communities through the moralistic identity work highlighted by Luedicke et al. (2009) connect to larger and more stable sociological constructs and structures, such as gender narratives.

Third, this research illuminates how the existing consumers phenomenologically respond to brand gender-bending practices, and it identifies a different response than that predicted by the prior experimental research. Prior research has shown that men choose possessions associated with masculinity and avoid possessions associated with femininity; therefore, researchers have hypothesized that men will abandon possessions once they have been contaminated by women. However, this research finds that the men who have invested themselves in a brand will fight for its meaning, territorially protecting their masculine identity markers from becoming associated with women. Rather than leaving their brand when it has been gender contaminated, the Porsche men engage in defensive practices within their brand community to actively defend their masculine identity marker and combat the feminization of their brand. This strategy supports our understanding of the co-creative process of brand meaning management among the consumers of a brand and underscores the importance of brand communities as spaces for creating value for consumers outside of, and sometimes in conflict with, the value provided by marketers.

The response of Porsche consumers contrasts with the findings from prior research that has focused on the appropriation of the identity markers of subordinate (rather than dominant) groups. Studies of subcultures whose symbols are appropriated by the mainstream (Clarke, 1986) find that members abandon identity markers once they are appropriated by the mainstream and find new ones with which to distinguish themselves. Rinallo (2007) shows that homosexual men, however, embrace the appropriation of their fashion and grooming markers by heterosexual men, viewing it as a way to gain mainstream acceptance of their alternative version of masculinity. In contrast, this article studies the appropriation of the identity markers of a dominant group, namely white, heterosexual men. This dominant group actively resists the appropriation of their identity marker brands and works to limit access to the brand's masculine identity meanings to those who embody their definition of masculinity. The distinctions between the findings of these diverse studies reminds us that gender politics still matter; the men who are at the top of the power structure actively resist when those on the rungs below them (including women and less masculine men) use their brands. While subcultures abandon their products when the dominant groups abscond with them, the dominant groups actively fight to maintain semiotic control of their markers of identity and actively work to prevent subordinate groups from appropriating them.

Fourth, the Porsche consumers' battle for their brand contributes to our understanding of how consumption practices impose social structure and social distinction within brand communities. Politicized ingrouping/outgrouping processes have been previously documented in brand community research (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005) that shows that the community members often view themselves as an ingroup and those who use the competitive brands as an outgroup, an inter-brand effect. However, the Porsche results show that this process can also be an intra-brand effect. Regardless of the brand moniker that one buys, entry into the ingroup is a communally negotiated process (Leigh et al., 2006). Consumers who buy the Porsche brand expecting entry into a social collective might find themselves excluded and ridiculed by those in the brand's communities who are pursuing their own political agendas.

When men refuse to share their masculine identity markers with women (or with men whom they deem inferior), these men reinforce their power advantage and buttress hegemonic masculinity as the prevailing cultural standard in their brand community. However, at the same time, through the gender stereotyping that elicits and reinforces recognizable pejorative subcategories within the gender spectrum, the existing Porsche owners contribute to the creation of a complex gender status hierarchy where the more nuanced gender identities beyond the male/female dichotomy, such as the soccer
mom, the poseur, and the yuppie, are defined and stratified. By defending their masculine identity markers, the men defend their position at the top of the gender order and suppress the alternative definitions of gender that are emerging for both men and women.

In conclusion, this research shows that the social practices that constitute gender continue to shape the meaning of brands and concomitantly shape the use and value of brands as gender identity markers by consumers. It also illustrates how the practices of gendered brand consumption contribute to the gendering of the social hierarchy and the regulative discourses that constrain both men and women in brand communities. This research helps us to better understand the continued presence and importance of gendered consumption in the postmodern world.

5.2. Future research

It is important to note that this study focuses on the common identity needs of a largely homogeneous population: the majority of the Porsche brand community is Caucasian, heterosexual, upper class, highly educated, white collar professionals. Their collective response to the launch of the SUV represents how men who are well endowed with the markers of masculinity respond to brand gender contamination. Men pursuing alternative forms of masculinity or those who are further from the hegemonic ideal are not represented, and research suggests that their responses could differ. The men who do not fit the typical profile associated with traditional masculinity can use gender-bending consumption to explore alternative forms of masculinity. Homosexual men can engage in feminine consumption practices to distance themselves from hegemonic definitions and to create their own definition of gay masculinity (Kates, 2002). African-American men can pursue a black masculinity populated with consumption items that would typically be classified as feminine such as jewelry (Weems, 2005). Women’s responses to brand gender contamination are also not captured in this study. Women, as a subordinated group, might be more fluid when playing in the spaces between the dichotomous poles of masculine and feminine (Borgeson & Rehn, 2004) and might therefore perceive less of a threat from brand gender contamination.

The moderating role of other identities that intersect with gender is also left unexplored. Interesting intersections of gender with race and social class were evident in the data and suggest that stereotyping is used to define not only gender hierarchies but also racial and class ones. The Porsche brand community attaches pejorative racial and social class stereotypes to the SUV owners, such as the hip-hop rapper and the Southern redneck, to distance these users from the brand’s more traditional masculine meanings. Further research that explores identity intersectionality and the simultaneity of gender, race, class, and sexual identities, and intersectionality’s interaction with consumption behavior would be useful to further develop the theory because a brand’s identity meanings are multifaceted and represent a desired identity defined by more than one identity category.

5.3. Managerial implications

Stagnant sales in many mature product categories are causing managers to look for new ways to increase business. A gendered brand necessarily ignores half of a potential audience, making it a ripe target for expansion. Gender-bending a gendered brand allows the marketers to tap into the large consumer segment occupied by the opposite sex. However, this decision is where the trouble often begins. When a gendered brand’s identity meanings are diluted by its appropriation by the opposite sex, its existing consumers have two options: to discard the brand because it no longer delivers their desired gender identity (a strategy suggested by previous research) or to stay and fight for the gendered meanings that they use to present their identities, as presented here in this article. Either option thwarts the manager’s objective of increasing the brand’s appeal to both sexes.

This study offers insight into the challenges of gender-bending brands. Before gender-bending, the managers need to assess how much of their brand equity derives from the brand’s gendered identity meanings. For brands such as Porsche that have gendered identity meanings that are actively utilized by their consumers, gender-bending could be a high risk strategy. In this case, the managers should consider alternative branding strategies, such as the creation of a new brand to target the opposite sex; for example, Procter and Gamble offers its Old Spice brand for men and its Secret brand for women, hiding the corporate affiliation between the two brands from consumers to avoid gender contamination. If launching a new brand is too costly, marketers can launch gendered derivatives of their existing brands; for example, Gillette’s women’s products are branded “Gillette for Women,” while Dove’s men’s products are branded “Dove for Men” to distinguish the brands and to reassure consumers that they are not using the same products as the opposite sex. For brands that are not used by consumers to communicate their gender identities, gender-bending is a more amenable strategy because the brand equity is not reliant on the gendered identity meanings of the brand. Thus, determining how central the gendered meanings are to the existing consumers is a key first step in deciding whether to gender-bend a brand.

Second, managers need to determine how contaminating usage by the opposite sex will be. When women ride Harley-Davidson’s, they engage in gender tourism and empower their own femininities through a hyper-masculine display (Martin et al., 2006). The brand is useful to these women because of its masculine identity meanings, and their masculine creative play does not threaten the gendered meaning of the brand but rather reinforces it, as they are not trying to feminize the brand through their usage. However, the Porsche case illustrates the dangers when brand managers or the women they target position or use a masculine identity marker in more feminine ways. When a brand’s manager actively courts women with feminized product designs, features, or brand narratives, the inherent gendered meanings of the brand are more likely to be diluted and male consumers might fight to protect them. As long as women respect the masculinity of the brand and act appropriately with it in their usage practices, Martin’s research suggests that men will allow a certain degree of female patronization of their brand. However, when an incursion of women into the brand fundamentally changes the perceived masculinity of the brand in the eyes of the social audience, the men in brand communities mobilize to protect the identity meanings that they hold dear. Hence, women can use masculine brands as long as they respect their masculinity; the trouble begins when women (or the brand’s managers) try to feminize the masculine identity markers.

Third, managers need to be ready for a backlash when they try to gender-bend masculine brands. This study shows that masculine brands become paradoxically more masculine following gender-bending brand management programs. Managers still need to heed the asymmetry inherent in gender relations and its differential impact on consumer behavior (Bristor & Fischer, 1993). Despite media-fueled images of gender-bending that suggest that the gender boundaries are breaking down, this article shows that contemporary men remain protective of their brands and will actively reject efforts to feminize them. Male consumers are likely to have negative responses to these gender-bending practices and can use tactics such as negative stereotyping to preclude women from accessing the brand’s identity meanings. These actions reinforce the masculinity of the brand and cause consumers to display hyper-masculine behaviors to gain entry into the brand’s community of owners. As such, the managers of masculine identity marker brands should be wary of gender-bending branding practices. Rather than stretching the brand’s meaning to make it more flexible, these practices might paradoxically make the brand more male than ever before, precluding future brand expansion opportunities.
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References


Happily (mal)adjusted: Cosmopolitan identity and expatriate adjustment

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A B S T R A C T

As an increasing portion of the world’s population identifies itself as cosmopolitan, we examine whether cosmopolitan identity involves openness and adaptability to new environments or instead favors maintaining a global lifestyle that persists across environments. Based on a field study of expatriates, we find that the expected duration of sojourn is a crucial moderator of cosmopolitan behavior. In short-duration sojourns, cosmopolitans adjust more to new environments than non-cosmopolitans. In long-duration sojourns, non-cosmopolitans adjust more to the host country while cosmopolitans tend to retreat into a global lifestyle. We find that these adjustment choices are correlated with well-being, contrary to the claims in existing literature on expatriates that adjustment should be the preferred behavior regardless of consumer identity.

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1. Introduction

“Where are you from?” is one of the most commonly asked identity questions in everyday life, a question that is generally useful to predict relevant traits like taste and attitude. Research and practice have shown that much can be inferred from someone’s current address (Steinbein, Ainslie, & Engebretson, 2003) and history of acculturation (e.g., Birman & Trickett, 2001; Kang, 2006; Penaloza, 1994). However, in an increasingly globalized society, many individuals claim a cosmopolitan identity that is more relevant to them than the idiosyncrasies of their personal journey across locations. These individuals favor consumption and lifestyle habits that transcend local conditions. Their values, interests, and behaviors are cross-cultural, and they view themselves as ‘citizens of the world’. While there is a body of research on various sociological aspects of the cosmopolitan identity (see, for example, Gouldner, 1957; Hannerz, 1990), its implications for consumer behavior remain largely uncharted (exceptions include Cannon & Yaprak, 2002; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999).

In this paper, we study the adjustment behavior of expatriate consumers in connection with their cosmopolitan identity. A basic tenet of previous literature is that successful expatriates need to adjust their lifestyle to the host country. Failure to do so has been associated with mental health issues, identity confusion, dissatisfaction, poor performance, and thus high turnover for the sponsoring organization (e.g., Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Black & Stephens, 1989; Bolino, 2007; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; Takeuchi, Shay, & Li, 2008). However, although intuition suggests that cosmopolitan expatriates should be adept at relocation, it is not clear what adjustment strategy we might actually expect from them. ‘Citizens of the world’ might be more open and adaptable than their non-cosmopolitan counterparts, but they are also likely to seek global consumption patterns that they carry with them wherever they reside. Interestingly, the prominent global cities of the world (e.g., London, New York, Hong Kong, Paris, Singapore, Tokyo, Sydney, Milan, Shanghai, etc., see Sassen, 1991) usually combine strong local flavors and characteristics with exceptional access to global products and services. Many banks, academic institutions, housing developments, retailers, hotels and restaurants, among others, target cosmopolitan consumers, and additional insights into their preferences should prove useful.

Our analysis reveals that the cosmopolitan identity is associated with a specific pattern of expatriate adjustment depending on the expected duration of sojourn. We find that cosmopolitans engaged in a short sojourn adjust more to local patterns of consumption than non-cosmopolitans, whereas cosmopolitans engaged in a long sojourn adjust less to these local patterns than their non-cosmopolitan counterparts. We predict (and show) that these adjustment strategies are driven by differences in the determinants of well-being. Non-cosmopolitans derive well-being from the status quo, adjusting only if duration makes the effort worthwhile, whereas cosmopolitans derive well-being from the pursuit of a global lifestyle that can nevertheless be enriched by short-term experimentation with local choices.

Our study contributes to several theoretical and practical perspectives. First, we identify two relevant dimensions (i.e., degree of cosmopolitanism and expected duration of sojourn) that should be taken into account when addressing expatriate consumer segments. Second, we challenge the nearly universally accepted idea in the organizational behavior and management literatures that expatriates...
are made better off by adjusting to their host country (e.g., Black et al., 1991; Stahl et al., 2002; Takeuchi et al., 2008; Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson, 2004). Finally, we offer a better understanding of the behaviors that evolve from a cosmopolitan identity. The study of expatriate adjustment as a function of the expected duration of sojourn leads to a better understanding of preference persistence or status quo biases in the presence of horizon effects (Shu & Gneezy, 2010; Watthieu, 1997). Our findings show that individuals hold identity beliefs that significantly recast intertemporal decisions into larger orientations.

In the following sections, we develop our hypotheses, outline our empirical approach and results, and draw conclusions that highlight limitations and avenues for future research.

2. Expatriates, cosmopolitan identity, and adjustment behavior

Expatriates are people who take a work or study assignment in a foreign location, independently or sent by an organization to which they belong—often a multinational corporation (Harzing, 2001; Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997). Expatriation is a dramatically increasing phenomenon, and expatriates have a significant impact on the global economy, especially through the execution of international business strategies and the transfer of knowledge across countries (Richardson & McKenna, 2006; Stahl et al., 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Expatriates are distinct from immigrants in that their sojourn has a finite time duration that is likely to influence adjustment to the host country. Our analysis draws a distinction between two types of expatriates: the (baseline case) non-cosmopolitan expatriate and the cosmopolitan expatriate. We propose that the costs associated with adjustment and non-adjustment to the host country, and the evolution of these costs over time, are different for each type of expatriate.

Starting with the baseline case, we propose that non-cosmopolitan expatriates will find adjustment costly at first, but increasingly less costly as adaptation begins to occur. Consumers plunged into a new environment ordinarily prefer to persist with previous choices, even when these are dysfunctional or suboptimal with respect to the new environment. Preference persistence has been attributed to loss aversion (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) or to aversion toward uncertainties and ambiguities characterizing new environments (Muthukrishnan, 1995; Muthukrishnan, Watthieu, & Xu, 2009). Adjusting to the host country thus involves mental effort, in addition to more concrete search costs (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Both of these costs will diminish over time, which is captured by the downward-sloping marginal cost curve in Fig. 1.

In contrast, the costs associated with no adjustment should remain relatively incompressible over time. Such costs might include shopping at specialty stores featuring products imported from the home country, transporting and keeping stocks from the home country, or postponing activities (e.g., a visit to the dentist) until the next trip home. As suggested in the organizational behavior and management literatures, maladjustment can also cause mental health issues, identity confusion, dissatisfaction, poor performance, turnover, and overall poor well-being (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Black & Stephens, 1989; De Cieri, Dowling, & Taylor, 1991; Jun, Gentry, & Hyun, 2001; Takeuchi, Wang, Marinova, & Yao, 2009).

We propose that the expected sojourn duration will be a key determining factor in the decision to adjust, as captured in Fig. 1: adjustment for non-cosmopolitan expatriates would not be worthwhile in the context of a short sojourn, but it becomes more likely when the expected sojourn is sufficiently long and allows adaptation to take place.

Expatriates with a cosmopolitan identity are much less likely to be driven by preference persistence and gradual adaptation. Indeed, we expect cosmopolitans to be driven by curiosity and their adventurous nature, open to the panoply of transcultural diversity (Holt, 1997). They consume cultural differences in a reflective, intellectualizing manner and can afford to experiment with local experiences while they (by definition) are reluctant to take root and permanently adjust to any local condition (Hannnerz, 1990; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Cosmopolitans have been described as variety-seekers, early adopters of innovations, open-minded, extensive travelers and positive thinkers (Holt, 1997; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Yoon, 1998). Therefore, expatriation for a cosmopolitan individual is less likely to coincide with perceptions of ambiguity and loss of subjective competence. Instead, we propose that a short-term adjustment will be experienced as a beneficial process of discovery and learning rather than as a cost. However, in the course of an extended sojourn, cosmopolitans will progressively come to view adjustment as a loss of their identity, a costly confinement away from their preferred international consumption patterns and global lifestyle standards and expectations. This idea is captured in Fig. 2 by a hockey stick-shaped curve that represents the total cost of adjustment as a function of time spent in the host country. The graphical analysis then suggests that
a cosmopolitan embarking on a long sojourn will avoid adjustment and maintain a global lifestyle, while a short sojourn (in sharp contrast with the baseline case) will involve an embrace of local choices. An alternative reading of Fig. 2, assuming that expatriates make incremental decisions (instead of forming an initial adjust/not adjust policy), would predict that more cosmopolitan individuals adjust for a short period of time before switching back to their global habits and values, which would still be consistent with an overall pattern of adjustment in short-term sojourns contrasting with a reluctance to adjust in long-term sojourns.

The discussion above can be summarized in the form of a testable hypothesis:

**H1.** In the presence of a shorter (longer) sojourn, expatriates who identify themselves as more cosmopolitan adjust more (less) to the host country, compared with less-cosmopolitan expatriates.

Hypothesis H1 contradicts previous research that almost unanimously represented expatriate adjustment as experientially desirable (e.g., Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Mezias & Scandura, 2005). If we are correct, the well-being outcome of a sojourn to a new country is affected by an alignment among cosmopolitan identities, expected duration of sojourn, and adjustment to the new environment. This alignment exists in two scenarios: more-cosmopolitan expatriates will feel more comfortable adjusting when they expect a short-term sojourn and less-cosmopolitan expatriates will feel more comfortable adjusting when they expect a long-term sojourn. In contrast, two other scenarios constitute a discrepancy among the same factors that are expected to have a negative impact on well-being: more-cosmopolitan expatriates will feel less comfortable adjusting when they expect a long-term sojourn and less-cosmopolitan expatriates will feel less comfortable adjusting when they expect a short-term sojourn.

This characterization of the preferences associated with the cosmopolitan identity is captured in the following testable hypothesis:

**H2.** The impact on well-being of a direct relationship between individuals’ expected duration of sojourn and their adjustment to the host country is positive for less-cosmopolitan expatriates and negative for more-cosmopolitan expatriates.

### 3. A study of expatriates in the United States

#### 3.1. Sample and data collection

We collected data on self-initiated and business expatriates. Self-initiated expatriates are people who have sought an overseas position independently such as academic researchers, students, entrepreneurs, and to some extent, company employees (Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Business expatriates are employees and managers sent to a foreign country by their organization with the intent of controlling company operations or providing technical and administrative services (Harzing, 2001; Jun et al., 2001). While prior research on expatriates has typically focused on one of the two groups (e.g., Black & Stephens, 1989; Peltojoki, 2008), our more holistic sampling approach has several advantages. First, it ensures an inclusive view of the studied phenomenon and enhances the generalizability of the study. Second, it enhances heterogeneity with respect to the key factors studied (i.e., adjustment, cosmopolitan identity, expected duration of sojourn). This study is interested in consumer adjustment, and consumption is a behavior shared by all types of expatriates (whether students, visiting professors or managers in multinational corporations). Nevertheless, we conducted a series of independent-samples t-tests to compare the two groups of expatriates on all the variables in the study, making sure that the groups are not different.

We used three sources to generate our sample ($N = 260$). We first identified two large foreign communities residing in the area where the authors lived during the time of the research (near Boston, Massachusetts): an Israeli and a Belgian community. Through the help of the local Israeli and Belgian community associations, lists of Israelis and Belgians residing in the area were retrieved, and 750 invitations were sent via email asking self-initiated and business expatriates to participate in our survey. The lists included different types of expatriates (e.g., those sent by their organization, students, entrepreneurs, visiting scholars) and to some extent immigrants. The latter, however, selected themselves out in view of the email invitation and the questions asked in the survey. Ninety-seven expatriates from these two groups responded to the survey (a 13% response rate). Approximately 70% of these respondents defined themselves as self-initiated expatriates, while 30% identified as business expatriates.
The third source of our sample involved a group of internationals registered at the behavioral lab of the business school with which the authors were affiliated during the time of performing this research. The behavioral lab’s list included both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens, in addition to students and some non-students (typically people who work at or near the university). Here, a list of 1200 non-U.S. born subjects (both students and non-students) received via email an invitation to participate in our study. One hundred and sixty-three agreed to participate (a 14% response rate). The above response rates are comparable to other studies on expatriates (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Gregersen, Hite, & Black, 1996). As in the first sub-sample, approximately 70% of respondents in this group defined themselves as self-initiated expatriates, and 30% identified as business expatriates. In the analyses reported later, we controlled for differences between the two sources of our sample (using a dummy for each of the sub-samples: the Israeli sub-sample, the Belgian sub-sample and the sub-sample based on the list from the behavioral lab), and between self-initiated and business expatriates, showing that our results are robust across the groups. Furthermore, we made sure that non-response bias is not an issue. Because the Belgian sub-sample was relatively small (N=11), we focused for this purpose on the Israelis (N=81) and those sampled by the behavioral lab (N=168). Specifically, we compared early and late respondents (Armstrong & Overton, 1977) on three key variables for which data were available (i.e., age, time already on assignment, and nature of expatriation—self-initiated or business) and found that there were no significant differences between them in all cases. These findings minimize concerns for a non-response bias.

3.2. Measures

Whenever possible, we adopted established survey measures. For an overview of these measures, the items and loadings on the measures, and their reliabilities, see Appendix A. The correlation matrix appears in Table 1.

The cosmopolitan identity construct is still in need of a well-accepted scale (Cannon & Yaprak, 2002; Haas, 2006, Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009). In this study, we adopted a composite measure of a cosmopolitan identity based on four items derived from a number of sources. The decision to integrate items from different sources is based on the evidence that prior measurement efforts of cosmopolitanism exhibited very poor psychometric properties (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009). An effort was made to identify items that correspond with a key conceptualization of cosmopolitanism—the notion of cross-cultural openness and diversity. Focusing on this single key dimension of the construct is likely to enhance the reliability of the measure. As we later describe in the Measurement model validation section, we made sure that this conceptualization is indeed empirically manifested as a single dimension. The first item asked respondents to read a text featuring a characterization of a cosmopolitan (Cannon & Yaprak, 2002: 37) and rate their agreement with the text on a seven-point Likert scale (anchored by 1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”). The text emphasizes cross-cultural openness and diversity in the context of consumption, social interactions and experiences with foreign countries and products. It reads as follows: “Many of my friends long to go home. I have no home. Or rather, I feel like my home is the world. I like to experience the best of what the world has to offer. I have my favorite foods, but they don’t represent any particular culture. I simply like them because they are good. The same is true of my friends. I savor them when we can get together, even if that is only once every 10 or 20 years. We may communicate by email, or call, if the occasion arises, but I don’t pine away when they are not around me. Life is too short for that. I live in Singapore, but I could live just as well in New York, Kiev, or Rio de Janeiro. I like to visit smaller, less cosmopolitan cities because they are interesting. But I wouldn’t want to live there. They don’t offer the variety or the level of excellence I have come to enjoy. Most of all, I like to travel. If I want culture, I go to London; if I want art, I go to Paris; if I want intellect, I go to Moscow. It’s all out there. You just have to find out where.” The other three items were adopted from Cleveland and Laroche’s (2007) global consumer culture scale and from Jain and Elgar’s (1977) cosmopolitanism scale. These items are in line with the basic premise that “cosmopolitans are individuals with broad experience in many countries” (Haas, 2006: 367) and that they have interest in travels and stays abroad (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009). These items were also measured using seven-point Likert agreement scales. The reliability of this measure, 0.67, is similar to that of the cosmopolitanism scale with the highest reliability that is currently available in the literature (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

For expected duration of sojourn, respondents were asked to assess, in years, the initial expected duration for their current assignment. To make it easier for respondents to assess the expected duration, we used a six-point scale with time categories. The reasons for using this categorization rather than a continuous measure were twofold. First, past academic and managerial reports tend to categorize expatriates’ assignment duration (e.g., Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Bolino, 2007; GMAC Global Relocation Services, 2008). Second, following interviews with expatriates, we realized that it is sometimes difficult for them to accurately forecast their expected assignment duration. Rather, they felt much more comfortable when considering

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
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<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1 Cosmopolitan identity</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Expected duration of sojourn</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Adjustment to the host country</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Well-being</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Family status</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Time already in host country</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td>7 Type of expatriate: Student</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Type of expatriate: multinational corporation</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Source of sample: Israeli sample</td>
<td>-0.35**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>-0.28**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Source of sample: Behavioral lab sample</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.89**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Gender</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Long-term orientation</td>
<td>-0.18*</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.30**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>43.28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>57.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>54.84</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>34.42</td>
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</table>

* p < 0.05.
** p < 0.01.
time categories (e.g., between 3 and 5 years, up to one year). Specifically, our scale included the following categories: “less than 1 year,” “approximately 1 year,” “approximately 2 years,” “approximately 3–5 years,” “approximately 5–10 years” and “10 years or more.”

In addition, we conducted the following robustness check for this measure. We followed the expatriate literature, which observes that assignments lasting about one year or less are typically considered short-term (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Bolino, 2007). We therefore conducted all the analyses using a dummy code for long versus short expected sojourn, yielding similar results (additionally, we conducted all the analyses while using the more conservative approach of 2 years as the cut-off point and obtained similar results).

The measure of adjustment to the host country was adopted from Black (1988). It included 5 items (e.g., “adjustment to housing conditions”) and was measured using a seven-point Likert scale (anchored by 1 = “no adjustment,” 7 = “total adjustment”).

Well-being was measured using the ‘satisfaction with life’ scale, which was adopted from Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). This three-item measure is designed to assess cognitive aspects of well-being (e.g., “the conditions of my life are excellent”). It was measured using a seven-point Likert agreement scale (anchored by 1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”).

We also collected data on a number of control variables that are often used in the expatriate literature or that are especially appropriate for this study. We controlled for time already in the host country, in months, because some of the respondents were already in the midst of their sojourn, whereas others had just started theirs. We controlled for family status (dummy for accompanied by relatives (coded as ‘0’) versus not accompanied by relatives (coded as ‘1’)) based on Van Vianen et al. (2004). We controlled for gender (male ‘0’ and female ‘1’) following Peltokorpi (2008) and Takeuchi et al. (2009). We monitored for type of expatriate (a dummy for students (typically self-initiated expatriates), a dummy for business expatriates (typically managers and employees of multinational corporations), and a dummy for “others”) following Richardson and McKenna (2006), and Jokinen, Brewster, and Suutari (2008). To control for differences among the respondents’ cultural backgrounds in the specific case at hand, we controlled for variability in subjects’ long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1980). This construct can be especially relevant when considering expatriates’ time expectations and time-related decisions. Indeed, a long-term orientation emphasizes a focus on the future and adaptation of one’s own traditions to new circumstances. People with a long-term orientation believe that the most important events in life will occur in the future, and they are more adaptable (Van Evergdingen & Waarts, 2003). Specifically, we added a variable that captures Hofstede’s measure. Since Hofstede collected data on this variable only in a limited number of countries, we conducted the analysis twice, with the original Hofstede data and after replacing the missing values using the linear trend at point method (Sheskin, 2004). Both analyses yielded similar results. Finally, because we generated our sample from different sources, we controlled for this difference using two of the following three dummy variables—the Israeli sample, the Belgian sample and the sample based on the university behavioral lab.

3.3. Measurement model validation

The confirmatory factor analysis (i.e., the measurement model that includes all our scales) is extremely satisfactory: $\chi^2(51) = 109.998, p < 0.05$; CFI = 0.938; IFI = 0.940; RMSEA = 0.067. Using the estimated measurement model, we assessed the convergent validity of the constructs. All the item-to-construct loadings were found to be significant—the lowest t-value was 5.49, demonstrating adequate convergent validity. We also confirmed the discriminant validity of the constructs by running a series of models involving a comparison between pairs of constructs. Specifically, models with construct correlations constrained to 1.00 (suggesting that two constructs can actually be represented by a single construct) were compared to unconstrained models. In all cases, this led to a significant increase in Chi-square and LM-tests, revealing that these constraints should be removed. Thus, all constructs exhibited discriminant validity.

A specific implication of the above validation process is the confirmation that our cosmopolitan identity measure, the only measure we are using which is still not established in the literature, involves a single key dimension, which captures the cross-cultural openness and diversity of cosmopolitans.

3.4. Analysis

We used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), AMOS 17.0, to test our hypotheses. All models are satisfactory in terms of their fit indices (CFI, IFI and RMSEA; see Table 2). To test H1 we ran Model 1, which involved expatriates’ adjustment to the host country as the dependent variable and the two-way interaction between expatriates’ cosmopolitan identity and their expected duration of sojourn as the key explanatory variable. To test H2 we ran Model 2, which involved expatriates’ well-being as the dependent variable and the three-way interaction among expatriates’ cosmopolitan identity, their expected duration of sojourn, and their adjustment to the host country as the key explanatory variable. Recall that our theory predicts different effects on well-being of the pair-wise combination of adjustment and expected duration of sojourn, depending on whether the expatriate possesses a cosmopolitan identity.

Following convention (Aiken & West, 1991), we mean-centered the variables constituting the interaction terms and then tested for multicollinearity, making sure that variance of inflation factors (VIF) and tolerance are below harmful levels.

3.5. Common method bias

Several steps were taken in the design of the questionnaire to prevent common method bias (Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan, & Moorman, 2008). First, each of the dependent and independent variables were on different pages of the electronic questionnaire with different instructions. Second, each of these variables employed distinct endpoints (for example, the well-being measure included the end-points “strongly agree” versus “strongly disagree,” while the adjustment measure included the end-points “total adjustment” versus “no adjustment”).

To check for common method bias, we first conducted a Harman’s one-factor test (i.e., factor analysis without rotation). The results indicated that no single general factor existed. Rather, three distinct factors representing our multiple-item scales emerged, and none of the factors accounted for the majority of the variance among the measures (the most dominant factor accounted for only 23.6% of the variance) (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Second, we performed the same test on pairs of multiple item scales and found the test to always produce two distinct factors (Kyriakopoulos & Moorman, 2004). Third, following Podsakoff et al.’s (2003) and Netemeyer, Boles, McKee, and McMurrin’s (1997) guidelines, we incorporated a ‘same-source’ factor (i.e., a single-common-method-factor) into the indicators of all our theoretical constructs in each of the two structural models we ran. In all of the cases, the hypothesized relationships were not influenced by the same-source factor and retained their influence and direction. Moreover, in the vast majority of cases, the indicator loadings to the theoretical constructs remained significant (only one indicator in one of the models became insignificant). Finally, only a minority of indicator loadings on the same-source factor were significant. We thus conclude that there is no ground for concern regarding a common method bias in our analysis.

Furthermore, the presence of significant interactions among the model constructs as described below also supports a conclusion that...
more likely to adjust than cosmopolitan expatriates when expecting a long-term sojourn (\(M_{\text{non-cosmopolitans}} = 5.52, M_{\text{cosmopolitans}} = 5.20, t_{151} = 2.725, p = .007\)).

Our results also support H2, as the three-way interaction is significant and negative (\(b = -0.154, p = 0.030\)). Accordingly, as Model 2 suggests, expatriates with varying cosmopolitanism levels generally report higher levels of well-being in the course of adjusting to local conditions only when there is an alignment between cosmopolitan identity and the expected duration of the sojourn. A breakdown of the results, displayed in Figs. 4a and 4b, sheds more light on the results of Model 2. As predicted, among more-cosmopolitan expatriates, general lifestyle adjustment increases well-being only during expected short-term sojourns (\(M_{\text{cosmopolitans/high adjustment}} = 5.04, M_{\text{cosmopolitans/low adjustment}} = 4.71, t_{54} = 2.251, p = .028\)). The opposite is true for expected long-term sojourns where adjustment among more-cosmopolitan expatriates decreases well-being (\(M_{\text{cosmopolitans/high adjustment}} = 4.49, M_{\text{cosmopolitans/low adjustment}} = 5.92, t_{52} = 3.981, p < .0001\)). For less-cosmopolitan expatriates, general lifestyle adjustment increases well-being only during expected long-term sojourns (\(M_{\text{non-cosmopolitans/high adjustment}} = 5.58, M_{\text{non-cosmopolitans/low adjustment}} = 4.51, t_{82} = 5.592, p < .0001\)). During expected short-term sojourns, higher or lower levels of adjustment among less-cosmopolitan expatriates lead to similar degrees of well-being (\(M_{\text{non-cosmopolitans/high adjustment}} = 5.22, M_{\text{non-cosmopolitans/low adjustment}} = 4.94, t_{49} = 1.131, p = .261\)).

5. Discussion

Our study of expatriates supports the suggestion that a cosmopolitan expatriate expecting a longer duration of sojourn and a less-cosmopolitan expatriate expecting a shorter duration of sojourn would be less inclined to adjust to their host country, where the reluctance to adjust in both cases is typically associated with greater well-being. This result conflicts with existing assumptions and findings in acculturation and expatriation literatures, which consider adjustment as unambiguously good. Nevertheless, the result matches our theoretical model, which interprets cosmopolitan identity as involving a preference for lifestyles and habits that transcend local conditions. In the context of a de-localization, the more-cosmopolitan expatriates will be curious at first and then eventually become disinclined toward local habits. In contrast, less-cosmopolitan expatriates will start with a period of costly adjustment before they enjoy their new place. Our finding is in fact consistent with some recent studies that show expatriate adjustment to be a more ambiguous issue than prior studies had suggested (e.g., Bolino, 2007; Takeuchi et al., 2008).

Our study constitutes an unusual attempt to analyze preference adaptation and persistence in a real-life intertemporal context. People’s adaptation when they move to a different context has been shown in experimental research to be stronger when feelings toward the earlier context are more ambiguous (Muthurikshnan, 1995). Our research adds the new realistic insight that preference persistence is also influenced by the anticipated length of sojourn in the new context: a longer sojourn will reduce (improve) the degree of adaptation of more- (less-) cosmopolitan expatriates. This finding might also be reminiscent of the psychological theory of temporal construals (e.g., Liberman, Trope, & Wackslak, 2007), which suggests that an abstract identity concept such as cosmopolitanism will be more salient for individuals who contemplate long-term horizons (Wackslak, Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2008).

From a managerial point of view, our findings pose an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, cosmopolitans form a prime target for expatriate assignments; they have a global perspective, and because their motivation for expatriation is presumably more personal/experiential (Stahl et al., 2002; Tung, 1998) it can compensate for the perceived career risk implied by overseas assignments (Stahl et al., 2002). On the other hand, our findings suggest that cosmopolitans might require and enjoy longer assignments only at the expense of predictably

4. Results

Our results are reported in Table 2. Accordingly, H1 is supported as the tendency of expatriates to adjust to the host country is shown to depend on the combination of our key constructs of interest: expatriates’ cosmopolitan identity and their expected duration of sojourn. Specifically, we find, as the results of Model 1 illustrate, that the more (less) cosmopolitan the expatriate, the more (less) likely they are to adjust to the local environment when expecting a short-term (long-term) sojourn in the host country (\(b = -0.174, p = 0.009\)). A breakdown of the results, displayed in Fig. 3, shows how cosmopolitan expatriates were more likely to adjust than non-cosmopolitan expatriates when expecting a short-term sojourn (\(M_{\text{cosmopolitans}} = 5.86, M_{\text{non-cosmopolitans}} = 4.86, t_{105} = 5.304, p < .0001\)). In contrast, non-cosmopolitan expatriates were

Table 2 Results of SEM models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adjustment to the host country (Model 1)</th>
<th>Well-being (Model 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family status</td>
<td>-0.036 (0.151)</td>
<td>-0.055 (0.178)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time already at the host country</td>
<td>0.049 (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.002 (0.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of expatriate: student</td>
<td>-0.096 (0.185)</td>
<td>-0.115 (0.216)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of expatriate: multinational corporation manager/employee</td>
<td>0.010 (0.187)</td>
<td>0.047 (0.221)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of sample: the Israeli sample</td>
<td>-0.132 (0.380)</td>
<td>-0.005 (0.454)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of sample: behavioral lab sample</td>
<td>-0.109 (0.354)</td>
<td>-0.058 (0.417)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.090 (0.142)</td>
<td>-0.055 (0.170)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term orientation</td>
<td>0.051 (0.003)</td>
<td>-0.148** (0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan identity</td>
<td>0.218* (0.109)</td>
<td>0.272** (0.141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected duration of sojourn</td>
<td>0.126* (0.060)</td>
<td>0.015 (0.075)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment to host country</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.072 (0.085)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan identity × expected duration of sojourn</td>
<td>-0.174** (0.045)</td>
<td>-0.112 (0.053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan identity × adjustment to host country</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.074 (0.054)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected duration of sojourn × adjustment to host country</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.136** (0.059)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan identity × expected duration of sojourn × adjustment to host country</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.154** (0.037)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model fit indices</td>
<td>χ² (df) = 240.55, (107)</td>
<td>401.25, (193)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-Value</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>0.909</td>
<td>0.909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFI</td>
<td>0.914</td>
<td>0.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We report standardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). We highlight in bold the hypothesized effects. ** p < 0.05. * p < 0.1.

the respondents reliably captured effects of the phenomena without substantial bias (Blalock, 1971).
lower degrees of adjustment to local conditions. By the same logic, organizations and the expatriate herself/himself should carefully consider short-term assignments when the expatriate is less cosmopolitan as she/he might enjoy shorter assignments only at the expense of a lower degree of adjustment. Furthermore, in the context of the trend toward shorter international assignments, which is part of a movement to reduce expenses in response to economic conditions (GMAC Global Relocation Services, 2008), organizations may consider paying special attention to level of cosmopolitanism among their potential expatriates. Based on our findings, cosmopolitans are likely to be more suitable candidates for short-term expatriations.

While our results may suggest important implications for multinational corporations and expatriates in terms of expatriate selection, assignment duration, and expectations on performance in international assignments, they may also have implications for choosing the location of expatriate assignments. Non-cosmopolitans on short assignment and cosmopolitans on long assignments might both be preferably directed to cosmopolitan cities. Less-cosmopolitan cities might be more suitable for cosmopolitans on short assignment or non-cosmopolitans on longer terms.

The study may also have implications for brand managers who target the often-affluent population of expatriates in different geographical contexts (Andreasen, 1966).

6. Limitations and future research directions

This field-based study has allowed us to discuss important variables in real contexts where they matter most. However, one drawback of such studies is that causality is not being addressed. To address this issue, longitudinal research designs may be more relevant. Additionally, our results might be subject to self-selection and endogeneity biases, e.g., if cosmopolitans who do not need adjustment naturally value (or are preferably selected for) assignments of long duration. There might be specific heterogeneity

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**Fig. 3.** Two-way interaction—cosmopolitan identity times expected duration of sojourn on adjustment.

**Fig. 4.** a: Three-way interaction—cosmopolitan identity times expected duration of sojourn times adjustment on well-being: the high cosmopolitan identity case. b: Three-way interaction—cosmopolitan identity times expected duration of sojourn times adjustment on well-being: the low cosmopolitan identity case.
effects associated with self-initiated vis-à-vis business expatriates, although our findings are just as robust when controlling for their effects. Future work may consider a systematic comparison between the two groups of expatriates, as we are not aware of such studies at present. In addition, our dependent variables are subjective in nature and may benefit from some objective measurement to validate our subjects’ responses (see for example Takeuchi et al., 2008, 2009). Nevertheless, efforts were made to ensure that common method bias was not a concern, starting with the design of the questionnaire and finishing with a series of tests for common method bias.

Lack of consensus on the conceptualization and measurement of the cosmopolitanism construct and poor performance of prior measures led us to develop our own cosmopolitan identity measure, focusing on the underlying meaning of the construct and one of its key dimensions—the notion of cross-cultural openness and diversity. While it is based on items taken from different sources, our measure exhibits reliability that is similar to that of the cosmopolitanism scale with the highest reliability available in the literature. Nevertheless, there is room for further research on the development and validation of a cosmopolitanism measure. A relevant point of departure is the work by Riefel and Diamantopoulos (2009), and that by Riefel, Diamantopoulos, and Siguaw (2012), which offer guidance for future studies involving a cosmopolitanism scale.

The unique nature of the dominant groups among the sampled expatriates—Israelis and Belgian—may be a source of concern. Specifically, Israelis and Belgians may have characteristics in common that differentiate them from citizens of many other (often larger and presumably less cosmopolitan) countries. However, in the context of our sample, note that: (a) Israelis and Belgians represent only part of the sample (81 and 11, respectively, in a total sample size of 260) which is in fact composed of a variety of expatriates from many countries, (b) we control for these sub-samples’ main effects and observe that our results hold above and beyond these controls. Similarly, the location of our study—the Boston area, with its unique characteristics—may limit the generalizability of our study to other locations. Yet the Boston area may have actually provided us with some advantages: Boston is a large-enough city—it is neither too small nor too large, it is neither clearly cosmopolitan nor clearly non-cosmopolitan, and it is home to a variety of expatriate types (academic, high-tech, etc.).

Other relevant and potentially interesting venues for future research might be as follows.

First, cultural differences and background conditions involving uncertainty and ambiguity might moderate the effects found here. There might be effects from the proximity or distance between the home and the host country. As a further example, the study of the impact of expected sojourn duration on expatriates' behavior and performance may benefit from exploring the role of relevant cultural constructs based on Hofstede’s (1980) cultural framework. We studied subjects' long-term orientation, but other cultural dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance may also play a crucial part. Similarly, economic and educational background conditions can play a role in explaining expatriates' behavior and may be given more attention.

Second, the study of social networks is gaining interests and relevance in marketing and management (e.g., Stam & Elfring, 2008; Van den Bulte & Wuyts, 2007). Studying the social networks of expatriates may be helpful in understanding their impact on expatriates' decisions and behaviors. The specific effects of such networks, and the more general study of expatriates' communities, on well-being and assignment performance would itself be a matter of interest.

Third, a better understanding of the phenomenon studied may be gained by studying relevant mediators. Such potential mediators may include a host of expatriates' perceptions and capabilities, such as expatriates' expectations regarding the outcomes associated with long- and short-term sojourns, and their level of “comfort” with their level of self-perceived adjustment or their learning capabilities.

In sum, it appears that studies on expatriates (not only cross-national but also longitudinal studies) can be fertile grounds for insights that are not only useful for contemporary multinational corporations but also elucidate variables of great general theoretical interest such as psychological and physical distance, or the general phenomenon of preference and habit adaptation.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Liat Sadot for her invaluable help in the data collection process. They would also like to acknowledge helpful comments from Alan Andreassen, Ann Kronrod and seminar participants in HEC Montréal, Tel-Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University.

Appendix A. The measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures and their items</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Loadings Cronbach's alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My experience is similar to the one described in the attached text (“being a cosmopolitan”)</td>
<td>Cannon and Yaprak (2002) Cleveland and Laroche (2007) Jain and Etgar (1977)</td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.58 ) ( \lambda = 0.43 ) ( \lambda = 0.56 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have extensively visited countries other than my home country.</td>
<td></td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.64 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have resided in countries other than my home country.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the future, there is great likelihood that I will live in countries other than my home country.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected duration of sojourn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) less than 1 year (2) approximately 1 year (3) approximately 2 years (4) approximately 3–5 years (5) approximately 5–10 years (6) 10 years or more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment to the host country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living conditions in general</td>
<td>Black (1988)</td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.87 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing conditions</td>
<td></td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.88 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td></td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.50 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td></td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.46 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td></td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.61 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being (satisfaction with life)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.</td>
<td>Diener et al. (1985)</td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.92 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conditions of my life are excellent.</td>
<td></td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.77 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.</td>
<td></td>
<td>( \lambda = 0.73 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family situation (accompanied/not accompanied by relatives)</td>
<td>Van Vianen et al. (2004)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time already in the host country</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of expatriate (student/business expatriate/other)</td>
<td>Jokinen et al. (2008) Richardson and McKenna (2006)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of sample (Israeli, Belgian or university behavioral lab)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term orientation</td>
<td>Hofstede (1980)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How political identity and charity positioning increase increase donations: Insights from Moral Foundations Theory

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Moral identity
Moral Foundations Theory

A B S T R A C T

Marketers can strategically target potential donors based on their political identity. Drawing upon the moral foundations underlying political identity, we examine conditions in which a charity's positioning increases donations based on its alignment with a political identity. In doing so, we demonstrate the moderating role of moral identity internalization, which is a robust predictor of donation behavior. In three studies, our results reveal that when the moral foundations of a charity, as evidenced by the charity's management processes (Study 1) or mission (Studies 2 and 3), are aligned with the donor's political identity, donations increase. This effect is enhanced among those with higher moral identity internalization. These results offer theoretical contributions, as well as practical implications, for organizations soliciting donations, providing insight into the extent to which charity positioning based on moral foundations can differentially influence donations based on political identity.

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1. Introduction

With Americans donating over $200 billion annually (Giving USA, 2010), nonprofit organizations must appeal to consumers to donate to their specific charity (Cronin, 2006). Several studies show that a consumer's identity affects his or her donation behavior (Shang, Reed, & Croson, 2008; Winterich & Barone, 2011). In particular, a consumer's moral identity interacts with other identities (e.g., gender; see Winterich, Mittal, & Ross, 2009) and influences his or her giving (Aquino & Reed, 2002) as well as aspects of the donation process itself (e.g., donating time vs. money; see Reed, Aquino, & Levy, 2007). Clearly, consumer donations are labile and susceptible to external influences, particularly those related to charity characteristics and consumer identity.

We examine how consumers' political identity – relative conservatism or liberalism – may influence their donations (Brooks, 2006; Smiley, 2004). More specifically, we examine whether alignment between political identity and a charity's moral foundations or the psychological basis of morality (Haidt & Joseph, 2004) increases donations. Take a universally important cause: helping children. Would donations to such a cause be affected by the donor's political identity? If so, do the moral foundations of this political identity offer a systematic explanation? In addition, does the effect of the alignment between a charity and a political identity on donations persist unconditionally, or is it moderated by moral identity internalization, which represents the private, subjective experience of one's moral character and its hidden cognitions (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009)? That is, is the enhancing effect of moral identity internalization on donations dependent on the charity's moral alignment with a consumer's political identity? Answers to these questions are not obvious, though they are important, given the growing significance of political identity in shaping the lives of consumers across the world (Abramowitz, 2011; Ford, 2006).

We answer these questions in three studies. Study 1 manipulates the charity management process (i.e., private or government management) for a cause that helps to feed hungry children. Studies 2 and 3 manipulate a charity's moral foundations communicated in its stated mission. These studies demonstrate that a charity's positioning and political identity interact to influence donation intentions and behavior. Moral identity internalization moderates this effect. Similar to the role of fit between a brand and a cause (Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010), a charity's alignment with the donor's political identity may garner increased donations. Consequently, the alignment mechanism can be rooted in moral foundations and may be used by charities to enhance donations.

2. Political identity, moral foundations, and moral identity internalization

2.1. Political identity

Political identity represents a person's beliefs about the underlying goals and ideals of a political system (Grove, Remy, & Zeigler, 1974).
In Western countries, especially within the United States, there are two dominant political identities: liberal and conservative (Brooks, 2006; Reyna, Henry, Korfmancher, & Tucker, 2005; Skitka & Tetlock, 1993). However, the liberal–conservative continuum for political views is not limited to the United States (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). The present study focuses on donations by American consumers, for whom a liberal identity corresponds to the Democratic party, and the conservative identity corresponds to the Republican party. Next, we propose that political identities may influence donation behavior, depending on the moral emphasis of the charity.

2.2. Moral Foundations Theory

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT hereafter) systematically explains the origins, development, and cultural variations in morality (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Drawing upon traditional values research (Kroefach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992), MFT focuses on the psychological basis of morality. Moral foundations are not values or virtues; rather, they are the psychological systems that guide cognitions: the “first draft” of the moral mind.

MFT identifies five specific moral foundations—harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). These foundations collapse into two super-ordinate foundations labeled the individualizing and binding foundations. As is explained below, the individualizing foundation alludes to the protection and fair treatment of individuals. In contrast, the binding foundation is based on loyalty, tradition, and purity.

- Harm/care is associated with concern about caring, nurturing, and protecting vulnerable individuals from harm. Fairness/reciprocity considers the notions of rights, justice, and what people owe to each other. These two foundations suggest a general regard for the protection and fair treatment of individuals. As such, they collectively have been called the “individualizing” foundations.

- In-group/loyalty concerns patriotism and self-sacrifice for one’s group. Authority/respect focuses on the importance of social order and respect for leadership and traditions. Purity/sanctity refers to a moral mindset that resists the carnal nature of humans. Together, these three foundations focus not on the protection of individuals but on group-binding, duty, and the moral systems in which people are bound in groups and institutions. Therefore, together they have been called the “binding” foundations.

People’s moral foundations can systematically differ by political identity (Haidt, 2012). Specifically, liberals find issues of harm and fairness, which represent the basis of individualizing moral foundations, to be of higher moral relevance to their judgment than conservatives do. Conversely, conservatives find the binding moral foundations, which concern issues of authority, group loyalty, and purity, to be of greater moral relevance than liberals do (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Notably, individualizing foundations tend to be of greater relevance in general. However, this effect is moderated by political identity: the difference between the two foundations is greater for liberals. Conservatives tend to value these two foundations equally (Graham et al., 2009). These systematic differences mean that conservatives find binding foundations to be of greater relevance than liberals do, and liberals find individualizing foundations to be of more relevance than conservatives do.

The binding foundations have been examined previously, though mostly in the context of immorality. These foundations can result in unacceptable behavior, such as racism, blind obedience, and stigma (Graham et al., 2009). Importantly, morality research recognizes that moral–psychological mechanisms are often double-edged swords (de Waal, 1996). For example, conservatives tend to have more authoritarian personalities, and studies have found that authoritarianism is associated with religious fundamentalism and prejudice (Altemeyer, 1996). Such findings have led to a perception of “conservatives without conscience” (Dean, 2006). However, conservatives, who tend to value individualizing and binding foundations relatively equally, may still engage in moral behavior, such as protecting others and supporting fairness. However, these behaviors may be limited to their group or those abiding by tradition based on the simultaneous importance of binding moral foundations.

How do moral foundations offer insight into the effects of political identity on helping others? Skitka and Tetlock (1993) found that conservatives denied help to those not agreeing to undergo vocational training. Such denial of aid is consistent with morality based on respect for authority, a binding foundation held more strongly by conservatives such that individuals should have been obedient to authority and re-formed (Graham et al., 2009). Fowler and Kam (2007) examined the allocation of money in dictator games. When a political identity was known, Republicans were more likely to give to another Republican (vs. Democrat). In contrast, Democrats were not more likely to give to another Democrat (vs. Republican). This study suggests that Republicans have a stronger in-group bias than Democrats, which is consistent with the in-group loyalty that characterizes conservatives (Graham et al., 2009). Reyna et al. (2005) found that conservatives were more opposed to affirmative action for black people than for other groups (i.e., women). This effect was mediated by group-based stereotypes based on deservingsness and was not mediated by racism or threat to oneself. This role of group-based stereotypes is also consistent with the in-group moral foundation held more strongly by conservatives than by liberals. Notably, this finding also corresponds to past MFT research showing that conservatives place greater emphasis on individualizing moral foundations than on binding foundations (Graham et al., 2009). This differential emphasis results in favoring affirmative action, regardless of group, because of fairness. In contrast, conservatives may value both individualizing and binding foundations (Graham et al., 2009). Nevertheless, their evaluations of fairness may be limited based on their equal prioritization of binding moral foundations (i.e., only the in-group; Reyna et al., 2005). Therefore, moral foundations may explain these findings.

We argue that the extent to which the moral foundations of the charity are appropriately aligned with those of the consumer’s political identity may predict the level of a donation that a consumer makes to the charity. Specifically, when a charity is characterized by binding moral foundations, conservatives may donate more to the charity than liberals based on the importance of binding foundations to conservatives. Conversely, when a charity is characterized by individualizing moral foundations, liberals may donate more than conservatives to the charity, due to the importance of individualizing foundations to liberals. We theorize that individualizing foundations will be more aligned with liberals than with conservatives for two reasons. First, individualizing foundations are of greater relevance to liberals than conservatives. Second, individualizing foundations of care and fairness are more inherently present in charities. Therefore, conservatives who value binding and individualizing foundations equally may need binding foundations to be of reasonable importance to a charity in addition to the importance of individualizing foundations inherent to charities to donate to it.

2.3. Moderating role of moral identity internalization

Moral identity has been defined as the mental representation of one’s moral character that is held internally (internalization) and projected to others through moral actions in the world (symbolization; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984). Internalization has also been referred to as moral identity centrality (Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011, Aquino et al., 2009) because it represents the private experience of moral identity and is central to one’s self-concept. Consistent with this centrality, the internalization dimension is a more consistent predictor of various types of moral behaviors and behavioral intentions than symbolization (Aquino
et al., 2009, 2011; Reed & Aquino, 2003; Reed et al., 2007; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). We focus on the internalization dimension, referring to it as moral identity internalization, as it is more central to the self and thus more influential on moral behaviors, such as donation behavior.

We theorize that moral identity internalization moderates the effect of the alignment between political identity and charity moral foundation on donation behavior such that the effect of alignment on donations is enhanced when internalization is high. Reed et al. (2007) argue that “when a consumer's moral identity is highly salient or self-important, his or her sensitivity to acts that are consistent with moral identity increases” (p. 180). This increased sensitivity to moral acts occurs because consumers process and prefer to act in ways that are consistent with and enhance their social identity (Blasi, 1984; Forehand, Deshpande, & Reed, 2002; Reed, 2004). Along the lines of this argument, consumers may desire to act in ways that help to align the moral foundations underlying these behaviors with their political identity, and this desire may be moderated by their moral identity internalization. How does this occur?

We propose a two-step process. First, the act must be deemed to be moral based on the alignment of the act with the moral foundations embedded in the other relevant social identity (i.e., political identity). If the act is deemed to be moral based on a person’s political identity, moral identity internalization can motivate moral behavior based on the importance to one’s self-concept. In other words, moral identity internalization can catalyze charitable acts once they are perceived as moral based on the alignment between one’s political identity and the charity’s moral foundations. Specifically, conservatives are more likely than liberals to deem causes that are more representative of binding moral foundations to be more moral; in contrast, liberals are more likely than conservatives to deem causes that are more representative of individualizing moral foundations to be more moral. However, higher moral identity internalization will increase the motivation to engage in moral action (i.e., donations) when a cause is aligned with one’s political identity.

To summarize, our theorizing is as follows. First, donations will increase with the alignment between political identity and charity moral foundation. Specifically, conservatives will donate more than liberals to a cause more strongly associated with binding foundations, and liberals will donate more than conservatives to a cause with individualizing foundations. Second, moral identity internalization moderates the effect of alignment: the alignment effect is enhanced for those with higher moral identity internalization, thereby increasing donations. In contrast, donations will not be influenced by political identity and cause alignment among those with lower moral identity internalization because their motivation to engage in moral behavior is weaker. That is, alignment does not motivate donations for those lacking the perception of the importance of a moral identity.

3. Study 1: alignment of political identity with the charity management process

Several charitable programs, such as WIC, Planned Parenthood, and even public parks, receive a large portion of funding through the government and are conducted as public agencies. Others, such as rehabilitation centers, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens, receive little if any government support and are primarily funded and managed by community and religious organizations. These differences may be particularly important, as consumers’ political identities correspond to the role of government in helping the public. For example, liberals tend to support government programs more than conservatives, whereas conservatives tend to favor private enterprise more than liberals (Anderson, Mellor, & Millyo, 2005; Brooks, 2006). This relationship between private enterprise and conservatism may be associated with the underlying moral foundations of in-group and authority, whereas the relationship between government programs and liberalism may be associated with moral foundations of harm and fairness. Indeed, conservatives responded more favorably than liberals to moral judgments regarding harm and fairness with specific items including the following: “The government must first and foremost protect all people from harm,” and “When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly” (Graham et al., 2009). Given these beliefs, we expect that a privately managed charity should be more closely aligned with the moral foundations of conservatives than with those of liberals. In contrast, government-managed charities, which may focus on preventing harm and ensuring fairness, should be more closely aligned with the moral foundations of liberals than with those of conservatives. We also propose that moral identity internalization will enhance the effect of political identity and charity alignment on donations. That is, moral identity internalization will moderate the joint effect of the charity management process and political identity, resulting in a three-way interaction.

3.1. Pretest

Participants (n = 56 undergraduates) indicated their agreement with the following two items: “Most of the time, I feel that liberals are supportive of government programs for social welfare” (M = 6.32, t(55) = 4.63, p < .0001) and “Conservatives tend to support the endeavors of private organizations for social welfare over those of government organizations” (M = 4.95/7, t(55) = 4.78, p < .0001). The t-tests indicate that responses were significantly greater than the scale midpoint of 4. Therefore, students in our sample perceive that liberals support government-run programs and that conservatives support privately run programs. Importantly, responses to these two items were not correlated with respondents’ own political identity (r = .17, p = .22; r = −.15, p = .27, respectively), indicating that this perception holds regardless of political identity.

We theorized that these differences in the preference for government versus privately managed organizations between political identities may be associated with differences in moral foundations. We conducted a separate test (n = 41) to test this theory. Participants read one of two charity descriptions for Save the Children such that both descriptions were for the same cause but was either managed by private agencies (coded as ‘1’) or government agencies (coded as ‘-1’), respectively, as described below:

Save the Children creates lasting change for children in need in the United States and around the world through private [government] intervention. Save the Children aids children by providing food, clothing, and medical aid to children in poverty through privately funded support [government-funded support]. The funds that Save the Children raises are managed and administered to children in need through private organizations especially local citizens and religious organizations [public agencies, especially the U.S. government]. These private [public] agencies will use the funds to help children who are in need of food, clothing, and medical care.

After reading the description, participants indicated the extent to which they felt that Save the Children was concerned with each of the following five statements: caring for the vulnerable, protecting the rights of every individual, protecting group interests, maintaining social order, and maintaining standards of decency. These items were adapted from the Moral Foundations Questionnaire developed by Graham et al. (2011). Responses were on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 9 = very much so). The first two statements reflect individualizing moral foundations (r = .44, p = .01), whereas the last three reflect binding moral foundations (α = .64).

Participants in the privately managed condition perceived the charity to have stronger binding moral foundations (M = 6.39) than those in the government-managed condition (M = 4.85, t(39) = 3.23, p = .003), as expected. Participants in the government-managed condition perceived the charity as having individualizing moral foundations (M = 6.78) equal to those in the privately managed condition (M = 6.86, t(39) = −.16, p = .87). Individualizing moral foundations were not perceived as differing between government and private
management. However, this response may have been observed because the basic needs of food, clothing, and medical care provided by Save the Children reflect the moral foundations of harm and fairness. Importantly, a difference was found in binding moral foundations between private management and government management, which is consistent with the tendency for conservatives to find binding foundations to be more relevant than liberals (Graham et al., 2009, 2011). Perceptions of charity moral foundations did not differ by political identity (effect of political identity on binding foundations: $p = .82$, individualizing foundations: $p = .86$), and the difference in binding moral foundations remained significant when political identity was included as a covariate ($p = .004$). Therefore, these results suggest that government versus private management of a charitable organization may differentially align with binding moral foundations.

3.2. Participants and design

Undergraduates ($N = 161$; 58% female) completed the study for course credit. Participants were assigned to either a private-managed charity or a government-managed one with both moral identity and political identity measured as continuous variables. Moral identity was measured at the beginning of a one-hour research session with other personality scales. After completing unrelated survey tasks for approximately 20–30 min, participants completed the donation intention task followed by demographic information, political identity, and the conservatism scale.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Political identity

We measured political identity with the six-item scale constructed by Mehrabian (1996). Sample items are as follows: “I am politically more liberal than conservative,” and “On balance, I lean politically more to the left than to the right” ($1 = $ strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). These six items were averaged to create one conservatism score ($\alpha = .84$) which had a mean score of 6.21 (SD = 1.72). On this scale, higher scores represent stronger conservatism. The results reported below are for the measured conservatism political identity, but the results were consistent when using self-reported Democratic (33%) and Republican (67%) party affiliation and are available upon request. As expected, conservatism is positively and strongly correlated with political identity ($r = .73, p < .0001; 0 = \text{Democrat}, 1 = \text{Republican}$).

3.3.2. Moral identity internalization

Participants responded to Aquino and Reed’s (2002) Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale ($1 = $ strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The ten items represent the two five-item subscales measuring internalization and symbolization. Consistent with our theorizing and past research (Aquino et al., 2011; Reed & Aquino, 2003; Reed et al., 2007), we focus on internalization. Internalization items include the following: “It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics,” “I strongly desire to have these characteristics,” and “Having these characteristics is not really important to me” (reverse-coded). The five internalization items were indexed ($\alpha = .75, M = 6.49, SD = .51$), and this index was not correlated with political identity ($r = .01, p = .82$). We also averaged the five symbolization items ($\alpha = .70, M = 4.88, SD = .96$).

3.3.3. Charity management process

Participants read one of the two pretested charity descriptions, which indicated private (coded as ‘1’) or government (coded as ‘-1’) management (Jaccard & Turrisi, 2003).

3.3.4. Donation intentions (allocation)

Participants were told the following: “Suppose you have $100 at your disposal. Please indicate the amount you are willing to donate to Save the Children” ($M = 26.83, SD = 22.00$).

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Manipulation check

To verify that participants perceived the charity management process as intended, they were asked to respond to six statements ($1 = $ strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) after completing the dependent measures. Three items indicated management by private agencies and include “Private organizations support and fund the Save the Children program.” Three items indicated management by government agencies and include “The U.S. government and other public organizations fund the Save the Children program.” The three private-agency items were reverse-coded, and the six items were averaged to create an index ($\alpha = .91$). Participants in the privately managed condition perceived that the charity was run by government agencies less than those in the government-managed condition ($M_{private} = 2.76$ vs. $M_{gov} = 4.59, t(159) = 10.18, p < .0001$). Therefore, the manipulation of the charity management process was successful.

3.4.2. Donation intentions (Allocation)

We conducted a regression analysis with donation intentions as the dependent variable and the charity management process (government vs. private), moral identity internalization, and political identity (both continuous variables) as the independent variables. The results are reported in Table 1. First, as expected, the two-way interaction of the charity management process and political identity was significant ($\beta = .43, t(153) = 2.35, p = .02$). However, to understand the moderating role of moral identity internalization, we examined the three-way interaction of moral identity internalization, the charity management process, and political identity. This three-way interaction was significant ($\beta = .33, t(153) = 1.98, p = .05$). To interpret the pattern of this three-way interaction, we examine the effect of political identity for each of the charity management processes by low and high levels of moral identity internalization (i.e., one standard deviation above and below the mean of moral identity; Aiken & West, 1991). Among those with high moral identity internalization (+ 1SD), political identity negatively influenced donation intentions when the charity was managed by the government ($\beta = -.48, t(153) = -2.14, p = .03$) such that liberals had higher donation intentions than conservatives. In contrast, there was a significant positive effect of political identity for donations to the privately managed charity ($\beta = .69, t(153) = 2.03, p = .04$) such that conservatives had higher donation intentions than liberals. When moral identity internalization was low (−1SD), there was no effect of political identity on the intentions to donate to the government-managed charity ($\beta = -.26, t(153) = -2.61, p = .42$) or the privately managed charity ($\beta = -.35, t(153) = -.15, p = .88$). See Fig. 1. These results support our hypothesis.

3.4.3. Religion as a potential alternative explanation

Private agencies, such as religious organizations, were included in the private management condition. Because religion may be correlated with political identity (Altemeyer, 1996), it may be an alternative explanation. In our sample, political identity and religion were correlated such that Republicans were more likely to be of Christian faith ($r = .43, p < .0001$). When religion was included as a covariate in the main analysis reported earlier, it did not predict donations ($p = .42$). When religion replaced political identity in the regression analysis...
predicting donation intentions, no effects were significant, including the three-way interaction ($p = .40$). Therefore, religion does not appear to be a viable alternative explanation.

3.5. Discussion

A subtle manipulation of the charity management process affected the donation intentions of conservatives and liberals. Specifically, when the charity was managed by the government, liberals with high moral identity internalization had higher donation intentions than conservatives. In contrast, when the charity was managed privately, conservatives with high moral identity internalization had higher donation intentions than liberals. When moral identity internalization was low, donation intentions did not differ, regardless of the alignment of the charity management process with political identity because these individuals did not find donation behavior to be important to their self-concept, specifically, their moral identity. It is likely that perceptions of a charity’s moral foundations may differ in ways other than predicting donation intentions, no effects were significant, including the three-way interaction ($p = .40$). Therefore, religion does not appear to be a viable alternative explanation.

4. Study 2: alignment of political identity with charity’s moral foundations

The charity’s mission was aligned with either binding (purity, in-group, and authority) or individualizing (harm and fairness) moral foundations. This study focuses on differences in the binding moral foundations of in-group loyalty and purity. Next, in Study 3, we focus on the binding moral foundation of authority to increase generalizability.

4.1. Pretest

Participants ($N=61$) read one of two charity descriptions for Children’s Advocates. Although both descriptions emphasized harm and fairness foundations through a focus on abused, neglected, and at-risk children, the binding description placed an additional emphasis on purity through spiritual needs and in-group loyalty through community and leadership. Given these charity distinctions, we anticipate moral foundations to differ in terms of in-group and purity binding foundations rather than in terms of authority. All participants read the following passage: “Founded in 1981, Children’s Advocates works to break the cycle of child abuse through prevention, education, advocacy and funding. Children’s Advocates strives to meet the…” with one of the following passages, depending on condition.

[Binding Moral Foundations: coded as ‘1’] “…educational and spiritual needs of abused, neglected, and at-risk children. Children’s Advocates fights for every child’s right to be protected from abuse and neglect and to grow up in a safe, stable, permanent home. Children’s Advocates champions efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions in a safe, community environment through programs on: character and leadership development; education and career development; and health and life skills.”

[Individualizing Moral Foundations: coded as ‘-1’] “…physical and emotional needs of abused, neglected, and at-risk children. Children’s Advocates fights to enshrine in the law of the land every child’s right to be protected from abuse and neglect. Children’s Advocates’ programs and services include: National Child Abuse Hotline, Good-Touch/Bad Touch, and Children’s Advocacy Centers.”

After reading the description, participants indicated the extent to which they felt that Children’s Advocates is concerned with each of the following five statements: preventing harm, protecting and ensuring...
rights, ensuring respect, protecting group interests, and preventing impurities. The responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The first two statements concern individualizing moral foundations and were averaged (r = .79, p < .0001), whereas the last two concern the focal in-group and purity foundations in the binding charity description (r = .74, p < .0001).

Participants in the binding condition had stronger perceptions that the charity had binding moral foundations compared with those in the individualizing condition (M = 4.86 vs. 3.27, t(59) = 3.71, p < .0005), as expected. In contrast, participants in the individualizing condition had stronger perceptions that the charity had individualizing moral foundations compared with those in the binding condition (M = 5.75 vs. 4.77, t(59) = 2.03, p = .05). We acknowledge that in the binding condition, individualizing, and binding moral foundations do not differ (M = 4.77 and 4.86, t(30) = 1.64, p = .11) as they do in the individualizing condition (M = 5.75 and 3.27, t(29) = −8.71, p < .0001). However, this finding is representative of the inherent emphasis on individualizing moral foundations of harm and fairness for any non-profit organization seeking to protect abused children. Moreover, there is a tendency for political distinctions in individualizing moral foundations, specifically harm, to be weakest, whereas binding foundations, such as purity, tend to be strongest (Graham et al., 2011). Therefore, consistent with these differences in moral foundations by political identity, the critical distinction is the relative emphasis on binding moral foundations between the two charity descriptions. Given this finding, the descriptions were perceived as intended.3

4.2. Participants and design

A total of 100 adults (Mage = 45.40 years, SD = 11.94, range = 21–71) from an online panel across the United States participated in the online study in exchange for entry in a lottery for $50 Amazon.com gift certificates. The study is a one-factor (Charity Moral Foundation: Binding vs. Individualizing) between-subjects design, with both moral identity and political identity being measured as continuous variables. The online survey was presented as two unrelated short surveys, with the first survey automatically redirecting to the second survey to be consistent with the cover story of multiple short surveys. In the first survey, participants completed the moral identity measure used in Study 1. We used five internalization items with α = .84, M = 6.19/7, SD = 0.93 along with the political identity, which was couched within demographic measures. Political identity was self-reported on a 7-point scale with 1 = strongly liberal to 7 = strongly conservative. Responses ranged from 1 to 7 with an average of 4.01, SD = 1.69, indicating that both strong liberals and strong conservatives were represented in our sample. Political identity was not significantly correlated with moral identity internalization, r = −.04, p = .69.

Next, participants were redirected to the second, presumably unrelated, survey, which contained approximately 15 minutes of unrelated questions. Immediately before finishing the second survey, participants read one of the two descriptions of Children’s Advocates presented in the pretest and responded to a donation request. We measured donation intentions with two items adapted from Reed and Aquino (2003): “I would like to donate money to this cause” and “I would like to support this cause.” We selected these two items because they explicitly focus on consumers’ donation intentions. The responses (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) to the two items were averaged to create an index (r = .76, p < .0001, M = 3.82, SD = 2.11).

4.3. Results and discussion

The two-way interaction of charity moral foundations and political identity was marginally significant (β = .40, t(92) = 1.90, p = .06), as expected. However, this two-way interaction was qualified by the three-way interaction of moral identity internalization, charity moral foundation, and political identity, which was significant (β = .51, t(92) = 2.03, p = .04; see Table 1 for regression results). As in Study 1, we examined the effect of political identity on donation intentions for each moral foundation at high and low levels of moral identity internalization (+/− 1 SD) to understand the pattern of the interaction. Among those with high moral identity internalization, political identity negatively influenced donation intentions for the charity with an individualizing moral foundation (β = −.92, t(92) = −2.08, p = .04): liberals had higher donation intentions than conservatives. In contrast, there was a significant positive effect of political identity for the charity with a binding moral foundation (β = .90, t(92) = 2.18, p = .05); conservatives demonstrated higher donation intentions than did liberals. When moral identity internalization was low, there was no effect of political identity on donation intentions to the charity with an individualizing moral foundation (β = .10, t(92) = .17, p = .86) or the charity with a binding moral foundations (β = −.12, t(92) = −.29, p = .77); see Fig. 2. These results are consistent with those of Study 1 in which moral foundations were manipulated through the charity management process, rather than through the charity’s mission.

Donation intentions increase when the moral foundations of the charity are aligned with consumers’ political identity. Moral identity internalization enhances this effect. We next examine charity positioning based on differences in the binding moral foundation of authority to provide more generalizable evidence. More importantly, Study 3 examines donation behavior, as opposed to intentions, to improve the external validity of these results.
5. Study 3: donation allocation behavior by charity moral foundations

This study examines donation allocation behavior, rather than donation intention, in the context of an actual charity supporting home ownership, namely, Rebuilding Together. The descriptions of the charity differed primarily in terms of the authority moral foundation. This difference from prior studies should ensure that effects are not dependent on the specific cause (i.e., supporting children in Studies 1 and 2) or moral foundation. To manipulate the moral foundations, we emphasized different aspects of the charity according to the information presented on the charity’s website.

5.1. Pretest

Participants (N = 47) read one of two descriptions of Rebuilding Together. One description emphasized the authority dimension through a focus on individual development and traditions and the in-group dimension through family and community support. All participants read the following passage: “Rebuilding Together (http://www.rebuildingtogether.org/) is the nation’s leading organization working to preserve affordable home ownership and revitalize communities. Rebuilding Together believes…” and were randomly assigned to continue this passage with one of the following statements:

[Binding Moral Foundations: coded as ‘1’] “…in the importance of a healthy home where families can live together. They provide rehabilitation services to working families who are trying to develop themselves to follow American traditions and support their communities.”

[Individualizing Moral Foundations: coded as ‘-1’] “…every person deserves the protection of a home. They provide free critical repairs to the homes of low-income Americans as well as financial support to protect low income families who are susceptible to home loss. This support works to ensure every individual has the right to a home.”

Participants indicated the extent to which they felt that Rebuilding Together was concerned with the following factors: caring for the vulnerable, protecting the rights of every individual, supporting group interests, supporting tradition, and preventing impurity (1 = not at all to 9 = very much so). The first two statements for individualizing moral foundations were averaged (r = .43, p = .003), and the third and fourth statements for binding foundations were averaged (r = .33, p = .03) because neither description focused on the purity dimension. Participants in the individualizing condition perceived the charity as having a stronger individualizing foundation compared with those in the binding condition (M = 6.98 vs. 5.85, t(45) = 2.19, p = .03). In contrast, those in the binding condition perceived the charity as having a stronger binding foundation compared with those in the individualizing condition (M = 6.68 vs. 5.09, t(45) = 2.95, p = .005), as expected.4

5.2. Participants and design

Online panel participants (N = 198, Mage = 42.08 years, SD = 13.18, range = 18–78) completed the study in exchange for entry in a lottery for a $50 Amazon.com gift certificate. The study is a one-factor (Charity Moral Foundation: Binding vs. Individualizing) between-subjects design with both moral identity and political identity measured as continuous variables. First, participants read one of the two pretested descriptions of Rebuilding Together. The website for Rebuilding Together was included in the description to indicate that the charity was not fictitious. Next, the subjects were told they could donate all, some, or none of the $50 gift card lottery winnings to Rebuilding Together. The donation allocations were as follows: (a) $50 donation to Rebuilding Together/no gift card, (b) $40 donation/$10 gift card, (c) $30 donation/$20 gift card, (d) $20 donation/$30 gift card, (e) $10 donation/$40 gift card, and (f) No donation and $50 gift card. Following Freeman, Aquino, and McFerran (2009), donation allocation was treated as a continuous variable ranging from 1 to 6, with higher numbers indicating larger donations.

Finally, participants completed a series of personality questionnaires that included the moral identity scale (five internalization items: α = .83, M = 6.21/7, SD = .83) and the conservatism scale used in Study 1. Political identity, as measured in Study 2, was included with demographic questions, including gender and age (M = 3.45/7, SD = 1.68). Higher scores indicate a more conservative political identity, which was not correlated with moral identity internalization (r = −.11, p = .16).

5.3. Results for donation allocation behavior

Following Freeman et al. (2009), we ran a regression analysis (see Table 1).5 The two-way interaction of charity moral foundation and political identity was statistically significant (β = .31, t(190) = 2.00, p = .04). Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, this two-way interaction was qualified by the three-way interaction of moral identity internalization, charity moral foundation, and political identity (β = .42, t(190) = 2.62, p = .01).

We examined the pattern of this three-way interaction as in Studies 1 and 2. Among those with higher moral identity internalization, liberals had higher donation allocations than conservatives for the individualizing moral foundations charity (β = −.43, t(190) = −1.95, p = .05). In contrast, conservatives had higher donation allocations than liberals for the binding moral foundations charity (β = .99, t(190) = 2.99, p = .003). When moral identity internalization was low, there was no effect of political identity on donation allocations to the individualizing moral foundations charity (β = −.22, t(190) = −.58, p = .56) or the binding moral foundations charity (β = −.01, t(190) = −.04, p = .97). See Fig. 3.6 We next discuss the contributions, implications, and limitations of this research.

6. Discussion

We theorize that consumers who self-identify as being on either end of the political spectrum may be more likely to donate, as long as the charity is aligned with the moral foundations of these consumers’ political identity. This effect of alignment on donations is enhanced by consumers’ moral identity internalization. We used different samples, measures, and charities, demonstrating the robustness of our results. Two studies (Studies 2 and 3) used a panel of adults. Study 3 examined actual donation behavior. Political identity is assessed with a conservatism measure (Study 1) and a liberal–conservative continuum (Studies 2 and 3) to ensure that the results are not specific to a particular measure of political identity. The robustness of moral foundations as a positioning strategy is demonstrated using an in-group and purity focus (Study 2) and an authority and in-group focus (Study 3).

6.1. Contributions to marketing practice and theory

Charities can enhance their donations by positioning their management process or mission to align with the moral foundations underlying

4 Perceptions of charity moral foundations did not differ by political identity (effect of political identity for binding: p = .35, individualizing: p = .78), and the perceived differences in moral foundations remained significant when political identity was included as a covariate (binding: p = .006, individualizing: p = .03).

5 The substantive results and conclusions were unchanged when analyzed as an ordered logit.

6 We replicated the results with the conservatism measure used in Study 1: the three-way interaction was significant, and the pattern remained unchanged.
political (and other) donor identities. This implication may be particularly relevant when for-profit organizations partner with non-profit organizations to increase cause-related marketing (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988; Zdravkovic et al., 2010). For instance, Target has experienced customer boycotts because of its donations to a political candidate who opposed same-sex marriage (Hernandez, 2010). Target’s donation to support a political candidate who opposed same-sex marriage likely conflicted with the individualizing moral foundation of fairness. Future research should examine how large organizations, such as Target, can simultaneously cater to many segments with diverse political identities.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the political identity literature, particularly in the context of donation behavior. Scholars and authors in the popular press engage in a spirited debate on whether liberals or conservatives are more generous. Although there are proponents of each ideology (Brooks, 2006; Dean, 2006; MacDonald, 2004; Skitka & Tetlock, 1993), support may be confounded with the nuances of their claims. For example, when measuring the average dollar amount donated (Brooks, 2006) or the percent of income given to charity (MacDonald, 2004), households headed by a conservative individual donate more than those headed by a liberal person. However, when measuring the respondent’s support for government spending on social programs, those with a relatively liberal political identity are more generous (Anderson et al., 2005; Brooks, 2006).

The only experimental study in which liberals and conservatives were randomly assigned to inequality treatments based on unequal show-up fees, there were no significant differences in giving in the public goods game based on respondents’ political identity (Anderson et al., 2005). In all three of our studies, we found no main effect of political identity (all p’s >.20) on donations. Therefore, our results show that political identity alone does not make a person more or less generous. Rather, Republicans and Democrats may donate more or less to a specific charity based on the degree to which the charity’s moral foundations are aligned with their own political identity. This issue may be relevant to examining brand equity, which may be differentially affected by a consumer’s identity and moral foundations.

To date, MFT has received limited consideration in the marketing literature, although binding or individualizing moral foundations may be influential in other consumer contexts. For example, binding foundations may be influential in contexts where purity is of great importance (e.g., cleaning products, as well as food products and services) or where authority is relevant (e.g., banking, insurance, and investment services). In contrast, individualizing foundations may be influential in contexts focused on fairness (e.g., education) or on protection from harm (e.g., child or elderly care). We believe not only that the distinctions between binding and individualizing moral foundations are a key conceptual insight of our paper but also that the model provides actionable guidance to charities. Because these two sets of moral foundations are distinct constructs (and not merely the obverse of one another), they should be examined in additional consumer and marketing contexts.

Moral identity has been examined as an antecedent of donation behavior (Aquino et al., 2011; Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008 for review), but research on the moderating effect of moral identity on donation behavior is nascent (see Aquino et al., 2011; Winterich et al., 2009 for exceptions). We contribute to this stream, hoping that future research will develop a broader model where multiple identities interact with one another to affect key consumer behaviors.

6.2. Limitations and future research considerations

We only measured political identity and moral identity, thereby limiting causal interpretations of the empirical evidence. Although results based on temporarily activated moral identity and measured moral identity internalization are highly consistent (Aquino et al., 2011; Reed et al., 2007; Winterich et al., 2009), research should replicate these results by priming and/or activating political identity. Such research would also reveal the interplay between chronic and activated identities. Will the salience of moral identity simply enhance donations among those without a chronically high moral identity when charity moral foundations are aligned with their political identity? Similarly, it is unclear whether moral identity enhances the importance of moral foundations that are aligned with political identity. Alternatively, are moral foundations equally important, regardless of moral identity? If so, moral identity may simply act as a motivator for moral action, which includes donating to a charity when moral foundations are aligned with one’s political identity. Additionally, symbolization can be examined in future research, as it may be an influencing factor when donations are recognized or are publicly visible.

Finally, our focus on samples based in the United States should not mask the fact that consumers in other countries donate billions of dollars annually as well and may also differ somewhat in terms of their political identity. For instance, in the United Kingdom, over £52 billion was donated to the 162,400 charities in 2009–2010 (UK charitable...
sector, 2011). The association between political identity assessed by the liberal-conservative continuum and moral foundations held even when participants included those from Europe, Canada, Latin America, and other areas (Graham et al., 2009, 2011). Nonetheless, we believe these results should be replicated with samples from other countries, particularly those in Europe and Asia.

6.3. Conclusion

We find that aligning the charity's moral foundations with those underlying the donor's political identity increases donations. This alignment is enhanced among those with high moral identity internalization. These results should aid marketers in positioning their charities to align with the target donor's political identity and thus increase donations to their charity.

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Repeated exposure to the thin ideal and implications for the self: Two weight loss program studies

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A B S T R A C T
Exposure to thin models results in self-esteem shifts that influence people’s motivation to diet. This research study applies a goal perspective to explain the effect of exposure to thin models on dieters’ motivation to lose weight. Two (one-week) weight loss program studies that included treatment conditions in which participants were repeatedly exposed to either a thin model or to control conditions with either a neutral dieting-related cue (Study 1) or a normal-sized model (Study 2) were conducted. Female participants who were exposed to the thin model perceived their dieting goals as less attainable, engaged in more goal-inconsistent behavior (i.e., consuming unhealthy snacks), and had less success losing weight. The effect of exposure to thin models on weight loss success is mediated specifically by the perceived attainability of the thin ideal.

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1. Introduction

Each of us has a sense of who we are. The existing literature uses several different terms to describe this sense of self, self-identity, or self-concept (e.g., Belk, 1988; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Markus & Kunda, 1986). To know one’s “self” means that one perceives oneself as possessing (or lacking) certain character traits, skills, or physical attributes and thus as belonging to certain social groups (Dittmar, 2008). People frequently derive self-images by comparing themselves with others (Festinger, 1954), which has direct consequences on how they evaluate themselves, on how satisfied they are with whom they represent, and on how they ideally would like to be (Richins, 1991).

Because body image is an important part of identity (Harter, 1999), comparing ourselves with images presented in mass media affects our self-evaluations, usually by establishing an ideal of what we want to look like. For example, models presented in mass media are thinner than the average female (Levine & Smolak, 1996). Fashion models often have body mass indexes (BMI) as low as 16, which is significantly lower than the lowest point (18.5) in the range of BMI values that represent a biologically healthy weight (Feldman, 2006). Comparisons with a (role) model on such salient and relevant dimensions (e.g., thinness) can strongly influence how a person thinks and feels about the self (Epstude & Mussweiler, 2009). Especially for female dieters, most of whom have internalized a thin ideal to define their personal appearance value system, body weight and size are highly accessible domains of identity and the ideal self (Ogden, 1995). Consequently, these women are very susceptible to thin model cues (Wegner, 1994; Wheeler & Berger, 2007).

The consequences of exposure to thin models have been well studied, and the literature primarily demonstrates that self-esteem and body satisfaction decrease among dieters who are exposed to media images of thin models (see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Yet, some studies also suggest positive outcomes, particularly that viewing a thin model might have inspirational effects (Collins, 1996; Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004; Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). Recent studies explain these contradictory findings by demonstrating that the effects depend on the extremity of the model cue (Smeesters & Mandel, 2006; Smeesters, Mussweiler, & Mandel, 2010); that is, extreme comparison standards foster a contrast effect (e.g., Meyers & Biocca, 1992; Richins, 1991) that can induce changes in self-esteem, motivation to lose weight, and even food intake (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Mills et al., 2002).

However, existing experimental studies on the behavioral consequences of model exposure on eating behavior have been limited to single-exposure settings in which participants’ self-esteem, motivation to diet, or eating behavior is assessed immediately after the exposure. In this study, we argue that dieting and eating behaviors require a longer period of observation that allows for the concurrent investigation of the participants’ motivation to pursue a weight loss goal and their corresponding eating behaviors. We propose that just as exposure to model cues influences eating behavior, one’s eating behavior also serves as a feedback about one’s progress in achieving the relevant goal. If exposure to a thin model causes dieters to
disinhibit food intake (Mills et al., 2002), those dieters might be interpreting their increased consumption as lack of progress in attaining their goal to lose weight. Such negative feedback regarding their progress toward a particular goal may then initiate a shift in their motivation to pursue the goal or to engage in goal-consistent behavior by dampening their expectations of goal attainability (Brendel & Higgins, 1995).

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of how model cues influence the motivation to lose weight and the corresponding eating behavior, we need to adopt a longer perspective. In this article, we investigate the effects of repeated exposures to a thin model on the motivation to diet and on eating behavior over a longer time span, which enables us to contribute to existing research in several ways. First, whereas previous studies have ignored the intertwining effects of exposure on eating behavior and on motivation to lose weight, we consider both factors concurrently over a longer time span. Second, modern consumers cannot realistically be exposed only once to a thin model cue; they frequently encounter such cues, either intentionally or unintentionally. Dieters who have internalized a thin ideal should be particularly sensitive to these thin model cues (Wegner, 1994; Wheeler & Berger, 2007). We therefore investigate the effects of this constant exposure on participants’ eating behaviors and motivations to lose weight. Third, achieving a goal such as losing weight does not depend solely on an individual’s motivation in any given situation but rather demands engagement in goal-consistent behavior over time. Therefore, exploring the effect of exposures to thin models over time in a setting that mimics typical dieting scenarios seems more adequate.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social comparison

Appearance, beauty, and the “perfect” body have long been central influences on women’s identities. Women are socialized early to understand that their bodies should be used to attract others (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altbe, & Tantless-Dunn, 1999), and they learn to see themselves as objects to be evaluated on the basis of their appearance (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). This pressure is repeatedly reinforced by strong sociocultural ideals of female beauty, which have come to be embodied in ultra-thinness (Wiseman, Gray, Moisman, & Ahrens, 1992). In this context, women develop a natural drive to evaluate their own attributes and abilities and compare themselves with media models, who are substantially thinner than the majority of the female population (Festinger, 1954). These upward comparisons with someone who is superior with regard to the relevant dimension (i.e., a thin model who is superior on the thinness dimension; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997) strongly influence how people think and feel about themselves (Epsteude & Mussweiler, 2009). The effects of upward comparisons to thin (idealized) models are often conceptualized in terms of “contrast effects,” which refer to the tendency to evaluate oneself more negatively after viewing highly attractive others (Thorton & Moore, 1993). Richards (1991) demonstrates that women are less satisfied with their own physical appearance after exposure to thin, attractive models. However, upward comparisons may also have positive effects (e.g., Collins, 1996; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). For example, viewing highly attractive models may have inspirational effects and may result in positive shifts in self-perception (Collins, 1996). Mills et al. (2002) show specifically that dieters rate themselves as thinner after exposures to idealized body images.

Recent studies (Smeesters & Mandel, 2006; Smeesters et al., 2010) shed further light on these contradictory findings by demonstrating that the extremity of the model determines the effects of the exposure on people’s beliefs and self-esteem regarding their appearance. Comparisons with a moderate standard (e.g., a moderately thin model) trigger standard-consistent self-knowledge and result in assimilation, such that self-judgments move in the direction of the comparison standard (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). In contrast, comparisons with an extreme standard (e.g., an extremely thin model) foster standard-inconsistent self-knowledge and result in contrasts, such that the self is judged as opposite to the comparison standard (Richins, 1991). If the difference between the assessor and the model with respect to the standard is significant (e.g., normal-BMI respondents exposed to extremely thin models), exposure to the model leads to a contrast effect and reduces self-esteem (Smeesters et al., 2010), which might motivate people to lose weight (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Smeesters et al., 2010) and change their eating behaviors (Anschutz, Engels, Becker, & van Strien, 2008; Seddon & Berry, 1996; Smeesters et al., 2010; Strauss, Doyle, & Kreie, 1994; Warren, Strauss, Taska, & Sullivan, 2005).

Existing studies have also demonstrated that exposure to thin models influences subsequent food intake. Nonetheless, whereas some studies find that people eat less after exposure to thin models (Smeesters et al., 2010), others find that dieters stop inhibiting their eating behavior and instead increase their food intake (Mills et al., 2002). For dieters, exposure to thin models might increase the perceived discrepancy between their actual self and the desired end state because it fosters contrast effects (Smeesters et al., 2010). The proposition that the discrepancy between the assessor (e.g., the dieter) and the comparison standard (e.g., a thin model) determines the consequences of exposure is consistent with studies on goal formation (Brown, 1948; Hull, 1932; Levin, 1938), which demonstrate that the distance between the current self and a desired end state determines the motivation to pursue a certain goal.

2.2. Goals and attainability

Theories of goal pursuit emphasize a key driver: the desire to reduce a perceived discrepancy between the actual state and the desired end state (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Kruglanski et al., 2002). When a desirable end state has been activated and adopted as a goal, people continuously assess their progress by comparing their actual state (e.g., current weight) with the activated end state (e.g., thin model’s perceived weight). Feedback on perceived progress toward the goal may influence expectations about goal attainability (Brendel & Higgins, 1995) and thereby influence the motivation to work toward the goal in two dynamic ways.

On the one hand, proximal goals should increase individual motivation and promote better performance than distal goals. Bandura and Schunk (1981) find that proximal goals, compared with distal goals, provide immediate and achievable incentives and are thus more effective in mobilizing goal-attainment efforts. Similarly, according to the goal gradient hypothesis (Brown, 1948; Hull, 1932; Levin, 1938), “goals loom larger” effect (Brendel & Higgins, 1995), the classic theory of achievement motivation (Atkinson, 1964) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974), the motivation to attain a certain goal increases as the desired end state approaches. If a goal appears closer and easier to attain, individuals become more confident (Tubbs, Boehne, & Dahl, 1993) and allocate more effort to reach it. However, if a goal appears very difficult to attain, continued investments of time and effort seem unlikely to pay off, and the goal seeker might thus disengage from the effort. Following this reasoning, we posit that the intertwining effects of increased food intake and exposure to thin models decrease dieters’ commitment to their goal.

On the other hand, studies on the unconscious effects of subtle cues on behavior suggest that primes trigger more enduring effects when they are perceived as distant from an active self-concept. Sela and Shiv (2009) demonstrate that situational primes consistent with self-concepts are more likely to affect behavior in a semantic activation pattern; cues that are discrepant from the self-concept are likely to affect it in a goal-activation pattern. Thus, a perceived
discrepancy between the active self-concept and the cue signals that the goal has not been attained, which functions as a motivator (Dijksterhuis, Chartrand, & Aarts, 2007; Sela & Shiv, 2009). This finding that primes are especially motivating when there is greater discrepancy between the active self-concept and the prime (Sela & Shiv, 2009) is in line with studies on dynamic self-regulation, which demonstrate that a focus on what remains to be done to achieve a desired end state is a sign of limited progress and increases the motivation to adhere to the goal (Koo & Fishbach, 2008). Following this reasoning, the intertwining effects of exposure to thin models and increased food intake should increase the perceived discrepancy between the dieter and the model and thus increase the motivation to attain the weight loss goal.

These two accounts thus make different predictions about the influences of exposure to thin model cues on a dieter’s commitment to become thinner and on her identity construction. According to studies on modern identity, identity has shifted “from a fixed set of characteristics determined by birth to a reflexive, ongoing, individual project shaped by appearance and performance” (Zukin & Maguire, 2004, p. 180). That is, a person’s sense of self is guided, constantly refined, and updated by what happens and by what he or she has done and hopes to become. Individual success or failure in achieving the goal of losing weight should thus have direct consequences for identity formation.

2.3. Current research

We investigate whether being exposed to a very thin model decreases the motivation to lose weight and triggers disengagement from the goal (prediction I) or increases that motivation and fosters goal-consistent behavior (prediction II). In this study, we focus on normal-weight to moderately overweight women who view very thin model cues, a common situation in everyday life. We specifically include dieters as participants because they appear most susceptible to thin model cues as a result of their efforts to become thinner (Wegner, 1994; Wheeler & Berger, 2007). Because exposure to thin models might result in more food intake (Mills et al., 2002), which increases the discrepancy between the current self and the desired end state, it becomes especially relevant to explore how the motivation to attain a thinner self evolves over time. Unlike existing studies, we do not rely on a single exposure to a thin model but rather expose participants repeatedly to the thin ideal.

3. Study 1

We organized a weight loss program for students to explore whether repeated exposure to a thin model, rather than a neutral, dieting-related cue, influenced the dieters’ motivation and their success in becoming thinner. We specifically invited female students who wanted to lose weight to participate in a one-week program. They received an eating diary in which they were to note after every occasion of food consumption (i.e., breakfast, lunch, dinner, and all snacks) exactly what they ate. Half of the participants received a diary with a cover picture of a thin model (treatment); the other half used diaries with a neutral, dieting-related image of a measuring tape on the cover (control). To avoid any potential bias that might arise if only the control condition saw a process-related cue, we included the picture of the measuring tape within the diary provided to the treatment condition participants.

3.1. Participants

Dieters are especially common among young women (Morgan, 2007), so our sample of undergraduate women was highly appropriate. We sent e-mails to all first-year female students and explained that we were looking for women who wanted to lose weight and would like to participate in a one-week weight loss program. They were told that they would receive 50€ for their participation. We recruited 54 female undergraduate students with an average age of 19.96 years (SD = 1.70) who wanted to lose an average of 6.85 kg (SD = 4.15) and had an average BMI of 23.25 (SD = 4.00), which is near the upper bound of the normal and healthy BMI range (i.e., 18.5–24.9).

3.2. Method

Because losing weight is the top New Year’s resolution for many people (Dorsett, 2010), we considered the beginning of the calendar year to be the perfect time to conduct the study. Before the study began, the participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire that collected some general information and to choose among four time slots for their first meeting. This choice, unbeknownst to the participant, also assigned her to either the treatment (model cue) or the control (dieting-related cue) condition. Using the participants’ answers to the online questionnaire, we compared the participants in the two conditions with respect to how many kilos they wanted to lose and their motivation to lose weight. None of the results indicated any significant differences between the two groups (all Fs < 1).

The weight loss program spanned one week. The available time slots allowed the participants to participate in meetings at four different times during the day. Each meeting followed a strict procedure: The participants were informed that many women want to lose weight but that they unfortunately often use extreme diets, pills, or medicines that may be effective in the short term but result in the so-called yo-yo effect in the long run. The researcher explained that in addition to limiting food intake, it was important for them to monitor their food consumption. Therefore, each participant received an eating diary and was asked to write down, for one week, everything she ate and drank. These diaries were created in cooperation with a renowned health center (Infraaligne®) that helps people lose weight. As we noted, half of the diaries featured a thin model on the cover, with pictures of the measuring tape on the pages, whereas the other half showed the neutral, dieting-related picture on the cover and every note page. An instruction manual explained how the participants should complete their diary and highlighted the importance of taking the diary with them and noting their consumption right away, including everything they ate or drank, without exceptions. At the end of the first session, the participants were weighed and received their eating diaries. They recorded their current weight and desired weight on the first page of the diary, and they were informed that they would be weighed again one week later. The researcher asked them to wear the same clothes for the second meeting to ensure that weight differences could not be attributed to lighter or heavier clothes. The participants also received a phone number that they could call any time if they had any questions. Within the period of the study, we sent them two e-mails and called them once to confirm that they were writing down everything they ate and drank.

The second meeting took place exactly one week later. The participants first completed a questionnaire that we designed to investigate their perceived goal attainability (“I am able to work effectively toward my long-term goal”), motivation to write in their diary (“I was very motivated to write in my eating diary”), and self-esteem regarding their appearance (e.g., “I am dissatisfied with my weight” from the Appearance Self-Esteem Scale, Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The items were measured on seven-point agree–disagree Likert scales. Then, the participants assigned a grade to their performance with respect to their goals during the weight loss program (1–10, 10 being very good). Finally, each participant was weighed again, and this weight was recorded on the last page of the diary.
3.3. Results

Overall, the participants were highly compliant with their diary entries. Six participants did not seem to take the weight loss program seriously and wrote only sporadically in their diaries; we excluded them from the analysis. All of the other participants followed the rules explained in the manual and indicated that they carefully noted their consumption.

3.3.1. Perceived attainability

We assessed whether the treatment and control participants differed in their perception of goal attainability. The analysis revealed a significant difference (F(1,46) = 6.29, p < .05) between the control participants (M = 5.08, SD = 1.50) and the treatment participants (M = 4.08, SD = 1.25). The participants exposed to the thin ideal were less confident than the participants in the control condition that they would be able to attain their goal. This finding is in line with our argument that exposure to thin models causes the goal to be perceived as more difficult to attain. However, the question remained as to whether this perception motivated or demotivated them to work toward their dieting goals.

3.3.2. Goal success

By adopting a broader time span, we were able to investigate the participants’ actual weight loss, which should have signaled their level of motivation to work toward their dieting goals. We subtracted the weight measured at the end of the week from the initial weight measured at the beginning of the study. To express the difference in weight not in absolute terms but in relation to participants’ initial body weight, we divided the difference by the initial body weight. The comparison of the control participants (M = 87, SD = 1.08) with the treatment participants (M = -23, SD = 2.11) revealed a significant difference (F(1,46) = 5.24, p < .05). Specifically, the participants in the control condition managed to lose weight, whereas those in the treatment condition were less successful in achieving their goal and even gained a slight amount of weight. From these results, we were able to infer that the participants exposed to the thin ideal consumed more food than the participants in the control condition.

Because snacking (both too much and too often) contributes substantially to weight gain (Science Daily, 2000), we compared the diaries of members of the control and treatment conditions based on the number of unhealthy snacks (e.g., chocolate, chips, cake, donuts) they consumed. We defined a snack as anything eaten between meals or after dinner. The participants in the treatment condition ate significantly more snacks (M = 10.45, SD = 9.03) than the participants in the control condition (M = 5.91, SD = 4.47; F(1,46) = 4.89, p < .05). We acknowledge, however, that this finding does not necessarily indicate that they consumed more calories because the snack count did not include calorie information.

Thus, we conducted further analyses to compare the number of calories in the unhealthy snacks the participants consumed. Three independent judges checked the number of calories in each snack listed in the diaries and calculated the total number of calories consumed over the week. The participants in the treatment condition (M = 1284.75, SD = 1023.15) consumed significantly more calories (F(1,46) = 4.92, p < .05) more calories than those in the control condition (M = 754.15, SD = 571.08), which explains why they gained weight. Thus, the weight loss program that showed them a picture of a very thin model did not help them decrease the discrepancy between their actual weight and their desired weight but instead increased it even more.

The question that arises is whether the consumption of calories was different from the outset or whether this difference appeared over the one-week period. Accordingly, we compared the amount of calories that the participants in the treatment condition consumed in the beginning (days 1 and 2) and at the end (days 7 and 8) of the week to the amount consumed by the participants in the control condition. We found no significant difference during the initial days of the program; the participants in the treatment condition consumed snacks containing 122 cal on average (SD = 199.19), and the participants in the control condition consumed snacks containing approximately 88 cal (SD = 134.19; F < 1). However, we uncovered a significant difference at the end of the week: the control condition participants consumed an average of 60 cal (SD = 111.13), whereas the treatment condition participants consumed an average of 174 cal (SD = 205.14; F(1,46) = 6.04, p < .05). Although this finding is surprising, considering that the participants were trying to lose weight, it is in line with our finding that they perceived the dieting goal as less attainable. Because expectations for the eventual attainment of a particular goal can determine whether people persist or disengage (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998), and because the treatment condition caused the goal of losing weight appear unattainable, the participants considered it reasonable to stop putting effort into their goal of losing weight.

3.3.3. Self-evaluation

To assess whether the participants exposed to the thin model, who performed significantly worse than members of the control condition, were aware of their bad performance, we compared the conditions with respect to the grade that participants assigned themselves. The participants in the treatment (M = 7.25, SD = 1.42) and control (M = 7.21, SD = 1.95) conditions assigned almost identical grades to themselves (F(1,46) = .007, p = .93). That is, the participants exposed to the thin model did not realize that the model cue negatively influenced their eating behavior. This is in line with existing studies on goal activation (Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, & Tanner, 2008), which found that situational cues influence goal-consistent or goal-inconsistent behavior without the subjects’ awareness. This finding is striking: were participants in the two conditions really pursuing the same goal throughout the week? We might argue that the participants exposed to the thin model simply revised their goal downward when they perceived that their initial target was not attainable. The questionnaire that the participants completed at the end of the study included a question that explicitly asked whether they had changed their goal weight; only three respondents indicated that they revised their goal (they revised it downward). Thus, the participants in the treatment condition did not consciously revise their goal and assess their performance according to a newer, more attainable target.

3.4. Discussion

The results of Study 1 reveal that repeated exposure to a thin model, rather than a dieting-related cue, triggers perceptions that a weight loss goal is unattainable. Existing studies similarly demonstrate that people are more confident about attaining goals that require less work to complete (e.g., Tubbs et al., 1993). An extremely thin model represents a desired end state that is distant from the current self. The large discrepancy between the actual self and the thin model then emphasizes the significant effort required to achieve the desired ideal, which causes people to engage in goal-inconsistent behavior (i.e., consuming unhealthy snacks) and makes them less successful in losing weight.

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1 We asked three independent judges to count the number of snacks consumed by each participant. The judges’ results were all highly correlated (r = .846, r = .745, r = .001). Consequently, we added the scores and calculated the average.

2 To determine the number of calories in each snack, the judges used the following web pages: www.caloriecount.com, www.dietbites.com, and www.livestrong.com. Their results were highly correlated (r = .856, p < .001), so we used the average for our analysis.

3 For this analysis, we relied on data from one coder; the other two were responsible only for providing overall numbers.
Accordingly, Study 1 provides evidence in support of our prediction I: being confronted with a thin model prompts dieters to disengage from the goal of losing weight. These findings run counter to the account provided by Sela and Shiv (2009), who argue that model cues encourage people to reach their goal by representing a distant desired end state (prediction II). The significant discrepancy between the dieter’s actual self and the thin model might explain why our findings support prediction I: because the distant model cue appears out of reach, the sense of unattainability is likely to trigger loss of motivation in persisting with one’s goal. By contrast, prediction II might hold for distant goals that still seem attainable. In Study 2, we assessed the assumption that it is the perceived unattainability of the goal that is responsible for the negative effect of exposure on the treatment participants’ success in the program.

4. Study 2

For this study, we specifically controlled for model thinness: the treatment condition featured a very thin model (different from the one used in Study 1), whereas the control condition included the same model, adjusted to appear normal in size. We used Photoshop® tools to alter some body parts (i.e., arms, belly, legs, and face) of the thin model so that the model looked normal rather than extremely thin. Thus, we could test whether it was exposure to a model as such or only exposure to an unrealistically thin model that triggered the perception of an unattainable goal and dampened motivation.

The findings from Study 1 also suggest that perceived attainability determines whether people engage in goal-consistent behavior that pushes them toward their desired end state. Following this reasoning, we might have expected that perceived attainability would mediate the effect of exposure to the thin model on the participants’ weight loss, even though our mediation tests revealed no significant effect. Our measure of attainability (“I am able to work effectively toward my long-term goal”) in Study 1 was rather broad and did not explicitly assess the perceived difficulty of losing weight. Therefore, for Study 2, we measured attainability more precisely (“It is unrealistic for me to expect to reach my goal of losing weight”) to determine the potential for mediation.

Our experimental design for Study 2 also helped us address a possible alternative explanation for the Study 1 results: being presented with a thin model might have evoked an outcome focus, whereas the dieting-related cue (i.e., measuring tape) might have activated a process focus. Existing studies indicate that a process focus results in different levels of performance than an outcome focus. Gollwitzer and Brandstätter (1993) show that people complete difficult goals approximately three times more often when they adopted an implementation intention (“I intend to perform goal directed behavior when I encounter situation z”) rather than merely goal intentions (“I intend to achieve x”). Similarly, Pham and Taylor (1999) demonstrate that students study more and earn better grades when they focus on processes rather than outcomes. Hence, the process focus stimulated by the measuring tape in the Study 1 control condition may have driven participants more effectively toward the goal of losing weight than did the outcome focus prompted by the thin model. If we could replicate our findings when both conditions featured images of the same model that differed only in the thinness, we could rule out this explanation.

Finally, we explicitly asked the Study 1 participants to monitor their food consumption behavior. The strict monitoring they experienced might have made them more aware of their consumption behavior. Thus, in Study 2, we did not mention that the diaries had to be handed in but rather left the participants with the impression that the diaries would be only for their personal use. We also did not call or e-mail them during the week; we only indicated that they could contact us with any questions or problems.

4.1. Participants

As with Study 1, we sent an e-mail to female undergraduates and explained that we wanted to recruit female students who wanted to lose weight to participate in a one-week weight loss program, for which they would receive 50€. As a first requirement for participation, they had to complete an online questionnaire, which we used to prescreen participants with respect to their current weight and dieting intentions. We recruited 42 female undergraduate students who expressed a wish to lose weight. The online questionnaire showed that they are 20.98 years of age on average (SD=1.41), that they wanted to lose an average of 4.82 kg (SD=4.61), and that they had an average BMI of 22.5 (SD=3.94), which lies at the upper boundary of the normal and healthy BMI range.

4.2. Method

We conducted this weight loss program during the last week of November; the study solicitation communicated that we were looking for students who wanted to shape up for the holiday season by losing some weight. Before the actual study began, the participants completed the same online questionnaire that was used in Study 1 to provide general information and choose a time slot, which assigned them randomly to the treatment (thin model cue) or control (normal model cue) condition. We again used their answers to the online questionnaire to compare the two groups with regard to how many kilos they wanted to lose and their motivation; neither analysis showed any significant differences (all Fs<1).

The weight loss program lasted one week, and each meeting followed the same procedure as described for Study 1. However, we did not stress explicitly that it was important for the participants to keep a precise record of their food consumption. After the introduction to the study, all of the participants received an eating diary. In the treatment condition, they received a diary that featured the thin model, whereas in the control condition, they saw a slightly larger version of the same model.

A pretest (N=35) confirmed that the thin model (M=5.8, SD=1.38) was perceived as significantly thinner than the normal model (M=4.8, SD=1.50; F(1,56)=51.4; p<.005). However, the pretest revealed no significant difference between the attractiveness ratings of the thin model (M=5.46, SD=.145) and those of the normal model (M=5.70, SD=1.37; F(1,56)=44; p=.05). The pretest participants also did not indicate any differences in how much they desired to look like either the thin model (M=4.33, SD=1.62) or the normal model (M=4.23, SD=1.50; F(1,56)=.052, p>.05).

The participants were weighed at the end of the first session, and their current and desired weight was recorded on the first page of their diaries. Exactly one week later, the second meeting took place, during which we measured their perceived goal attainability (“It is unrealistic for me to expect to reach my goal of losing weight”) explicitly to explore its potential mediating effect. Finally, at the end of the session, each participant was weighed, and her weight was recorded on the last page of the diary.

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Perceived attainability

We assessed whether the participants in the two conditions differed in their perception of how attainable the goal was; this analysis revealed a marginally significant difference (F(1,40)=63.87, p<.06) between the control condition participants (M=2.17, SD=.86) and the treatment condition participants (M=3.04, SD=1.73). The participants exposed to the thin model were less confident than the participants who were confronted with the normal model with regard to their ability to attain their goal.
4.3.2. Goal success

In line with Study 1, we examined the participants’ success in achieving their goal to lose weight. We subtracted their weight at the end of the week from their initial weight, then divided the difference by their initial body weight. A comparison of the control (M=0.13, SD=0.09) and treatment (M=0.03, SD=0.13) condition participants showed a significant difference (F(1, 40)=6.56, p<.05). The participants in the control condition managed to lose weight, but the participants in the treatment condition were not as successful in losing weight.

4.3.3. Mediation analysis

As indicated, we intended to test whether perceived attainability mediated the effect of our manipulation on goal success. Following Zhao, John, Lynch, and Chen (2010), we applied a bootstrap test to establish mediation. The results revealed a positive and significant mean indirect effect (a×b=0.0022), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero (0.0051 to 0.0001).

4.4. Discussion

The results from our second weight loss program study consistently revealed that dieters exposed to a thin model did not succeed in losing weight, whereas those exposed to a normal-sized model were able to do so. These results complement and advance the findings from Study 1 in four major ways. First, they demonstrate that it is not exposure to a model as such that causes dieters to be less successful in attaining their goal but rather being confronted with a very thin model. Second, the perceived attainability of the dieting goal drives the effect; being exposed to a thin model decreases the perceived attainability of the desired end state and thereby fosters disengagement from the goal. Measuring perceived attainability more directly, as in Study 1, helped establish perceived attainability as the underlying mechanism. Third, the Study 1 results were replicated even though we did not monitor the participants as closely as we did in the previous study, which confirms the robustness of the mediating effect of perceived attainability. Even if the participants did not worry that their diary entries would be checked, the same effects emerged in terms of goal success. However, because we did not state explicitly that the diaries were part of the study, we could not track the effect of exposure to the model cues on actual food consumption, as we did in Study 1. Fourth, using a different model generalized our findings because it showed that it was not the appearance of the model but rather the perception of her thinness that had a negative effect on the dieters’ motivation to lose weight.

5. General discussion

Existing studies have repeatedly demonstrated that exposure to thin models influences dieters’ self-esteem, motivation to diet, and eating behavior, though only by testing single exposures followed by immediate assessments of motivational and behavioral consequences. We extended this research stream by showing that it is important to explore the consequences of exposure to thin model cues over time. In line with existing studies, we have offered two contradictory predictions about the effects of constant exposure to a thin model on people’s commitment to attaining a thinner self. The findings of two separate weight loss program studies provide support for prediction I: repeated exposure to a thin model fosters disengagement from the goal. Specifically, in Study 1, we showed that dieters exposed to a thin model ate more unhealthy snacks than dieters exposed to a neutral dieting-related cue. This not only prevented them from getting closer to their goal of losing weight but even caused them to gain weight. In Study 2, we complemented and advanced these findings by showing that it was specifically exposure to a very thin model that triggered the perception of the goal as unattainable. The participants exposed to a very thin model perceived their weight loss goal as less attainable than the participants exposed to a normal model and therefore did not manage to lose weight. By contrast, their counterparts who were exposed to a normal model came closer to attaining their desired weight.

These findings extend previous studies on exposures to thin models in at least three important ways. First, existing studies rely predominantly on shifts in self-esteem to explain the consequences of these exposures on behavioral outcomes. We adopt a goal perspective and thereby highlight that exposure to a very thin model changes the dieter’s belief about the very attainability of a thinner self. Our findings reveal that the perception that a goal is unattainable demotivates dieters from investing effort in achieving the goal and causes them to disengage from the goal. Similarly, existing studies on goal-related behavior demonstrate that low expectancies of attainability cause people to recognize that their continued investments of time and effort are unlikely to pay off and thus to eventually give up on that particular goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Although the omnipresence of thin models in contemporary marketing and media fosters desires for a thinner self, it simultaneously hampers the search for an ideal identity. That is, women adopt the thin ideal but also recognize it as difficult to attain, so they disengage from weight loss goals. Self-identity studies also suggest that people can build a stock of knowledge about themselves and develop multiple self-schemata (Markus, 1977), perhaps by thinking of their recent experiences of success or failure and the implications of those experiences for future possibilities (Baumeister, 2010). We contribute to these studies by showing that exposure to thin models alters the importance that people attach to some self-schemata and to the actions needed to attain this ideal self. In Study 1, for example, the participants in the control condition (M=5.33) reported higher commitment to their dieting goals than the participants in the treatment condition (M=4.52; F(1, 46)=4.26, p<.05). The latter engaged in more goal-inconsistent behavior (i.e., eating unhealthy snacks) after repeated exposures to a thin model, which implies that constant confrontation with an ideal self decreases people’s motivation to achieve it.

Second, unlike existing studies, we investigated the effect of repeated exposures to thin model cues over a longer time span. Goals such as losing weight cannot be achieved immediately, so our tests of the effect of exposure to thin models on motivation to lose weight are more realistic. The longer time span enabled us to investigate the exposures’ effects on actual weight fluctuation and to reveal the surprising finding that repeated exposures to thin models while dieting decreases dieters’ success. Our study context is realistic (i.e., normal to moderately heavy women exposed to very thin model cues), and our findings imply that the prevalence of extremely thin model images in consumer culture is contributing to rising obesity rates. In this sense, our results add to the current debate regarding obesity and its causes (e.g., Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010), with important consequences for companies, policy makers, and legislative bodies. For example, being exposed to thin images in shows such as America’s Top Model, commercials for diet-related products, and women’s magazines makes it even harder for dieters to reach their ideal identities. In light of this finding, policy makers might consider imposing boundaries on how thin models depicted in these settings should be.

Our study is also realistic because consumers are frequently exposed to thin model cues. For example, a female consumer with a weight loss goal is likely to confront a thin model on the packaging of her low-fat breakfast cereal, a multitude of very thin models as she reads a magazine during her lunch break, and more very thin models as she watches TV while preparing her dinner. Our study design, in which participants recorded their food consumption in a diary every time they ate something, thus resembles reality in that participants were repeatedly exposed to the thin model cue both before and after their food consumption.
Third, we contribute to studies on the influence of exposure to thin models by highlighting that exposure results in overeating outside a laboratory setting. Contrary to what one might expect, dieters do not compensate for indulging (Dhar & Simonson, 1999; Novomsky & Dhar, 2005) due to their exposure to thin models by eating less in subsequent consumption situations but rather seem to keep eating, as Study 1 showed. These results may imply a “what the hell effect” (Cochrane & Tesser, 1996), such that increased food intake resulting from exposure to a thin model cue (Mills et al., 2002) gets interpreted by dieters as an indication of absolute failure. Then, re-exposure to the thin model when writing in the diary may make this initial lack of progress more salient and foster defeatist thinking, licensing the dieters to indulge further. This explanation is consistent with studies demonstrating that overly difficult goals are counterproductive (Soman & Cheema, 2004): if strivers fail, they suffer demotivation and poorer performance than people who never considered the goal. In our treatment conditions, the participants might have interpreted their increased food intake as a failure to achieve their goal, which reduced their commitment to it. Being confronted with an extremely thin model does not motivate individuals (prediction II) but rather fosters disengagement from the goal.

As with all studies, the present study needs to be interpreted in the context of its limitations. First, the attractive model on the diary cover in Study 1 could have increased the participants’ motivation to write in their diary, such that the treatment condition participants provided more detailed, explicit descriptions of how much and what they consumed. However, this alternative reasoning cannot explain the difference in weight loss/gain or the fact that we did not find a difference in the participants’ motivation to write in their diary. Second, Mills et al. (2002) show that restrained eaters experience a self-esteem boost after being exposed to thin media images, so perhaps participants in the treatment condition in Study 1 considered themselves more attractive after being exposed to the thin model and no longer experienced a need to lose weight. This alternative account could explain the decreased commitment to dieting goals; however, the comparison of the two groups of participants based on their self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) showed no significant difference. We assume that this deviation from extant studies reflects the longitudinal nature of our study: exposure to a thin media image might boost dieters’ self-esteem immediately, but there seems to be no long-term influence.

Finally, our study suggests several directions for further research. For example, self-identity literature has shown that recent experiences of success or failure help people update their self-views (Baumeister, 2010). Failing to inhibit food intake might highlight the difficulty of reaching a thin ideal and cause people to look for alternative ideals to boost their self-image (Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007). Further studies should investigate such compensatory mechanisms and explore whether people might try to compensate for their lack of motivation to lose weight by, for example, studying harders.

Further research could also explore the consequences of our present findings for marketers and companies that advertise dieting or low-fat products using thin models. Consider, for example, a dieter who consumes a low-fat product featuring a thin model on the cover: does she attribute her lack of success in attaining her weight loss goal to the product and thus refrain from purchasing it again? Our study suggests that advertising campaigns or package designs that feature thin models might be counterproductive and hamper weight loss success and could thus foster dissatisfaction with the product.

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Bolstering and restoring feelings of competence via the IKEA effect

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A B S T R A C T

We examine the underlying process behind the IKEA effect, which is defined as consumers’ willingness to pay more for self-created products than for identical products made by others, and explore the factors that influence both consumers’ willingness to engage in self-creation and the utility that they derive from such activities. We propose that creating products fulfills consumers’ psychological need to signal competence to themselves and to others, and that feelings of competence associated with self-created products lead to their increased valuation. We demonstrate that the feelings of competence that arise from assembling products mediate their increased value (Experiment 1), that affirming consumers’ sense of self decreases the value they derive from their creations (Experiment 2), and that threatening consumers’ sense of self increases their propensity to make things themselves (Experiments 3A and 3B).

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1. Introduction

A multitude of companies have emerged that allow consumers to create and design their own products, such as t-shirts, coffee mugs and ties. LEGO has a large and profitable online community, where adult fans of LEGO can generate and submit their own designs. Local Motors even offers the unique experience of being involved in the assembly of one’s own automobile. This trend is also prevalent on new media channels, where people seem to be more interested in creating and sharing their own amateur videos than consuming professionally produced content. Consumers even enjoy repurposing products beyond their original designs; for example, IKEAhackers.net provides how-to guides on reconfiguring standard IKEA products, such as bookshelves, for less-standard uses, such as artsy hamster cages. In short, consumers increasingly act as co-creators of goods rather than passive recipients of them (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000; 2002; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Why has the co-creation of products become so popular among consumers?

Functional fit is one of the most obvious benefits of co-creation. When consumers are involved in the production of a good and can customize it to their tastes, the good is more likely to meet their needs (Dellaert & Stremersch, 2005; Franke, Keinz, & Steger, 2009; Franke & Pillier, 2004; Randall, Terwiesch, & Ulrich, 2007; Schreier, 2006; Simonson, 2005). Additionally, consumers gain utility from truly unique goods, which often result from co-creation (Franke & Schreier, 2008; Lynn & Harris, 1997; Michel, Kreuzer, Kuhn, Stringfellow, & Schumann, 2009). Finally, customers may derive utility from participating in the design process because they find it to be enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dahl & Moreau, 2007; Dellaert & Stremersch, 2005; Franke & Schreier, 2010).

Although the above-mentioned factors account for some of the benefits of co-creation, recent research has shown that, even after controlling for these factors, consumers overvalue their own creations (Franke, Schreier, & Kaiser, 2010; Norton, Mochon, & Ariely, 2012). In one experiment, participants were willing to pay significantly more for an IKEA storage box that they assembled than for an identical box assembled by someone else. This effect, labeled the “IKEA effect,” shows that people place more value on their own creations, even if they are mundane products that are not unique, customized, or fun to build (Norton et al., 2012). Why is it that customers value their own creations more highly than identical products built by others? Furthermore, what conditions lead people to seek out the opportunity to create products, and what are the factors that influence the utility obtained from self-creation?

We suggest that the allure of self-created products stems partly from their role in fulfilling consumers’ desire to signal a competent identity to themselves and to others. By building things themselves, people both control and shape their environments, thereby demonstrating their competence to themselves and to others. Indeed, Dahl and Moreau (2007) found that “feelings of competence” were the most commonly mentioned motivation for engaging in creative tasks. Therefore, we propose that the competence consumers associate with self-created products drives the value they attach to their creations. Consequently, consumers will be relatively more attracted to opportunities to create products when their feelings of competence have been threatened, and derive relatively less utility from creating products when their sense of competence has already been affirmed.
1.1. Signaling identities to the self and to others

Consumers learn about their identity from their own actions (Ariely & Norton, 2008; Bem, 1972), and prefer to act consistently with that identity because behavior that confirms their identity creates utility (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; LeBoeuf, Shafir, & Bayuk, 2010). Recent research has demonstrated that consumers not only behave in accordance with existing identities, but also actively use their behavior to send “evidence” to themselves that they possess desired identities (Benabou & Tirole, 2011; Boden & Prelec, 2003; Gneezy, Imas, Nelson, Brown, & Norton, 2012). What important signal about identity does creating products send to the self? A large body of literature demonstrates a fundamental human need for effectance, the ability to successfully produce desired outcomes in one’s environment. One of the means by which people achieve effectance is by affecting and controlling objects and possessions (Bandura, 1977; Belk, 1988; Furby, 1991; White, 1959). Therefore, self-created products can be used to signal a competent identity to the self.

In addition, completed products can signal a competent identity to others. Indeed, consumers actively use products to signal their identities to others (Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; Wernerfelt, 1990) and use particular products, such as feature-rich electronic products, to signal their competence (Thompson & Norton, 2011). Therefore, we predict that the IKEA effect is driven by feelings of competence that are associated with self-created products. Self-created products function as signals of competence to the self and to others, leading to improved evaluations of these products and to a greater willingness to pay to possess them. Indeed, the loss of possessions can deprive people of the sense of self that is attached to those objects (Belk, 1988).

We provide initial support for this argument by examining whether feelings of competence associated with self-created products, which we operationalize as consumers’ feelings of pride about their creations, mediate the IKEA effect. Pride is closely linked to experiences of success and failure across a variety of tasks that involve self-efficacy and competence, from taking math tests to winning sporting events. Pride is also strongly linked to consumers’ evaluations of their own identity (Buss, 2001; Lazarus, 1991; Tracy & Robins, 2004a; Weiner, 1985, 1986; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979). Research shows that participants use words such as “accomplished” when asked to describe feelings of pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007), and that pride is associated with dominance among mammals (Tracy & Robins, 2004b), which is further evidence that pride is closely linked to feelings of success and competence. “Feelings of accomplishment,” a construct similar to pride, mediates the impact of successfully designing hedonic products (e.g., t-shirts) on consumers’ increased willingness to pay (Franke et al., 2010). Therefore, we predict that feelings of competence, measured by feelings of pride, similarly drive consumers’ increased willingness to pay for self-created products. However, in contrast to previous research and consistent with research suggesting that pride is associated with successful completion of both boring tests and exciting competitions, we predict that pride drives consumers’ increased willingness to pay even when participants create mundane products (e.g., IKEA storage boxes).

In addition to measuring feelings of competence associated with self-created products, we test our hypotheses by directly manipulating participants’ need to signal competence and examining the consequences of these manipulations on the value derived from self-creation. Self-affirmation theory argues that people strive to keep a positive view of the self (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) and suggests that people use a “fluid compensation” procedure, whereby affirming one important value to the self can temporarily reduce the weight placed on a different value (Steele, 1988). Therefore, if the IKEA effect is driven by the ability of self-created products to signal a valued identity, this effect should be reduced or eliminated if participants are first allowed to affirm the self. Conversely, threatening people’s sense of competence should increase the value they derive from self-creation and increase their propensity to engage in such activities. Indeed, affirming the self has been shown to reduce the likelihood of choosing products that signal important components of the self, whereas threatening the self has been shown to have the opposite effect (e.g., Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Townsend & Sood, 2012).

1.2. Overview of the studies

We present a series of experiments in which we both manipulate and measure feelings of competence associated with self-created products. In Experiment 1, we examine whether feelings of pride associated with one’s creation mediate the effect of self-creation on willingness to pay. In addition, we rule out a mood-based explanation for the effect. In Experiment 2, we provide additional evidence to support our hypotheses, not only by measuring feelings of competence associated with self-created products, but also by manipulating the need to signal competence. If our hypotheses are correct, participants who have affirmed their identity and do not require further boosts to their sense of competence will receive less benefit from self-created products and, consequently, the IKEA effect will be absent among these participants.

Finally, in Experiments 3A and 3B, we use a different methodology to demonstrate the importance of feelings of competence for self-assembly and co-creation. We first shake participants’ sense of competence in one domain and then measure whether this manipulation increases their propensity to engage in self-creation. If people use self-created products to signal competence, then they may be more willing to engage in co-creation when their feelings of competence have been threatened. Taken together, these experiments provide converging evidence for the proposition that people value self-created products because of their ability to signal competence to themselves and to others.

2. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we examine whether the increased value of self-created products is driven by feelings of competence. In this study, participants either build a product or are given a finished product that they are asked to examine. We then elicit participants’ willingness to pay for the product, the feelings of competence associated with the product, and participants’ overall mood. Consistent with previous research (Franke et al., 2010; Norton et al., 2012), we predict that participants are willing to pay more for the same product if they create it themselves. Importantly, we predict that this effect is mediated by feelings of competence (i.e., pride) associated with the product.

We also distinguish our competence-based account from a mood-based account (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), in which participants’ positive moods, related to successfully creating a product, might directly lead to their increased willingness to pay for the product. Consistent with previous research on task success and mood (e.g., Weiner et al., 1979), we predict that successful self-creation improves consumers’ moods. However, we predict that mood alone does not mediate the effect of self-creation on willingness to pay, but that pride associated with the product acts as a mediator both for increased willingness to pay and elevated mood.

2.1. Method

Participants (N = 79; 33 male) were paid $5 to complete the experiment. We excluded four participants because three failed to answer all of the questions and one was an extreme outlier (more than 3 SDs from the mean on the willingness to pay measure).

We randomly assigned some participants to a group of “builders,” who assembled a LEGO car. These participants were given the parts and instructions that come with the product to assemble the car. The other participants, the “non-builders,” were given the car already assembled and were asked to examine it. We next solicited their
reservation price by asking them to bid on the car. We told participants that we would draw a random price from an unknown distribution. If participants’ bids were equal to or above the random price, they would pay us the random price and take their LEGO car home, but if their bid was below the random price, they would not purchase their LEGO car. This technique is an incentive compatible value elicitation method and is a variant of the Becker, DeGroot, and Marschak (1964) procedure. Note that participants were not given the opportunity to customize this product; thus, participants in both conditions were effectively bidding on the same product.

Participants answered two questions that were designed to measure feelings of competence associated with the product they created. Specifically, participants were asked to rate, on 7-point scales, the extent to which they felt proud of the product they created (Frankle et al., 2010) and the extent to which they planned to show off their product to other people. We averaged these two measures to create a composite measure of competence associated with one’s product ($r = .33, p < .01$). Finally, participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), indicating the extent to which they felt a variety of positive (e.g., happy) and negative (e.g., upset) affective states based on 5-point scales (1: not at all; 5: extremely). We averaged items from the PANAS to form separate indices of participants’ positive and negative affect (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1999).

2.2. Results and discussion

We found that builders were willing to pay significantly more for their cars ($M = $1.20, $SD = 1.35$) than non-builders ($M = $0.37, $SD = .76$; $t(73) = 2.44, p < .05$). Although both groups were given the chance to buy the same product, those who perceived themselves as creators of the product imbued it with significantly more value, despite the fact that non-builders could easily have disassembled and reassembled their cars.

We next examined the competence measure to test the underlying mechanism of the IKEA effect. As predicted, feelings of competence were higher for builders ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.48$) than for non-builders ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.34$; $t(73) = 4.85, p < .001$; Table 1). More importantly, feelings of competence were significantly related to participants’ willingness to pay ($r = .36, p < .01$). Therefore, we examined whether competence mediated the effect of self-creation on willingness to pay (Baron & Kenny, 1986). While the build condition was a significant predictor of willingness to pay when entered alone into the regression ($B = .62, SE = .26$; $t(73) = 2.44, p < .05$), this effect became non-significant when competence was also included in the model ($B = .29, SE = .28$; $t(72) = 1.02, p = .30$), whereas the mediating effect of competence remained significant ($B = .21, SE = .09$; $t(72) = 2.35, p < .05$). Thus, feelings of competence associated with the product significantly mediated the effect of the experimental condition on willingness to pay ($Sobel’s Z = 2.08, p < .05$). These results provide initial support for our claim that people are willing to pay more for products that they create because of the feelings of competence that arise from successful self-creation.

We further predicted that feelings of competence associated with creation would elevate the builders’ moods, but that mood itself would not drive the builders’ increased willingness to pay for their products. Builders and non-builders did not differ in negative affect ($r < .1$); however, builders reported more positive affect ($M = 2.80, SD = .73$) than non-builders ($M = 2.30, SD = .91$; $t(73) = 2.61, p = .01$). Moreover, the competence scale was significantly related to participants’ positive affect ($r = .36, p < .001$), and, similar to willingness to pay, feelings of competence significantly mediated the effect of the build condition on their positive affect (Sobel’s $Z = 2.05, p < .05$). Therefore, feelings of competence not only affected participants’ liking of their self-created products, but also their overall happiness. Importantly, the effect of experimental condition on willingness to pay was not driven by participants’ moods. When both variables were entered into the regression equation as potential mediators (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), competence was a significant mediator (Sobel’s $Z = 2.01, p < .05$), but positive mood was not (Sobel’s $Z = .39, p = .70$), thus suggesting, as we predicted, that competence plays the critical role.

3. Experiment 2

The first experiment provides initial support for our theory that self-created products are valued more because of their influence on feelings of competence. In Experiment 2, we test our hypotheses by not only measuring participants’ competence (as in the previous experiment) but also by directly manipulating participants’ need to feel competent, using a self-affirmation manipulation. Self-affirmation theory suggests that people use a “fluid compensation” procedure, whereby affirming one important value reduces the need to affirm another value (Steele, 1988). If the IKEA effect is driven by the impact of self-creation on feelings of competence, the effect should be reduced or eliminated if participants are first allowed to affirm their sense of self in another way. Unlike existing research, in which consumers used more hedonic products to reaffirm the self (e.g., Gao et al., 2009; Townsend & Sood, 2012), in this study we use a mundane product (IKEA storage boxes) to show that ordinary products can also be used to increase consumers’ feelings of competence and that consumers can use a wide range of products to affirm their identities.

3.1. Method

Participants ($N = 135$; 75 male) completed this study to fulfill a requirement for an introductory undergraduate class. We excluded eleven participants who did not complete the self-affirmation task because they failed to rank their values correctly as well as five participants who did not complete all of our dependent measures.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions of a 2 (self-affirmation condition (no affirmation vs. self-affirmation) × 2 build condition (pre-built vs. build) between-subjects design. Participants in this experiment were randomized by experimental session to ensure that they could not see the participants in the other conditions. Following the procedure used by Sherman, Nelson, and Steele (2000), participants were first presented with a list of 11 values that they ranked from most to least important. Next, participants were asked to write an essay about why a particular value was important to them and to describe a time when that value had been particularly important. Participants in the self-affirmation condition were asked to write about the value they ranked as being most important, and participants in the no affirmation condition were asked to write about their ninth-ranked value.

Following the self-affirmation manipulation, participants were presented with an IKEA Kassett storage box. Those in the pre-built condition were presented with a box that was already built and were asked to examine it. Those in the build condition were given the necessary parts and IKEA instructions to assemble the box and were told to assemble it.

Participants were then asked to state the maximum amount that they would be willing to pay for the box on a scale ranging from $0 to $2 in 10 cent increments (we implemented a BDM procedure in

Table 1

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Builders</th>
<th>Non-builders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WTP $</td>
<td>$1.20 (.22)</td>
<td>$0.57 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence scale</td>
<td>4.39 (.24)</td>
<td>2.81 (.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANAS — positive</td>
<td>2.80 (.12)</td>
<td>2.30 (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANAS — negative</td>
<td>1.19 (.06)</td>
<td>1.19 (.05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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keeping with the previous study). All of the participants were paid $2 for completing this task to ensure that they all had money to spend on the box. We used a square root transformation to correct for the skewed distribution of the willingness to pay. Finally, participants completed the competence measures from Experiment 1 (r = .47, p < .001).

3.2. Results and discussion

A between-subjects ANOVA showed no significant main effects for the self-affirmation manipulation (F(1,115) = .44, p = .51) or the build condition (F(1,115) = 1.06, p = .31). Importantly, we observed an interaction effect between these two variables (F(1,115) = 3.90, p = .05; Fig. 1). In the no-affirmation condition, we replicated the standard IKEA effect: builders (M = $0.72, SD = .45) were willing to pay significantly more than non-builders (M = $0.46, SD = .50; t(52) = 1.99, p = .05). The IKEA effect was eliminated for participants in the self-affirmation condition, where there was no significant difference between builders (M = $0.49, SD = .46) and non-builders (M = $0.58, SD = .46; t(63) = .71, p = .48). Therefore, providing participants with an opportunity for self-affirmation eliminated the IKEA effect.

We next examined how the experimental conditions affected participants’ ratings on the competence scale. This analysis showed that the main effect of self-affirmation was not significant (F(1,115) = 1.0, p = .30), but the main effect of the build condition was significant (F(1,115) = 19.8, p < .001). Consistent with the previous experiment, the builders reported higher feelings of competence (M = 2.95, SD = 1.50) than the non-builders (M = 1.94, SD = 1.13). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect (F(1,115) = 5.8, p < .05). Participants in the no-affirmation condition reported higher feelings of competence when they built the box (M = 3.39, SD = 1.62) than when they received it pre-assembled (M = 1.76, SD = 1.01; t(52) = 4.55, p < .001). However, participants who were first given an opportunity to self-affirm their values showed no such effect (M_build = 2.57 vs. M_pre-built = 2.09; t(63) = 1.53, p = .13).

We tested a moderated mediation model to examine whether the indirect effect of competence on willingness to pay depended on self-affirmation (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Replicating the above ANOVA (see Table 2), we found a significant main effect of build condition on the competence mediator (B = 1.63, p < .001), which was qualified by a significant interaction between the build and self-affirmation conditions (B = −1.15, p < .05). Moreover, when the competence mediator was included in the model predicting willingness to pay, the effect of the mediator was significant (B = 1.2, p < .001), whereas the main effect of build condition (B = .07, p = .59) and its interaction with self-affirmation (B = −.21, p = .22) were no longer significant. Consistent with the previous experiment, these results suggest that competence mediated the effect of building on willingness to pay, but that the effect of competence was moderated by the self-affirmation manipulation. Indeed, the analyses revealed a significant conditional indirect effect of the competence mediator in the no-affirmation condition (B = −.19, SE = .07; Z = 2.80, p < .01) and a non-significant conditional indirect effect of the mediator in the self-affirmation condition (B = .06, SE = .04; Z = 1.34, p = .18).

4. Experiment 3A

The previous experiments demonstrate that the IKEA effect is mediated by feelings of competence associated with assembling products. Experiments 3A and 3B provide further support for our theory. We examine whether directly manipulating feelings of competence affects consumers’ propensity to engage in self-creation. Since consumers, in part, value self-created products because these items can bolster feelings of competence, consumers may be more willing to self-create products when their sense of competence is shaken (Gao et al., 2009). In both experiments, we give participants the choice to assemble products or not (see Moreau & Herd, 2010) and examine whether those participants whose confidence has been threatened are more likely to choose products that require assembly.

4.1. Method

Participants (N = 75; 42 male) completed an online survey and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions that manipulated their sense of competence. Participants in the high-competence condition were presented with four easy math problems (e.g., How likely is it that a fair coin that is tossed once will come up heads?). Participants in the low-competence condition were presented with four very difficult math problems (e.g., You have 4 coins. Three of the coins are normal, but one of them is heads on both sides. You pick a coin at random without looking. The coin you pick has heads on one side. What are the odds that if you flip the coin over, the other side will be tails?). All of the questions were presented with four potential answers, and participants were told that they could skip questions if they did not know the answer. Following the competence manipulation, participants were shown a picture of a bookcase from IKEA and were asked: “Imagine that you bought the above bookcase from IKEA. Would you prefer that it came pre-assembled, or would you prefer to assemble it yourself?”

4.2. Results and discussion

We first examined whether our competence manipulation was successful. Participants in the high-competence condition solved on average 92% of the questions correctly, whereas participants in the
low-competence condition solved on average only 22% of the questions correctly — no better than chance.

We next examined whether this manipulation affected participants’ propensity to assemble their own products. As predicted, threatening participants’ feelings of competence increased the likelihood that they chose to assemble their own bookcase (Fig. 2). Only 33% of participants in the high-competence condition preferred to assemble the bookcase, whereas 58% of participants in the low-competence condition preferred to do so ($\chi^2(1) = 4.72, p < .05$).

These results further highlight the critical role that competence plays in the IKEA effect. Feelings of competence not only mediate the IKEA effect, but threatening consumers’ confidence affects their propensity to engage in self-creation. These results also contribute to research about self-affirmation in consumer behavior (e.g., Gao et al., 2009) by demonstrating that consumers can restore their shaken sense of self even through extremely mundane activities, such as building a bookcase.

5. Experiment 3B

In a follow-up experiment, we examine whether we can replicate the effect on choice that we observe in Experiment 3A using a decision that more closely matches one that consumers face in everyday life.

5.1. Method

Participants ($N = 41; 24$ male) completed a short online survey that manipulated their feelings of competence and then were presented with a consumer choice. Participants were first presented with either one of the easy or one of the difficult math problem used in the previous experiment (see the examples above for a description of the exact problems). Following this manipulation, participants were shown two tables and were asked which they preferred. One of the tables was a pre-assembled table from Target. The other table was from IKEA and required assembly. The image of the table corresponding to the IKEA versus the Target table was counterbalanced to control for any preferences for one of the two tables.

5.2. Results and discussion

Ninety-six percent of participants in the high-competence condition correctly answered the math question, whereas 26% of those in the low-competence condition answered the math question correctly. More importantly, participants in the low-competence condition were significantly more likely to choose the IKEA table that required assembly (74%) than those in the high-competence condition (27%; $\chi^2(1) = 8.79, p < .01$). These results further support our claim that feelings of competence play a critical role in the value that people derive from their own creations.

These results also have important practical implications. Despite the benefits of co-creation for firms (e.g., consumers’ willingness to pay more for products they build, lower costs, etc.) and for consumers (e.g., increased feelings of competence after successfully assembling products), consumers are often reluctant to participate in such activities. A different group of consumers were asked ($N = 51$): “In general, what would you be willing to pay more for: products that you buy already assembled, or products that you buy with some assembly required?” Ninety-two percent of respondents said they would pay more for preassembled products, ($\chi^2(1) = 36.26, p < .001$). The results from the previous two experiments suggest that consumer participation in co-creation may be increased by appealing to consumers’ sense of competence and their need to signal that competence to others.

Taken together, Experiments 2, 3A and 3B demonstrate that feelings of competence (the mediator that underlies the IKEA effect) play a critical role in both consumers’ propensity to engage in self-creation (with threats to their competence increasing their desire to build products) and in the benefits consumers reap from self-creation (with affirmation attenuating the positive effects of building).

6. General discussion

Prior research has demonstrated that people are willing to pay more for goods that they create than for identical goods created by someone else (Franke et al., 2010; Norton et al., 2012). We propose that this increase in valuation occurs because of the feelings of competence associated with self-created products. Experiment 1 demonstrates how the competence associated with self-created products mediates consumers’ increased willingness to pay for these products relative to products created by others. Experiments 2, 3A, and 3B manipulate consumers’ need to signal competence to further demonstrate the critical role of competence in the IKEA effect. Affirming consumers’ sense of self causes the self-creation of products to be less rewarding, whereas threatening consumers’ feelings of competence leads them to seek out opportunities to build products to restore their sense of competence. Taken together, these experiments offer evidence regarding the crucial role that competence plays, as both a mediator and a moderator, in creating consumer interest in self-created products and in making their efforts feel rewarding. These results build on prior research that shows that products can be used to affirm the self (e.g., Gao et al., 2009; Townsend & Sood, 2012) by demonstrating that even the most mundane assembling activities that consumers engage in, such as assembling a storage box, can have implications for consumers’ sense of self.

6.1. Signaling to the self vs. others

Our measure of competence synthesizes two constructs: one about personal feelings of pride and another about consumers’ desire to show off their creations to others. Although the two constructs are correlated in each experiment, the relative contribution of these two types of competence likely varies by context. One factor that likely determines which of the two constructs is stronger is the type of product created. The products used in the current paper are less likely to be displayed to others than products that are, by their nature, explicitly designed to be shown off to others (e.g., clothing). Indeed, when people design products meant specifically for display, such as t-shirts and watches, the prospect of showing off these products to others strongly contributes to their value (Franke et al., 2010). Another important factor is the salience of opportunities to display one’s creation to others. During the current experiments, participants were not given such an opportunity. However, because the mere presence of others can increase consumers’ concerns about the impressions they make (Puntoni & Tavassoli, 2007), simply making the social context more salient should increase the impact of the desire to show off products on the magnitude of the IKEA effect. Finally,
the relative strength of these two factors also likely depends on the intended recipient of the created product (Moreau, Bonney, & Herd, 2011). Most of the self-created content created for new media channels (such as YouTube videos) is made specifically to display to others. In these cases, it is likely that the utility associated with one’s creations is heavily dependent on people’s ability to signal their competence to others. Future research is needed to examine the relative contributions of both competence signals to understand when and how people come to value their own creations.

6.2. Co-creation and customer satisfaction

These results have implications both for firms seeking to maximize customer satisfaction and for individuals seeking to increase their life satisfaction. For firms, we note that although our results demonstrate that involving consumers in creation can lead to higher willingness to pay, the effect we document here is a retrodictive phenomenon because participants value the product of their labor more highly after successfully building it. Disrupting consumers’ sense of competence increases consumers’ desire to engage in co-creation, but absent this manipulation, they are very unlikely to assemble their own product. Moreover, involving consumers in co-creation is not without risks. Although consumers may attribute successful co-creation experiences to their own efforts, they may attribute co-creation failures to the firm, which negatively impacts consumers’ perceptions of a firm (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003). Future research should examine the best way to encourage consumers to co-create.

Results from Experiment 1 demonstrate that self-creation leads to increases in positive affect among individuals, suggesting that people may be leaving utility on the table by generally choosing to relax instead of engage in labor. A large body of research highlights the centrality of labor to people’s well-being (Blustein, 2008) and shows that feelings of productivity are important to many people (Hsee, Yang, & Wang, 2010; Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). For example, unemployment has lasting psychological consequences; even when people find new jobs, the adverse impact of past job loss on well-being remains (Feather, 1990; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004). This perspective dovetails with other research suggesting that effortful activities such as exercising (Mocron, Norton, & Ariely, 2008), making time to behave pro-socially toward others (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008), and acquiring life experiences (Van Boven, 2005; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) can lead to lasting changes in people’s well-being (Lubyomisky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Consequently, encouraging people to engage in labor that they would otherwise avoid may lead to increased life satisfaction. Future research is needed to explore this hypothesis.

Finally, the overvaluation of products that occurs as a result of the IKEA effect has broader implications for organizations because overvaluation contributes to two key organizational pitfalls: sunk cost effects (Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Biyalogorsky, Boulding, & Staelin, 2006; Staw, 1981), which can cause managers to continue to devote resources to failing projects they have previously invested in (Biyalogorsky et al., 2006), and the “not invented here” syndrome, in which managers refuse to use perfectly good ideas developed elsewhere in favor of their, sometimes inferior, internally developed ideas. Our results suggest that managers may persist in pursuing failed projects and concepts because they truly believe that their ideas are more valuable; not pursuing their ideas means that money is left on the table and that using a competitor’s ideas would simply be choosing an inferior option. Not surprisingly, highly innovative projects are especially likely to generate over-commitment from managers (Schmidt & Calantone, 1998). While markets may sometimes correct these erroneous overvaluations, the IKEA effect may be resistant to any intervention, suggesting that the “not invented here” syndrome may be here to stay.

References


The referral backfire effect: The identity-threatening nature of referral failure

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A B S T R A C T

The present paper shows that when a person has the experience of giving advice but that advice is not acted upon, there is a reduced openness to external information. We call this the "referral backfire effect". We argue that this referral backfire effect is due to the identity threatening nature of referral failure: the referral backfire effect is attenuated (1) when the sender perceives oneself as having low expertise in the particular domain of referral and (2) upon self-affirmation. Accordingly, implicit egotism is increased after referral failure, reflecting the need to bolster the self against threat. Because referral behavior is considered to be an important predictor of business success, we discuss the implications of our findings for both theory and practice and sketch future research opportunities.

1. Introduction

“Invite your friends to try Omaha Steaks and we'll throw in a dozen free burgers. And for every two friends who try us out, we'll send you a $20 Reward e-Gift Card towards your next purchase of $80 or more.”

This advertising copy shows how Omaha Steaks, a mail order meat company that is recognized as an innovative marketer, tried to reinforce and incentivize the natural inclination of consumers to refer others in line with their own preferences. Imagine an enthusiastic fan of Omaha Steaks participating in this promotion and recommending the service to her friends. Because she will receive a gift card for every two friends that follow her referral, she is able to track the extent to which her referral was successful. However, what happens to the referrer when it becomes clear that almost none of these friends have followed the recommendation? Alternatively, consider the following example: imagine your new colleague asking your advice about the best search system for scientific papers. You recommend your preferred search system. Later on, you notice that your colleague still works with a less functional system. Again, what impact does this revelation have on you when your colleague does not follow your recommendation?

In this paper, we address the question of whether referral failure has any consequences for subsequent behavior of the referrer. Although consumers refer others on a daily basis and are stimulated to do so through company rewards (Ryu & Feick, 2007, Schmitt, Skiera, & Van den Bulte, 2011), we are not aware of any prior research that addresses the effect of referral failure on the referrer. However, as referral outcomes become increasingly transparent in online environments, these outcomes represent an issue of growing importance.

The existing literature indicates that consumption itself can often be considered a non-verbal form of identity-expression (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Reed, 2004; Richins, 1994) and that engaging in referrals makes consumption even more publicly visible (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005; Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Therefore, we propose that referral failure – the situation in which one’s advice is rejected – may in certain circumstances threaten consumers’ identities. Psychology provides ample evidence that identity threats motivate consumers to bolster their self-concept (Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991; Wentura & Greve, 2005). One way to bolster the self-concept is to act in a self-determined way (Blanton & Christie, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Nair, MacDonald, & Levy, 2000). We argue that referral failure invokes a need to make self-determined choices, void of external influence. We call this reluctance to comply with external influences – as triggered by referral failure – the referral backfire effect. Our studies will demonstrate the effect and test the underlying process in terms of identity threat.

Whereas the proposed effect is relevant to many research domains, such as social psychology, organizational behavior, or communications research, it is useful at this point to highlight this work’s contribution to marketing literature, more specifically, in the Word of Mouth (WOM) domain. To the best of our knowledge, research on WOM behavior has focused on the existence and implications of referrals but has never empirically investigated the outcome of
referral behavior on the referrer. Studies on WOM in an offline (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008; Laczniak, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2001) and online environment (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003) have especially focused on identifying and targeting consumers with a larger-than-average impact on the spread of information. Spreading consumer information is not reserved for an elite group of knowledgeable market mavens (Feick & Price, 1987) or influential opinion leaders (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). The ordinary consumer also engages in several conversations about brands and products every day (Keller, 2007), and her joint impact on spreading consumer information is, according to several researchers, of no lesser importance than the impacts of the aforementioned elite (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, & Scott, 2007; Watts & Dodds, 2007). The current project opens a new dimension in WOM research by focusing on the impact of this referral behavior on the sender’s subsequent behavior, rather than on the receiver’s.

2. Referral failure as identity threat

Referral behavior has at least two important features that connect it to consumer identity. Referral behavior reveals information about the adviser’s product preferences and opinions. Because many consumption decisions reflect a consumer’s identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), information about these decisions will also reflect that identity. Additionally, referral behavior subjects this information with all of its potential identity implications to public scrutiny because referral behavior offers the listener the opportunity to ignore or reject the information. Indeed, self-disclosure is perceived to be risky in general (Olivero & Lunt, 2004). In accordance with this conceptual analysis, the literature suggests that one important driver behind referral behavior is the motivation to maintain and enhance a positive self-concept, e.g., to demonstrate to others that one is an intelligent shopper or to reduce anxiety stemming from a negative consumer experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). By conducting in-depth interviews, Dichter (1966) found that 24% of the 352 investigated (positive) referrals were explicitly driven by self-confirmation motives, including confirmation of one’s judgment capacity or asserting status. Additionally, it is not unlikely that a substantial number of the referrals explicitly attributed to other reasons (product-, other-, or message-related reasons; Dichter, 1966), were also partially motivated by self-confirmation. Furthermore, Von Wangenheim (2005) found that switching brands might result in a negative WOM review of the initial choice to self-justify inconsistency demonstrated by the switch. Given that referral behavior is often motivated behavior, referral failure may be painful, which is a conclusion for which Dichter (1966) found some anecdotal support. Specifically, the link between consumption and the self-concept or identity suggests that referral failure may threaten the referrer’s identity.

Identity threat has numerous well-established effects on behavior. For instance, it has been shown that consumers selectively focus on information that bolsters their self-beliefs when their identity is threatened (Dunning et al., 1991; Wentura & Greve, 2005), that they also choose products that support their self-concept (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009), and, finally, that they become more motivated to firmly advocate their threatened self-beliefs (Gal & Rucker, 2010). Because referral failure implicitly questions consumers’ abilities to make adequate consumer decisions, any such failure will subsequently activate the goal to restore this self-belief. Building on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), we argue that reducing reliance on external information during decision-making can restore this self-belief. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) distinguishes between several motivational states, two of which are relevant for our argument. First, a behavior is controlled when others partially control one’s intentional behavior (e.g., when someone buys a product because a salesman is pushy or because he or she hopes it will make them blend in with a reference group). In this state, the actor is subject to external influences. In contrast, a behavior is self-determined when it reflects the self’s true preferences and autonomous decisions (e.g., when someone works hard because they like the work or when a consumer chooses based on her own needs). Only in this latter case can decisions be considered unbiased reflections of the self and relevant for one’s self view and, therefore, true choices (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Based on this distinction found in self-determination theory, we suggest that restoring one’s self-concept can be achieved only when decisions are made autonomously and not when one’s decision is (partly) the result of external influence, as is the case in controlled behavior.

We therefore expect that a goal to restore one’s self-concept as a competent decision maker will lead to a decreased likelihood of complying with external influence. Indeed, existing research mentions that noncompliance is used to defend important self-views (Nail et al., 2000). People even strategically reduce compliance to signal their identity to others (Berger & Heath, 2007) or shape it for themselves (Blanton & Christie, 2003). As a result, we propose that referral failure motivates consumers to discard external influence during their decision-making. We predict that

H1. Referral failure reduces the referrer’s likelihood to comply with external influence when making decisions.

The theoretical model we put forward implies that this hypothesized referral backfire effect (i.e., H1) may be explained by the identity threatening nature of referral failure. Prior research showed that identity threat leads to higher motivation to bolster the self. For example, upon perceiving an identity threat, people show a greater liking for people whose participant number resembles their birthdays (Jones, Pelham, Carvalho, & Mirenberg, 2004), take up more space when putting their signature (Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007), and increase their liking for brands and words resembling their own name (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005; Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002). We will measure the motivation to bolster the self via an implicit egotism measure (Buhrmester, Blanton, & Swann, 2011; Jones et al., 2002). If referral failure is threatening to the self, it should invoke the motivation to bolster the self, which leads to the following hypothesis:

H2. Referral failure increases implicit egotism.

To further investigate the proposed process driving the referral backfire effect, we turn to moderation designs. We will select two distinct factors that are believed to have an attenuating impact on identity threat: first, we focus on consumer knowledge concerning the specific product domain of the referral, and further below, we discuss the moderating role of general self-affirmation. Existing literature indicates that the level of knowledge about a topic is related to the centrality of that topic to the self (Belk, 1988; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). When applied to referrals, this relationship means that the centrality of the referral outcome to the referrer’s identity correlates with the referrer’s level of knowledge in this domain. Furthermore, the personal importance of a specific domain has been shown to affect the level of self-threat (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). For instance, a report describing the link between caffeine use and fibrocystic disease triggers defensive mechanisms only for heavy caffeine consumers for whom the topic is of greater importance (Liberman & Chaiken, 1992). This result indicates that referral failure can occur without identity threat, as long as the referral was made in a domain that is not central to one’s identity. We use knowledge of the domain of referral as a proxy for this centrality. Accordingly, we expect that

H3. The referral backfire effect is stronger for consumers who perceive themselves as more knowledgeable about the product domain than for consumers who do not.
Additionally, self-affirmation theory proposes that people can respond to threats by affirming alternative self-resources unrelated to the identity threat. This "self-affirmation" can be achieved when people reflect on important aspects of their life or engage in an activity that highlights important values, which causes participants to realize that their own self-worth does not depend solely on the aspect of their identity that is threatened and thereby reduces the need for self-bolstering (Steele & Cohen, 2006).

Accordingly, manipulations of self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) have been used successfully to reduce various effects of potential identity threats in different domains (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000; Steele & Liu, 1983). If referral failure leads to avoiding external input because it increases the need to bolster the self-concept, external support for the self should satisfy this need and thereby attenuate the referral backfire effect. Therefore, we propose that

**H4. Self-affirmation will attenuate the referral backfire effect.**

### 3. The present studies

The present studies induce referral failure by means of scenario studies or real decision contexts and measure their effects on subsequent decision-making. In particular, the studies examine the extent to which consumers incorporate external advice in their decisions. In study 1, we demonstrate the referral backfire effect, showing that the awareness that others have not followed the participant’s advice reduces his or her willingness to incorporate unrelated consumer reviews in decision making. In studies 2–4, we replicate this effect via different procedures and further elaborate the role played by identity threat in the referral backfire effect. In study 2, we show that referral failure is self-threatening. In study 3, evidence is provided that this effect of referral failure is attenuated for consumers with low levels of knowledge in the domain of referral. Study 4 shows that the referral backfire effect is also attenuated when the need for self-bolstering is alleviated by an external manipulation of self-affirmation subsequent to referral failure. Thus, studies 3 and 4 illustrate important boundary conditions of the effect: the referral backfire effect only occurs when referral failure is identity-threatening. Furthermore, study 3 shows that the referral backfire effect is independent of the match between domain of the referral and domain of the subsequent product decision.

#### 3.1. Study 1

We had two aims with this study. First, we wanted to show a relation between referral outcome and subsequent compliance with external influence (H1). After manipulating the referral outcome in a first scenario, we measured susceptibility to persuasion by a third party in a second, seemingly unrelated task. Second, we expected that referral failure influences subsequent decision making, whereas referral success does not because consumers nourish positively biased self-concepts: positive feedback regarding one’s self-concept is smoothly incorporated and does not receive considerable attention (Dawson, Gilovich, & Regan, 2002; Dunning, 2007; Jain & Maheswaran, 2000). Therefore, we added a control condition in which no referral was made. We did not expect referral success to influence any dependent measure.

##### 3.1.1. Method

One hundred fifty students at a large European university (50 males and 100 females), aged between 18 and 30, participated in this experiment in exchange for a participation fee.

##### 3.1.1.1. Manipulation of referral outcome. In a first phase, we manipulated referral outcome by means of a scenario. The participants were asked to imagine the following:

“You are the son/daughter of the manager of a small movie theater in your town. This gives you the chance to watch all movies for free and before all the others. Your friends are aware of this and they frequently ask you which movies are worthwhile to see. After a while, you notice that your advice is often or always [seldom or never] followed; they prefer the movies you liked [you did not like].”

In the control condition, the participants received a neutral filler task of similar length.

##### 3.1.1.2. Measurement of compliance with external influences. We adapted a procedure used in Fitzsimons and Lehmann (2004), telling participants that researchers of a food manufacturer were developing a new granola bar, and they were interested in consumer impressions. Subsequently, the participants received the descriptions of four potential granola bar formulations with two different attributes: taste and calories. Attribute values for each of the four formulations for taste (1: poor taste, 10: excellent taste) and number of calories were, respectively: A: 7.5, 125; B: 8, 365; C: 9, 220; D: 6, 150. Formulations A and C are relatively attractive, while formulations B and D are relatively less attractive (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004). Next, the participants received reports from an expert magazine (e-health) that strongly recommended either granola bar A or C (counterbalanced between participants). After receiving this advice, the participants were asked to indicate which of 20 different combinations of three granola bars they would prefer when given the chance to choose three bars (e.g., “A1, B1, C1, D0”; “A2, B1, C0, D0”; “A0, B0, C3, D0”, ... Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004). The participants could either incorporate this external advice and choose the recommended option or ignore the external advice by selecting bars that were not recommended.

##### 3.1.2. Results and discussion

To test whether referral outcome (success, failure, control) had an influence on a participant’s compliance with external influence on his or her choice, we performed an ANOVA with choice of recommended granola bars (0–3, log-transformed) as the dependent variable and the Referral Outcome manipulation as the independent variable. The main effect of the Referral Outcome manipulation was significant ($F(2, 148) = 4.79, p < .01$). The choice of recommended granola bars was lower in the referral failure condition ($M = 28, SE = .025$) than in either the referral success ($M = .36, SE = .025$) ($t(148) = 2.14, p < .05$) or the control conditions ($M = .38, SE = .019$) ($t(148) = 3.10, p < .005$). The difference between the latter two conditions was insignificant ($t(148) = .67, ns.$).

These results imply that experiencing referral failure leads to lower compliance with external influences in a subsequent choice compared to referral success or no referral experience at all. Additionally, the referral success condition did not differ from the control condition without a referral.

#### 3.2. Study 2

In the second study, we wanted to replicate our findings with actual behavior. Moreover, we wanted to test our inference that referral failure is threatening to the self. When referral failure occurred, we expected that a need to bolster the self against this threat would arise. Consequently and in accordance with existing literature about self-threat, we predicted an increased attachment to anything that is self-relevant after referral failure. Therefore, the aim of this second study is twofold: to test whether referral failure leads to increased implicit egoism (H2) and to replicate the referral backfire effect with a different procedure as in study 1.
3.2.1. Method

One hundred sixty seven students at a large European university (84 males and 83 females), aged between 18 and 25, participated in this experiment in exchange for course credit.

The participants were told that the experiment was a test case for a larger project that investigated the viability of a communication network between two consumer labs via the Internet. The participants were further told that the research concerned the fluency of e-communication when the participants saw each other’s picture. To further this cover story, the participants took a picture using a web camera. In reality, there was no interaction partner, and the alleged interaction partner’s behavior was preprogrammed. For the remainder of the description of this study, we use the word “participant” to refer to the actual person participating in the experiment, and the words “interaction partner” for the fictitious, preprogrammed person in the other lab.

The actual experiment consisted of two phases. In each phase, the participants were connected to a different interaction partner. The gender of the interaction partner was counterbalanced between the phases and participant’s gender to neutralize order and gender effects. In each round, the participants were asked to choose six product items (a cell phone, backpack, toothbrush, laptop, ballpoint pen and yogurt), which had to be selected from sets of three options. All 18 products were displayed as a picture. The participants were told that to structure the decision, they would be randomly assigned to either an adviser role – in which they could indicate their preference first – or a decider role – in which they had to make the final choice (for themselves, not for the interaction partner) after the adviser indicated his preference. The participants were further informed that they would be teamed up with a different interaction partner and switch roles in the second round. In reality, all participants were assigned the role of adviser in the first round, during which a manipulation of referral success took place. In the second round, the participants were all assigned to the role of decider, which allowed us to assess the referral backfire effect. In between rounds, we gave every participant the impression that the new interaction partner was not ready yet, and we asked them to complete some filler questions and a poll about which name to choose for the new computer system, which actually included the implicit egotism measure.

3.2.1.1. Manipulation of referral outcome (phase 1). In the control condition, the interaction partner followed the participant’s choice in 5 out of 6 trials. In the Referral Failure condition, the interaction partner followed the participant’s choice in only 1 out of 6 trials. The gender of the interaction partner was counterbalanced across conditions and participant’s gender to neutralize gender effects.

3.2.1.2. Implicit egotism measure. Between phases, we told the participants that we still needed to decide on a name for the new software system. The participants were allowed to indicate by means of a 20-point slider between two possible names how much they preferred one option to another. Importantly, one of the two options was manipulated such that the first three letters of the name for the program were the same as those of the first name of the participant. The suffix of those three letters (“-ano”) and the comparison name (“Valdamo”) were kept constant. Threats to the self should cause a higher preference for the name with the same first letters as the participant’s own first name (Jones et al., 2002). Measuring this preference thus allows us to test whether referral outcome affects implicit egotism.

3.2.1.3. The referral backfire effect. In the second phase, the interaction partner always gave the advice to choose the least attractive product out of the three (determined from pre-testing with 46 participants). We measured referral backfire by the number of times (0–6) the participant did not follow the interaction partner’s advice.

3.2.2. Results and discussion

Two effects were found for participants whose advice was not followed. First, we replicated the referral backfire effect found in study 1. Upon referral failure, the participants were less likely to follow the advice of the interaction partner (M = 2.35, SE = .093) than in the control condition (M = 2.68, SE = .11) (t(165) = 2.28, p = .05).

Second, the participants in the referral failure condition showed more implicit egotism: they preferred the name based on their own name to the control name (M = 10.84, SE = .72) at a higher rate than participants whose advice had previously been followed (M = 8.32, SE = .70) (t(165) = 2.51, p = .05). Additionally, we found these two dependent measures to be significantly correlated (r = -.18, p = .05), further cross-validating the referral backfire effect as an instance of self-bolstering.

3.3. Study 3

In this study, we wanted to replicate and combine our previous results and aimed for two additional contributions. First, we wanted to provide process evidence by showing that the referral backfire effect is suppressed when referral failure does not provide an identity threat. In agreement with existing literature that relates knowledge levels in a domain to centrality in consumers’ self-concepts (Sprott et al., 2009), we used self-perceived knowledge levels in the domain of referral (e.g., movies) as a proxy of the threatening nature of referral failure. We expected that if the sender were unknowledgeable about the domain of the referral, then referral failure would threaten the sender’s identity less and therefore reduce the referral backfire effect compared to when the sender is knowledgeable in the domain of referral. This study effectively provides an important boundary condition for the referral backfire effect.

The second aim of this study is to show that the referral backfire effect is not dependent on the match between the domain of referral and the domain of the subsequent product decision, which agrees with the self-affirmation literature that predicts non-threat specific effects of identity threat. In the previous two studies, we focused on the effect of referral failure on product decisions outside of the domain (across domain compensation). However, because there is no theoretical reason to expect moderation by domain match, this third study includes data from both within and across domain DVS.

3.3.1. Method

One hundred thirty-seven students at a large European university (57 males and 80 females), aged between 18 and 29, participated in this experiment in exchange for a participation fee. For this study, restaurants and movies were used as both the domains of referral and domains within which an external influence was provided. A scenario similar to the one used in study 1 manipulated referral outcome in an initial domain (either movies or restaurants), after which popularity information for items within and outside of this initial domain was given (for both movies and restaurants). This popularity information was based on the preferences of a large group of consumers and can be considered a subtle type of social influence (Nail et al., 2000).
Therefore, we obtain two measures of compliance with external influence— one within a domain (e.g., preferences for the most popular movie after recommending movies), and one across a different domain (e.g., preferences for the most popular restaurant after recommending movies).

3.3.1.3. Manipulation of referral outcome. This study used a scenario similar to the one employed in study 1. Importantly, in addition to manipulating the referral outcome between participants, we also manipulated the domain of referral to be either restaurants or movies. This factor was manipulated between participants and counterbalanced across referral outcome conditions. First, we asked participants to think of an acquaintance and to imagine this person asking them— occasionally— for advice about restaurants [movies]. We then presented participants with a list of six restaurants [movies] and asked them to recommend one. Next, we presented the remainder of this scenario, containing the referral failure manipulation (between participants):

“One week after recommending this restaurant, you coincidentally meet your acquaintance at the doorstep of the restaurant you recommended [a different restaurant than the one you recommended]. From the small conversation that follows, it turns out that this is not a coincidence: your acquaintance had indeed chosen to follow up [not follow up] on your referral.”

We asked the participants to imagine this in a vivid way, after which they answered several filler questions meant to provide a rationale for this scenario. A similar text was used in the movie condition.

3.3.1.2. Measurement of referral backfire. In the measurement phase, the participants were provided with lists of both restaurants and movies used in the recommendation phase and were asked to rank them according to personal preference. Crucially, prior to ranking, they were given popularity information as a source of external influence. The participants were told that one restaurant and one movie had been chosen as best by panels of visitors on relevant review websites. This approach allowed us to test their compliance with this external influence by looking at the extent to which these most popular items were ranked highly. Because the participants had made a recommendation in one of these two domains before, this resulted in two DVs, which allowed us to test the referral backfire effect both within and across domains (e.g., a participant who recommended a movie in phase one and ranks both movies and restaurants in phase two provides a within-domain measure for movies and an across-domain measure for restaurants). Measurement of these two DVs was counterbalanced for order between conditions. Importantly, because of the rank ordering task, a higher number indicates a weaker attitude towards an item, implying lower compliance with the external influence. Therefore, a higher number implies a stronger backfire effect.

3.3.1.3. Knowledgeability. Additionally, we asked the participants to indicate to what extent they knew about the items of each set they had been asked to rank order in the measurement phase. A single item scale, which we will further refer to as “knowledgeability,” between “not at all” (−5) and “very well” (5) was used to measure this (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007; Mobley, Bearden, & Teel, 1988). For analysis of knowledgeability, it is important to understand that this measure is matched with the participants’ domain of referral: participants that had recommended a restaurant [movie] in the referral phase, rated their own knowledgeability about the restaurants [movies] presented.

3.3.2. Results and discussion

We investigated whether the main effect of referral failure on subsequent compliance with external influence depended on the knowledgeability of the domain of referral (as a potential moderator of the threatening nature of referral failure) or match with the domain of referral failure (i.e., within or across domain evaluation of items). We conducted a linear mixed model with referral outcome as a between-participants categorical independent variable, domain knowledgeability as a continuous independent measure, and domain match (i.e., the rank of the externally recommended item within domain and rank of the externally recommended item across domain) as within-participants dependent measures.¹ We focus on three aspects of the results: the main effect of referral outcome (F(1,133) = 12.02, p < .005), which replicates the referral backfire effect; the two-way interaction between knowledgeability and referral outcome (F(1,133) = 5.08, p < .05), which tests the attenuating role of low knowledgeability on the referral backfire effect; and the absence of the three-way interaction, (F(1,133) = 0.38, ns.), which shows that the referral backfire effect is insensitive to domain match.

To elaborate on the main effect of referral outcome on rank across and within domain, we conducted contrast tests. First, we found a significant effect of referral outcome on ranking across domain: after referral failure, the participants ranked the recommended item lower (M=3.39, SE=.19) than after referral success (M=2.84, SE=.19; t(136) = −2.07, p < .05), which replicates the referral backfire effect found in studies 1 and 2. Second, a similar significant effect occurred within a domain: after referral failure, the participants ranked the recommended item lower (M=2.99, SE=.18) than after referral success (M=2.37, SE=.18; t(136) = −2.45, p < .05).

To examine in more detail the two-way interaction between knowledgeability and referral outcome (see fig. 1), we conducted spotlight analysis (Fitzsimons, 2008; Irwin & McClelland, 2001). At one standard deviation below the mean of knowledgeability, no significant difference appeared in the ranking of the externally recommended item between participants in the referral success condition and those in the referral failure condition (M=2.54 and M=2.74, respectively; β = .10, SE = .12, t = 8.84, ns). As hypothesized, low knowledgeability regarding the domain of referral attenuates the referral backfire effect. Interestingly, however, the referral backfire effect occurred at the mean level of knowledgeability (Msuccess = 2.61, Mfailure = 3.19, SE = .084, t = 3.47, p < .001) and at a high level (one standard deviation above the mean) of knowledgeability (Msuccess = 2.68, Mfailure = 3.64, β = .48, SE = .12, t = 4.05, p < .001).

For sake of completeness, the mixed model also showed a positive (r = .248) main effect of knowledgeability (F(1,133) = 9.69, p < .005), i.e., knowledgeability generally leads to lower ranking of the recommended item. Additionally, and unrelated to the full model analyzed above, we found that the participants were less knowledgeable about local restaurants (M = −1.88, SE = .25) than about movies (M = 1.48, SE = .23; t(136) = −10.50, p < .001).

In previous studies, we took measures to avoid potential alternative explanations that explained the referral backfire effect in ways other than the identity threatening nature of referral failure. These measures largely consisted of separating the phase where referral failure takes place as much as possible from the phase where external information is incorporated into a decision or not. Failing to do this could lead to a game of “tit for tat,” where participants ignore advice because theirs was also ignored. This failure could also lead to an alternative explanation in terms of experimental demand. On a more conceptual level, one could also argue that experiencing referral failure induces a social norm of independence. All of these arguments make

¹ Ranks are not on an interval scale. We conducted a generalized mixed model with ordinal probit dependent variables, which led to the same conclusions: the main effect of referral outcome was significant (Wald χ²(1) = 9.00, p < .005), as was the two-way interaction between knowledgeability and referral outcome (Wald χ²(1) = 4.31, p < .05). Again, a three-way interaction was absent (Wald χ²(1) = .24, ns). We preferred parametric analysis because of its greater flexibility in testing contrasts and spotlight analyses and because the violations are typically inconsequential (Velleman & Leland, 1993).
predictions similar to the referral backfire effect. However, these arguments do not account for the moderation of this effect by knowledgeability. Thus, this study not only provides further support for our hypotheses, but also rules out these potential alternative explanations.

Furthermore, this study provides several preliminary insights into the nature of threat from referral failure. Because the effect is not observed under low knowledgeability, it is clear that referral failure does not call into question the relationship between the sender and receiver nor the sender's power to influence others. These two explanations would not be eliminated under low knowledgeability. Referral failure threatens self-image at the level of competence in decision-making in the domain of referral.

3.4. Study 4

In study 4, we aimed to provide further evidence for self-bolstering as the underlying mechanism for the referral backfire effect. This study again uses a moderation design. The current study aims to eliminate threat to self-identity after referral failure and before the subsequent decision. This study design is in contrast to study 3, which prevented the threat altogether. If the referral backfire effect relies on a need to resolve identity-threat, the effect of referral failure should be attenuated when an alternative way to bolster the ego is provided. We asked the participants to evaluate the helpfulness of reviews for a product in an online store. Based on existing literature (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Nail et al., 2000), we use these reviews as sources of influence. This approach is in line with the fact that consumers rely heavily on the opinion of others when making consumer decisions (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). In accordance with previous results, we expected these evaluations of helpfulness to decrease after referral failure, as the participants would be more inclined to rely on their own preferences to make choices and discard external information. However, in accordance with $H_4$, we expected this effect to disappear when self-threat comprised by referral failure had been compensated for by a self-bolstering, positive experience.

3.4.1. Method

Ninety-three participants (62 males and 31 females), aged between 19 and 28 years, participated in this experiment in exchange for a participation fee. The participants came to the lab for a one-hour session that included several studies, of which this study was first. Four participants reported extreme evaluations of the reviews and were removed as outliers based on the 3SD criterion (3%).

3.4.1.1. Manipulation of referral outcome. The participants were asked to choose their favorite out of six movie posters. In the control condition, the participants were told that the study concerned what factors people take into account when making this sort of choice and were asked to write a short justification for why they chose that particular poster. Participants in the referral failure condition were asked to write the same justification but were also told that their arguments would be shown to another participant (called the reviewing participant, which was preprogrammed). The actual participants were told that the reviewing participant would indicate the degree to which he or she considered switching their favorite poster to the favorite poster of the participant after reading the justification. For this condition, no information about the identity of the reviewing participant was revealed. After writing and submitting their justification, participants in both conditions saw the favorite poster and the argument of a third, different preprogrammed participant, who justified his choice for a randomly picked poster by means of generic arguments. For example, one such argument was that the poster represented the movie accurately. At that point, the participants were asked to indicate how likely they were to change their opinion on a 7-point scale (1: “certainly not” to 7: “certainly”). Because participants in the referral failure condition had not received feedback on their own preferences yet, this likelihood did not serve as a dependent variable but was rather a part of the procedure aimed at making the advice phase believable. We found no correlation between this switching likelihood, and subsequent measures (all $Fs < 1$). Afterwards, participants in the referral failure condition always received a response from the (preprogrammed) reviewing participant that he would be “very unlikely” (2 out of 7) to switch to the participant's choice after having read the participant's argumentation. Participants in the control condition did not receive any such feedback. Afterwards, all participants were told that this task was completed and were asked to start the next task.

3.4.1.2. Self-affirmation manipulation. After the first phase of the experiment, the participants were asked to perform a writing task that seemed to be completely unrelated but included the self-affirming manipulation. We adopted a procedure frequently used in previous research (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sherman et al., 2000). The participants were asked to rank a list of 11 values and personal characteristics (e.g., physical attractiveness, being a good friend, financial success) in order of personal importance. In the self-affirmation condition, the participants wrote a brief essay explaining why their
top-ranked value was important to them and described a time in their lives when this value had been particularly useful. In the no-affirmation condition, the participants wrote about why and when the value they had ranked seventh in importance could be of importance to the average college student.

3.4.1.3 Measurement of referral backfire. In this study, the participants rated the helpfulness of online evaluations in a way similar to what actually takes place in such online stores as Amazon.com. The participants indicated the helpfulness of negative and positive comments made about a product that – at the time of this study – was little known among our participants (i.e., the Amazon kindle) by awarding 1 to 5 stars for each specific comment. Consumer reviews should be considered less helpful when participants are less willing to comply with external influence.

3.4.2. Results and discussion
A 2 (referral outcome) by 2 (self-affirmation) dimensional design showed that referral outcome had a significant main effect on the perceived helpfulness of consumer reviews: referral failure ($M = 3.45, SE = .25$) led to a lower perceived helpfulness than the control condition ($M = 4.14, SE = .24, F (1,85) = 4.03, p < .05$). Importantly, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect between referral outcome and the self-affirmation manipulation ($F(1,85) = 6.78, p < .05$). As depicted in Fig. 2, only participants in the no-affirmation condition rated the consumer reviews as less helpful when having encountered referral failure ($M = 2.77, SE = .34$) compared to the control condition ($M = 4.35, SE = .39, t(85) = 3.07, p < .005$). No referral backfire effect was observed in the self-affirmation condition ($M = 4.13, SE = .33$ in the referral failure condition vs. $M = 3.93, SE = .31$ in the control condition; $t(85) = -.45, ns.$). Additionally, participants in the referral failure condition rated the consumer reviews as more helpful after self-affirmation ($M = 4.13, SE = .33$) compared to the no-affirmation condition ($M = 2.77, SE = .34; t(85) = 2.85, p < .01$). In the control condition, self-affirmation had no effect on perceived helpfulness when comparing the neutral task condition ($M = 4.35, SE = .39$) with the self-affirmation condition ($M = 3.93, SE = .31; t(85) = .86, ns.$).

Study 4 conceptually replicated the referral backfire effect with a different procedure, thereby providing additional evidence for the process causing the effect. Moreover, study 4 supported H4: that self-affirming information attenuates the effect of referral failure on the evaluations of consumer reviews.

4. General discussion
Addressing the effect of referral outcome on the person making the referral is of growing importance because consumers engage in referral behavior on a daily basis and are even stimulated by companies to do so (Ryu & Feick, 2007, Schmitt et al., 2011). Making a referral is often driven by motivation to maintain and enhance a positive self-concept (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Moreover, engaging in a referral makes consumer’s choices, and therefore her identity, notably visible. This publicity is even more relevant in the online environment. Referral failure can thus bring into question not only consumer’s choices but also the view of oneself as a capable choice maker. We reasoned that consumers are motivated to re-establish this self-image by making choices that are a direct reflection of one’s capability as a decision maker. Based on self-determination theory, this motivation implies a relative shift from controlled to self-determined behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which we predicted would make consumers less likely to comply with external sources of influence. The fact that reduced compliance can be used to bolster the self is in line with existing literature (Blanton & Christie, 2003; Nair et al., 2000). Four studies showed that referral failure indeed reduces the referrer’s likelihood to comply with external influence in subsequent choices. Furthermore, based on the idea that referral failure is identity-threatening, we provided process evidence and boundary conditions for this referral backfire effect. Implicit egotism (reflecting a need to bolster the self) is increased after referral failure (study 2). Furthermore, the referral backfire effect is attenuated when the referral topic is not central to the identity of the referrer (study 3) and is eliminated when the threat is compensated by self-affirmation (study 4). In addition, the referral backfire effect is independent of the match between referral domain and the domain of the subsequent product decision (study 3). Throughout our studies, we rule out several potential alternative explanations for the referral backfire effect. Moreover, the results of study 3 allow us to make inferences concerning the nature of the threat of referral failure. Because our findings show that the referral backfire effect is attenuated in participants with low self-perceived knowledgeability in the domain of referral, we can conclude that what is under threat is not the relationship between the sender and receiver of information, nor the sender’s power to influence others. Rather, referral failure threatens the idea that consumers have of themselves as competent decision makers in the domain of referral. In combination, these studies suggest that referral failure poses a threat to consumers’ identity, which leads

![Fig. 2. Effect of referral outcome x self-affirmation on perceived helpfulness of product reviews.](image-url)
them to discard external influence in an attempt to restore their self-images as competent in making consumer choices.

4.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

We believe that our findings extend previous research in several important ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first researchers to acknowledge that the outcome of giving advice to others might be consequential to the sender of advice, which is a finding that has implications in many research domains other than marketing. Although several authors have identified the motivations involved in giving advice (Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram et al., 1998), no research has investigated what happens when the needs behind those motivations are not met. Whereas dominant models of information diffusion often model referral behavior (e.g., literature using the Bass diffusion model; Bass, 1969), they do not seem to assume feedback loops involving the referrers based on referral outcomes. Our results demonstrate the importance of considering the potential effects of the referral outcome on the referrer. These effects are particularly important in models of information diffusion or communication models in general. Second, we provide evidence that the outcome of a referral can be identity-threatening. Accordingly, we can expect many other behavioral effects because the existing literature indicates that self-affirmation in general can be used to cope with identity threats (Steele, 1988). For instance, it has been shown that identity threat leads to “compensatory” consumption of status goods (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). Therefore, senders who incur a referral failure may be subsequently more interested in offers that promise to bolster the self, such as compensatory status consumption or consumption in other unrelated domains, as long as this consumption helps protect against or compensate for the identity threat. Third, while previous consumer literature has identified reactions to identity threat in terms of what consumer decisions are made (Gao et al., 2009), we show that threats can also lead to reactions in how decisions are made. Consumers comply less with external influences on their decision processes after experiencing a referral failure.

Fourth, we arrived at our hypothesis about the nature of referral backfire based on a distinction made in the self-determination literature between controlled and self-determined behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Whereas this literature explicitly states that self-determined choices do not preclude complying with external influence, as long as one fully identifies with this influence (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; Ryan, 1993), our results highlight a potential limitation to the independence of self-determination and compliance. If choice serves to establish competence in choice making and thereby restore a self-image, then external influences prohibit choices to be a valid proof of this competence. However, one could argue that behavior aimed at restoring a self-image after a threat is caused or controlled by this threat, and therefore such behavior is not actually self-determined behavior. Future research in this domain should determine whether and when self-bolstering is self-determined or controlled behavior.

We also see important managerial implications of our findings. First, the potential effects of referral failure on subsequent behavior calls into question the much-heralded efficacy of WOM (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Reichheld, 2003). Considering that consumers who make referrals are usually the company’s most satisfied customers (Anderson, 1998), our results reveal the undesirable possibility that an ill-considered campaign that stimulates WOM might induce unintended behavioral changes in exactly those most valuable customers. It is difficult to predict a priori whether consumers’ discarding of external influence might make them abandon the product because of referral failure or cling to the product even more vigorously. Theoretically, both reactions are possible, and further research could find circumstances under which either condition prevails. However, customer development efforts, such as up-selling or cross-selling, are likely to be compromised in customers less willing to comply with external influences due to prior referral failure. Such attempts at persuasion might be particularly ineffective if they are not somehow framed as a support for an initial choice made by the customer. In other words, a good WOM campaign is more complicated than merely increasing the Net Promoter Score (Reichheld, 2003). To arrive at a more complete view of behavioral changes associated with stimulating word of mouth, a good WOM campaign should also consider the likelihood of referral failure and estimate its impact. We may therefore additionally recommend monitoring not only referral success in referral reward programs (Ryu & Feick, 2007, Schmitt et al., 2011) but also referral failure. This approach is potentially even more important because referral failure might — as previously mentioned — affect the company’s best customers. Interestingly, our findings not only reveal potential risks in the current practice of stimulating consumer referral, but also offer methods of addressing consumers facing referral failure. More specifically, self-affirmation in an unrelated domain can compensate for identity threat caused by referral failure (study 4). Indeed, highlighting a customer’s value to the company, their contribution or significance in general (e.g., by offering them rewards for loyalty) or affirming his or her lifestyle aspects relevant to the company’s offer (e.g., a perfume brand promoting a luxurious lifestyle) might be exactly the type of self-affirmation such a customer needs.

A final practical observation is that stimulating referrals is often mentioned as the solution to the declining effectiveness of traditional advertising methods (Kumar, 2010; Van den Bulte & Wuyts, 2009). Ironically, referral failures might contribute to that very decline because consumers facing referral failure might be impelled to make their own decisions and discard external information in the form of marketing messages.

4.2. Suggestions for future research

Our studies constitute a first step in answering the question of how referral outcome affects consumer behavior. Nevertheless, our research also evokes several questions for future enquiry. Most of those questions are based on our main contribution: referral outcome may be consequential for the referrer. However, it is essential that additional boundary conditions and both theoretical and practical implications be investigated. First, in our studies, the referrer is always aware of the failure of his/her referral. It might be an interesting avenue for future research to find out not only (a) when consumers notice referral failure but also (b) when they experience it as a failure. Second, in our studies, participants made recommendations to others that were moderately distant to them (fellow students). Research shows that recommendations travel through weak ties, where they have a bridging function, and through strong ties, where they are most influential (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Future research could focus on the moderating effect of the strength of these ties on the referral backfire effect. On the one hand, one may argue that strong ties buffer against referral failure because they are usually the result of rich and diverse relationships. Consequently, referral failure would not necessarily lead to self-threats when the receiver and the referrer have strong ties. On the other hand, strong ties are characterized by a high degree of association, which could lead to an assumption of similarity. In that case, referral failure could violate that assumption and therefore cause even stronger effects in strong ties. Third, although our findings in study 3 already suggest that the threat invoked by referral failure is on the level of specific consumer decisions or decision making capability, future research could also provide more detailed insights into the nature of the threat of referral failure. A priori, referral failure could call into question one’s personality at large, the relationship between receiver and referrer, one’s
consumer choices, one's decision capability, one's capability as an advisor, or other identity aspects. Additionally, the circumstances under which a referral occurs could affect different identity aspects, leading to varying effects of referral failure. Making a referral to a close friend or an unknown audience in the internet, as an established expert or as a lay person, after lengthy research or off the top of one's head, all of these different conditions could lead to different inferences concerning the significance of referral failure for one's identity with different possible behavioral patterns.

Fourth, it remains an empirical question whether consumers are on a certain level aware of the potential negative consequences of making a referral and whether they take this risk into consideration when deciding to make a referral. If this awareness is the case, it should bias these decisions toward more “safe” instances of referrals. Referrals would subsequently become more likely for brands with a high-perceived social support or under other circumstances that minimize the risk of referral failure.

Finally, we identified in our Introduction the need for self-presentation or self-enhancement of identity as the core drivers behind referral behavior (De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, in press; Hennig-Thuraus et al., 2004). Because our data show that the self is indeed involved in referral behavior, this notion might offer insights into the behavior of key actors in the diffusion of information. The existing literature has identified hubs (Goldenberg, Han, Lehmann, & Hong, 2009) and market mavens (Feick & Price, 1987) as important actors in information proliferation. Because hubs and market mavens share the attribute that they are active referrers, as well as avid information harvesters – and therefore very open to external influences – one might wonder how they accommodate referral failure. Does the centrality of being a hub or market maven in these consumers’ self-identities and the ensuing desire to accumulate information override the threat of referral failure? Do they rely on sources of self-affirmation that are intrinsic to their role? If they do so, would these sources differ between types of key actors? Hubs, defined in terms of their social connectedness, may prefer to intensify the spreading of (other) information as a way to bolster their identity. Mavens may spread knowledge that is more technical and objective, which would be less open to opinion and therefore less discounted by referral outcomes. Further research might investigate how different key actors deal with the experience of referral failure because this knowledge might provide insight into the development of such hubs and mavens.

In conclusion, we emphasize the need for more research into the effects of referral outcome on the referrer, especially in large mass of ordinary consumers because the implications could be substantial for both consumer theory and the marketplace.

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References


On the importance of social integration for minority targeting effectiveness

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Research into the influence of model ethnicity on advertising effectiveness usually compares a dominant or mainstream group with a single, ethnically distinctive minority group. Such two-group studies implicitly assume that all minorities react similarly to distinctive and non-distinctive models portrayed in ads. However, minorities differ in their level of integration into the dominant societal group, which likely influences their responses. This research studies target/non-target market effects for minorities whose levels of integration into the host society vary. In contrast with relatively less integrated minorities, minority groups better integrated into the dominant society exhibit target/non-target market effects unlike those previously reported. This study also contrasts two mediation routes for the observed effects of ethnic models: ad model—self-perceived similarity and perceived ad model credibility. The results show that the two routes are conditional for less integrated minorities but dissociated for better integrated minorities. The findings offer clear applications for the advertising industry.

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1. Introduction: Cultural diversity, identities, and advertising

Research has recognized the influence of social identities on consumer responses to marketing stimuli (e.g., Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994; Reed, 2004). Social identities are “mental representations that can become a basic part of how consumers view themselves;” they are based on aspects as diverse as traits, social roles, moral values, nationality, gender, sports team membership, or ethnicity (Reed, 2004, p. 286). Not only do these identities vary in their degree of importance and salience, but they also differ in the extent to which they guide individual beliefs about how to think, feel, and behave (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

This study addresses a specific, prominent type of social identity (or in-group identity), namely, ethnicity (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujiioka, 1978; Phinney, 1990), which often refers to minority populations (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007). The effects of ethnicity are pertinent for a wide range of marketing variables, such as consumption patterns, shopping orientations, responses to promotions and advertising, purchase decisions, media usage, and brand loyalty (e.g., Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000; Lee, Fernandez, & Martin, 2002).

Yet prior advertising research that focuses on the effects of ethnicity by studying models who represent an ethnic minority tends to oversimplify the influence of ethnicity in that it ignores the impact of the minority’s level of socio-cultural integration into the host society. With a few exceptions (Brumbaugh & Grier, 2006; Grier & Brumbaugh, 2007), research on the influence of ethnicity on advertising effectiveness compares only two groups: usually an ethnically non-distinctive dominant group and an ethnically distinctive group (e.g., White vs. Black Americans Brumbaugh, 2002; White vs. Asian New Zealanders Martin, Lee, & Yang, 2004; Anglo vs. Hispanic Americans Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994). These studies implicitly assume that all distinctive people display the same pattern of responses when exposed to ads designed to appeal to them, as well as to ads that portray non-distinctive models (Brumbaugh & Grier, 2006).

We argue instead that the assumption of ethnic similarity—which largely reflects the difficulty of collecting sufficient data from minority respondents (Brumbaugh & Grier, 2006; Hunt, 2000)—is unwarranted. Ethnic minorities have unique historical experiences and statuses in societies (Hunt, 2000) related to their relative integration into the host society (or dominant group). For example, cultural integration, or the acquisition of traits and behaviors of the host or mainstream culture (Laroche, Kim, & Tomiuk, 1998), influences the enduring salience of cultural identity and identity-related attitudes and behaviors (Chattaraman, Lennon, & Rudd, 2010).

We challenge the assumption that all minority groups should react in a similar way when exposed to ads designed to appeal to them, as well as to ads that portray non-distinctive models, and thereby aim to make two main contributions. First, we show that not all minorities react similarly to minority-targeted ads, and the
differences in responses can be explained by the level of integration of different minority groups into the host society. Second, we show that the primary driver of model ethnicity effects in advertising is not viewers’ perceived similarity to the model in the advertisement per se, as previous studies have proposed (e.g., Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999), but rather the viewers’ perceptions of the credibility of that model. Specifically, we show that for ads portraying an ethnic model, model–self-perceived similarity and model perceived credibility have a similar pattern of influence on advertising effectiveness for minorities who are relatively less integrated into the host society, but this result no longer holds for more closely integrated minorities. By highlighting this dissociation and confirming credibility’s superior explanatory power, we make a case for credibility as the “true” causal mediator of the effect of ethnic model portrayal on advertising effectiveness.

Furthermore, this study offers clear managerial implications for companies addressing an ethnically diverse audience. Our results show that the use of models from ethnically distinctive groups may be less effective than portraying models from a dominant group (i.e., mainstream models).

2. Theory

2.1. Viewer ethnicity and target/non-target market effects

Ethnicity reflects the frequent patterns of association and identification with common national or cultural origins of a subgroup in a larger society (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2004). For an ethnic minority group, ethnic membership often has great prominence, particularly in an ethnically mixed, rather than uniform, society (McGuire et al., 1978). In addition, ethnically distinctive consumers tend to prefer ads with ethnically distinctive models because they interpret the ad according to its ethnicity depictions (Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994). In contrast, non-distinctive ethnic groups usually do not react differently to ads portraying a distinctive or a non-distinctive model (Appiah, 2004; Brumbaugh, 2002) because ethnicity is less salient to non-distinctive viewers, and thus they prefer ads they perceive to be targeting them through a broader set of cues (e.g., age, gender, familiar lifestyle, ad scenario) (Sudbury & Wilberforce, 2006). In the vast majority of studies, White consumers respond equally favorably to ads featuring Black models as White models (e.g., Aaker et al., 2000 [Experiment 1]; Sudbury & Wilberforce, 2006; Whittler, 1991; Whittler & Spira, 2002). However, enhanced preferences for the ad with the Black model (Appiah, 2004; Brumbaugh, 2002), as well as decreased preferences for such ads (e.g., Aaker et al., 2000 [Experiment 2]), also occasionally appear in the literature. Decreased preference for an ad with a distinctive model mostly occurs among non-distinctive consumers when the model portrayed in the ad belongs to a controversial minority, such as gay men (Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Puntoni, Vanhamme, & Visscher, 2011). Thus, an ethnically distinctive model should have positive effects on ethnically distinctive consumers, but model ethnicity appears less relevant to the dominant group of consumers who identify with advertisements on a larger set of cues.

However, Brumbaugh and Grier’s (2006) findings challenge the established pattern for distinctive consumers. In their study, Asian minority consumers in the United States, unlike Black and Indian participants, did not prefer an ad portraying an Asian model to an ad with a White model. Brumbaugh and Grier speculate an influence of social status or visual salience of group membership. In U.S. society, Asian and White people tend to display a higher status than other groups, and Asians are a more visually ambiguous group than the highly visually distinctive Black minority (Brumbaugh & Grier, 2006). The speculation that status differences might account for these unexpected results also echoes Grier and Deshpandé’s (2001, p. 223) suggestion that “Asian Americans may respond relatively less favorably to ethnically targeted advertisements than other minority groups that are perceived as having lower social status.”

Following these suggestions, we investigate whether the relative socio-cultural integration of minorities into the host culture, which affects their social status (Lenski, 1954), explains differences in target/non-target market effects for minorities. In this study, we define target (non-target) market effects as the increased (decreased) preference for an ad by people (not) in the target audience (Aaker et al., 2000).

2.2. Socio-cultural integration and target/non-target market effects

Socio-cultural integration refers to the knowledge of the host country’s language, the understanding of its society, participation in its institutions, the development of interpersonal contacts with members of other ethnic groups (e.g., inter-ethnic friendships), and respect for or adoption of different norms and patterns of behavior (Hamberger, 2009; Junger-Tas, 2001). Most studies investigating the target/non-target market effects of ads that portray ethnic models contrast the attitudes of White Americans with those of Black Americans (e.g., Aaker et al., 2000; Brumbaugh, 2002; Bush, Smith, & Martin, 1999; Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Whittler & Spira, 2002). Yet Black Americans represent a specific case because of their persistent segregation, an institutional mechanism that creates and reinforces inequality and prevents socio-cultural integration (Junger-Tas, 2001). No other U.S. minority group has experienced as much segregation as Black Americans (Collins & Williams, 1999). Extant findings thus might hold true only for minorities with a relatively minimal level of integration into the dominant society. Grier and Deshpandé (2001) show, for example, that a lower status and perceived status differences, which are directly related to the concept of integration (Lenski, 1954), increase the positive effect of ethnic spokespeople on advertising effectiveness; this effect occurs through the heightening of ethnic salience.

Groups with a higher level of integration instead may tend to be more receptive to standardized marketing strategies and exhibit response patterns that are more similar to those of the majority (Webster, 1992). In particular, the level of immigrant socio-cultural integration should affect attitudes and responses to advertising and promotion (Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983; Webster, 1992), such that members of a better integrated minority most likely define themselves more in accordance with the majority than with a less integrated minority (Wood, Pool, Leck, & Purvis, 1996). Groups undergoing a socio-cultural integration process learn to think and behave similarly to the dominant group (Hamberger, 2009; Junger-Tas, 2001). Because they also may observe how the dominant group rejects the less integrated minority (as signaled by a lack of models who represent the less integrated minority in media or country regulations and asylum agreements regarding specific minority groups; Diplomatique Francaise, 2011), members of a better integrated minority may display negative attitudes toward less integrated minority groups (Allen & Wilder, 1980; Oakes, 1987). For example, people avoid consuming products that could have negative symbolic implications or project a negative image of them (Banister & Hogg, 2004). White and Dahl (2006) show that men have more negative attitudes toward and therefore are less inclined to choose a product that would associate them with feminaleness (e.g., ladies-cut steak). They further show that groups with which people prefer not to be associated have more influence on attitudes than out-groups in general.

Thus, for well-integrated minorities, ads that portray a model from their own or the majority group should be more effective than ads portraying a model from a less integrated ethnic group. In contrast, because their lack of socio-cultural integration into the host society implies some rejection of that host society’s culture and norms (Junger-Tas, 2001), less integrated minorities may be motivated to avoid associations with the dominant group. That is, for less integrated minorities, ads that portray a model from an ethnic minority group should be more effective...
than ads portraying a model from the dominant group, in line with previous findings regarding target/non-target market effects.

We expect to replicate the extant results pertaining to the target/non-target market effects for the dominant group and minorities with a relatively lower level of integration, but we predict a different pattern of results for more integrated minorities. Thus, respondent ethnicity should moderate the influence of model ethnicity on advertising effectiveness:

**H1a.** A more integrated minority group displays a more positive attitude toward an ad that portrays a model from its own ethnic group or from the majority group rather than a model from a less integrated ethnic group.

**H1b.** A less integrated minority group displays a more positive attitude toward an ad that portrays a distinctive model from its own group or from a more integrated minority group rather than a non-distinctive model.

For the dominant group, we do not expect any difference in reactions to ads because of model ethnicity. Therefore, we do not specify a separate hypothesis for this group.

### 2.3. Target/non-target market effects: the credibility versus similarity mediation routes

A model portrayed in an ad is a type of presenter. Literature on presenters shows that more credible presenters appear more persuasive (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Credibility encompasses elements such as source expertise (e.g., an expert user or technical expert) and trustworthiness (Rossiter & Smidts, 2011). Rossiter and Smidts (2011) also show that source expertise is a necessary condition for persuasion by celebrity presenters and posit that the same requirement holds for non-celebrity presenters, though these “real people” also possess some form of positive trustworthiness that grants them high source credibility as well. Klucharev, Smidts, and Fernandez’s (2008) study on brain imaging also confirms the positive effect of celebrity presenters’ perceived expertise on persuasion. Thus, from the literature on presenters, perceived model credibility seems to drive persuasion.

In the literature on the advertising effectiveness of ethnic models, some studies also propose source credibility as a mediator of the effect of model ethnicity on advertising effectiveness (e.g., Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994). How does the viewer’s socio-cultural integration affect this relationship? Similar to social status (see Grier & Deshpandé, 2001), social integration moderates the influence of ethnic salience and model ethnicity on advertising effectiveness for all ethnic groups (including the dominant group) and (2) among better integrated minorities, the mediation route through credibility is not confounded with the pattern of influence found for similarity as is the case for less integrated minorities.

**H2a.** Credibility, rather than similarity, mediates the effect of the interaction between respondent ethnicity and model ethnicity on the attitude toward the ad.

![Fig. 1. Proposed model.](image-url)
H2b. Similarity and credibility display the same pattern of influence on advertising effectiveness for less integrated minorities, but this does not hold true for better integrated minorities.

3. Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a quasi experiment in which we asked a sample of French female consumers belonging to the White majority, the North African minority, or the Black minority to evaluate ads portraying models from all three groups.\(^1\) In France, the North African minority experiences a relatively low level of integration into the White French group, whereas the Black minority has achieved a relatively higher level of integration (Geddes, 2003; Marthaler, 2008; Ouëlet, 2007). Before the experiment, we conducted a pilot study and ran six pretests to calibrate the stimuli and check the manipulations, as well as a general pretest of our questionnaire.

3.1. Study setting

France serves as the study context, which is both theoretically and substantively interesting. France is the most multi-cultural country in the European Union (Tréguer & Ségati, 2003), comprising three main ethnic groups: a White majority; a Black population consisting of French people with a sub-Saharan background (approximately 1.08 million people in 2009) or from overseas territories (approximately 757,000 in 2009); and North African French people (approximately 3.26 million in 2009) with roots in countries such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia (Independent, 2009). These minority groups have different historical and contemporary experiences, which influence their degree of integration into the host society. The first three points in Table 1 depict the main socio-cultural reasons that the North African French tend to be less integrated than the Black French, including language use, the French model of integration, and the difference between “imposed” and “chosen” immigration. Table 1’s remaining points pertain to the economic and politico-legal integration, both of which influence the socio-cultural integration of these minority groups (Grosjean, 2011; Lacoste, 2010).

This study setting enables us to assess the effects of integration and to avoid the potential confound that marks much prior research, namely, the degree of visual salience of group membership. In studies comparing American Black and White groups, the group for which ethnicity is most visible is also the group that has the relatively lower level of integration into the host society (Collins & Williams, 1999). The comparison of the White dominant group with both the Black French minority, characterized by relatively higher integration and higher visual salience, and the North African French minority, characterized by relatively lower integration and lower visual salience, circumvents this potential confound.

Ethnic minorities’ representation remains minimal in French advertising, especially on television. Non-European models appeared in only 3.1% of advertising in 2005 (Autorité de Régulation Professionnelle de la Publicité, 2006), though recent laws and agreements mandate a minimum presence of visible minorities on French television (Frachon & Sassoon, 2008). Therefore, it is substantively interesting to study the effect of the presence of visible minorities on advertising effectiveness among the multi-ethnic French population (Spears & Singh, 2004).

3.2. Design and participants

The study used a 3 (respondent ethnic group: more integrated Black French vs. less integrated North African French vs. White French) \(\times\) 3 (model ethnicity: Black vs. North African vs. White model) between-subjects design. In addition to the evidence provided in Table 1, we measured ethnicity and the level of socio-cultural integration markers.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-cultural integration markers.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Approximately 75% of French immigrants speak a foreign language at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is especially true for North African French, which suggests their poorer socio-cultural integration (Clanché, 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The perception that Muslim immigrants, mainly of North African origin, can no longer assimilate into French culture is an important issue (Geddes, 2003). For example, 30% of White French are reluctant to marry people from a North African minority, whereas only 21% express reluctance about marrying a person from the Black minority (Le Figaro, 2010).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Many French politicians and White French voters openly favor “chosen immigration” that welcomes only laborers or students (Marthaler, 2008). However, 70% of new immigrants, mainly from North Africa, move for family reasons, which is a form of “imposed immigration” (Independent, 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The North African minority’s integration has been slowed on various fronts: economic integration, measured as its access to the labor market and employment; education; income; housing; and politico-legal integration, which refers to the right to vote and be elected (Hamberger, 2009; Junger-Tas, 2001). Reasons include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• France’s postcolonial behavior toward North African French, including poor housing and working conditions and low-quality education, negatively affected this group’s integration into the dominant society (Lacoste, 2010), while overseas territories were being integrated into the French State. North African French have the highest unemployment rates (27% in 2005; INSEE, 2005), and differences in their literacy scores compared with non-migrants are among the highest in Europe (Entorf &amp; Minou, 2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In contrast with North African French, Black French from overseas territories have French nationality and participate in French politics (Lacoste, 2010).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most illegal non-EU immigrants in France are from Morocco and Algeria. Several countries such as Haiti, Congo, and Senegal have signed concerted agreements to repatriate their illegal immigrants, but Morocco and Algeria have not (République Française, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The European Union policy of immigration implies actions against “unwanted” North African immigration but disincentives for Black immigrants (Lindstrom, 2005).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

fore the study, we also ran a pretest with a convenience sample of French respondents recruited from the staff of a large French business school (21 White, 6 Black, and 6 North African), which confirmed the higher perceived level of integration of the Black minority: 54.55% of the respondents perceived Black French people as better integrated in France than North African French people: 18.18% believed the opposite \((z = 3.77, p < .01)\), and the remaining respondents (27.27%) considered Black and North African French equally well-integrated \((z = 2.45, p > .05)\).

All participants were randomly assigned to complete one of three different versions of the survey. With this design, we can assess our hypotheses using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the effect of the ethnic group \(\times\) model ethnicity interaction on attitude toward the ad (with similarity and/or credibility as covariate(s) to test H2a and H2b), followed by planned contrast analyses.

Four hundred fifty-five French women from White \((N = 210)\), North African \((N = 123)\), and Black \((N = 122)\) ethnic groups, all between 18 and 35 years of age, participated in the study. Thirty-four percent of White respondents saw a White model, 27% saw a North African model, and 39% saw a Black model; in addition, 33% of Black and 34% of North African respondents saw a White model, 32% and 33% saw a Black model, and 35% and 33% saw a North African model, respectively. Invitations to participate were posted in various women’s magazines and website forums. The link on the websites changed to ensure the random assignment of respondents to various conditions. Our data collection procedure targeted female consumers, who a priori have a higher probability of being exposed to such print ads. Moreover, women are more prone to react to the visual characteristics of people in advertising and more vulnerable to those images than men (Baird & Grieve, 2006). The selected age bracket also suggests that the respondents mostly represent second- or third-generation immigrants who had been born in France. Thus, the gender and age restrictions we applied created a homogeneous sample that generally matched the gender and age category of the models depicted in the ads.

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\(^1\) We label two groups by race and one group by origin (North African) because these are the most commonly used and simplest grouping terminologies.
Three ads for a fictitious mass-market cosmetic product (Sanydra) served as the study stimuli (see Fig. 2). We use advertising for a personal care product for three reasons. First, physical characteristics exert an important influence on purchase intentions for these items (Solomon, 2007). Because of differences in skin and/or hair type among different ethnic groups, personal care products belong to a category of products for which consumers likely formulate ethnic-specific quality requirements. In other words, this is a category for which ethnic social identity and, therefore, similarity to the model truly matters. Personal care thus allows for a strong test of our hypotheses and, particularly, of the dissociative pattern between model similarity and model credibility (H2b). Second, the prominent display of a (female) model is a well-established advertising format for this product category (Puntoni et al., 2011). Third, personal care products are an important product category in terms of sales (Xerfi, 2010) and represent a large and growing part of advertising expenditures in France (Kantar Media, 2011).

We ran a pilot study by reviewing two issues of each of three popular magazines: Elle, Marie-Claire, and Grazia (those published the last week of May and the second week of June 2011). This pilot study aimed to verify the dominance of White models in ads for personal care products in France. Of the 1398 pages in these six issues, 108 ads for personal care products featured lipstick (7.4%), skin care (38%), hair spray (2.8%), nail polish (3.7%), tanning products (2%), perfume (36.1%), and shampoo (8.3%), as well as multiple products together in one ad (1.7%). The ads contained 113 models (i.e., 5 ads depicted 2 models; 13.3% celebrities), 97% of whom was White, and 3% of whom represented an ethnic minority.

To create the main study stimuli, we cut and pasted photographs from a cosmetics magazine. Because the position and body language of the model, as well as her body mass index, needed to be identical across conditions, we kept one body shape and altered the face and skin color to display her ethnic heritage. We ran a first pretest with nine models (three per ethnicity) and 45 respondents (from a French business school’s administrative staff and students) to confirm unambiguous recognition of the model’s ethnicity. Respondents identified the ethnic membership of all models except one correctly. We ran another pretest with the eight remaining models to select the best set of three models, one from each ethnicity. For this pretest, we created eight cards and asked 18 business school staff members to pick a set of three models, one from each ethnicity, that they perceived as most similar. We selected the set of three models most frequently chosen (61.1%). During the pretest stage, we also asked 34 graduate students to evaluate the realism and professionalism of the ad (“Does it look like a real ad?”). All respondents answered affirmatively for the three ads we selected.

Finally, we ran a pretest to (1) confirm recognition of the models’ ethnicity and (2) check that the North African model’s ethnicity was perceived as visually less salient than the Black model’s ethnicity (to ensure that visual salience and integration are not confounded). Three versions of a questionnaire, depicting the selected set of three models in different sequences, were distributed to 24 female graduate students from the dominant White group (average age = 22.25 years, SD = 1.92). We asked them to identify the ethnicity of the models, among five possibilities (Caucasian, North African, Asian, Black, or other), to indicate which physical traits/characteristics led them to that conclusion, and to rate the extent to which these traits were visible and salient, using a seven-point Likert scale. All respondents correctly assigned the models to their ethnic groups. They mainly relied on two physical criteria: skin color and hair type. The average salience of criteria mentioned in position 1 (M Black = 6.65, SD = .42; M North African = 5.58, SD = .86; F(2, 69) = 11.42, p < .01) and position 2 (M Black = 5.86, SD = 1.26; M North African = 4.77, SD = 92; F(2, 65) = 11.14, p < .01) differed significantly across models and indicated that the Black model’s ethnicity appeared significantly more visually salient than that of the North African model (the most often used criteria were skin color and hair type, followed by eye shape and face shape). The experiment ran for four weeks, and the questionnaire took 10 min to complete.

3.4. Measures

After viewing one of the ads in Fig. 2, respondents answered questions pertaining to the dependent variables (attitude toward the ad, model credibility, and perceived model similarity; see Table 2). Attitude toward the brand was also measured, but given the fictitious nature of the product, as well as the absence of detailed product information, the results for this measure were the same as those for attitude toward the ad, and therefore we do not report them. As a proxy for their level of integration, respondents then indicated (1) if and how frequently they spoke a foreign language at home (five-point Likert scale), (2) whether and how frequently they watched foreign television channels (five-point Likert scale), and (3) the number of same-ethnicity friends among their five closest friends (e.g., Garrett & Pichette, 2000; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). These measures tap socio-cultural integration, which complements the established findings in Table 1. Then, the questionnaire included questions about respondents’ ethnic background and age, to confirm the comparability of the three subsamples. Because of the sensitive nature of questions about ethnic background, especially for a French population, many minority respondents hesitated or simply refused to
of integration. North African French respondents were significantly less integrated on each criterion (Fs ≥ 6.51, ps < .01).

4.3. Level of minority integration and advertising responses

In H1a and H1b, we predicted an interaction effect between respondent ethnicity and model ethnicity on Aad, such that a planned contrast analysis should show different response patterns for the two minorities, with only the less integrated minority displaying the target/non-target market effect indicated in prior research. Therefore, we conducted an ANOVA on Aad, with respondent ethnicity and model ethnicity as between-subjects factors.

For Aad, the significant main effects of respondent ethnicity (F(2, 446) = 14.72, p < .001) and model ethnicity (F(2, 446) = 8.40, p < .001) were subsumed by the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction (F(4, 446) = 3.70, p < .01). As we expected, the planned contrast analyses (Table 3) showed no significant differences across ads for White French respondents and asymmetrical response patterns for the two minorities. In support of H1a and H1b, the Black minority liked the Black and White model ads more than the North African ad (H1a), whereas the North African minority liked both minority ads more than the White model ad (H1b). Thus, the dominant group and the least integrated minority displayed the patterns of target and non-target market effects predicted by prior research, but the results for the more integrated minority deviated from conventional predictions.

4.4. Driver of model ethnicity effects in advertising

In H2a and H2b, we predicted that model credibility, rather than similarity, should mediate the interaction effect of respondent ethnicity and model ethnicity on attitude toward the ad (H2a) and that for the better integrated minority, the credibility mediation route should be dissociated from the effect of similarity (H2b). To test the mediated moderation hypothesis in H2a, we estimated two models (Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005) and determined whether the indirect path from the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction to Aad, through the proposed mediator, differed significantly from zero (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010). Thus, we first regressed the proposed mediator on respondent ethnicity, model ethnicity, and respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity (Model 1) and then regressed Aad on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Cell means and planned contrasts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distinctive models</td>
<td>Non-distinctive model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North African</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less integrated minority (North African)</td>
<td>4.38 (1.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attitude toward the ad</td>
<td>4.49 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Credibility</td>
<td>2.48 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Similarity</td>
<td>3.62 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant group (White)</td>
<td>3.21 (1.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attitude toward the ad</td>
<td>3.16 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Credibility</td>
<td>1.69 (.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Similarity</td>
<td>3.22 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: All p values are less than .05, unless indicated otherwise. Significant differences with the standard of comparison are identified by a, b, or c. Numbers in bold are the standards for comparison, such that for each respondent’s ethnic group, planned contrast analyses compare the model that matches the respondents’ ethnic group with the two other models.

a Significantly different from the North African model (**: p = .056).
b Significantly different from the Black model.
c Significantly different from the White model.

answer questions related to other socio-demographic or economic variables when the questionnaire was pretested. As a proxy for education, we asked respondents whether they were aware (yes/no) of four different news headlines and the extent to which they were concerned about those headlines (not at all/very). We did not use the second measure in our analysis but employed it to prevent respondents from discovering that the first question was designed as an educational test. All respondents answered the questions in French. The scales were professionally translated into French and back-translated into English (Brislin, 1980).

4. Results

4.1. Sample and measure checks

Because respondent ethnicity is not a random variable, we checked the comparability of the three samples in terms of age and found no significant differences (M Black = 24.32, SD = 4.40; M North African = 23.58, SD = 4.55; M White = 23.49, SD = 2.76; F(2, 452) = 2.03, p > .14; medians for the three groups are 23, 23, and 22, respectively; χ²(2) = 4.35, p > .11). News awareness across the ethnic groups also did not differ significantly (F(2, 452) = .42, p > .66).

Using Amos 19.0, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (maximum likelihood) of attitude toward the ad (Aad), model credibility, and model similarity (χ²(41) = 152.507, p < .001; NFI = .95; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .06). The Jöreskog rho values range from .82 for similarity to .93 for Aad; the average variance extracted ranges from .58 for credibility to .77 for Aad. In support of discriminant validity, the square roots of the average variance extracted are superior to any correlations between latent variables. As additional checks of discriminant validity, we performed systematic comparisons of the three-variable model with models containing one or two variables (e.g., we merged credibility and similarity into a single latent variable). The three-dimension model performs best (p < .001), in further support of the discriminant validity of our three constructs. To aggregate each variable, we took the mean of its respective items. The correlations between variables range between .39 (Aad and similarity) and .63 (Aad and credibility).

4.2. Manipulation check

To confirm the difference in level of integration between our two minorities, we analyzed respondents’ answers to three questions: use of a foreign language at home (M Black = 3.08, SD = 1.76; M North African = 3.83, SD = 1.47) foreign television channels watched (M Black = 2.27, SD = 1.55; M North African = 3.14, SD = 1.36), and number of own-ethnicity friends (M Black = 2.60, SD = 1.53; M North African = 3.03, SD = 1.11); where higher scores indicate a lower level of integration.
respondent ethnicity, model ethnicity, respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity, and the proposed mediator (Model 2).

When we estimated the Model 1 with credibility as a mediator, we found that the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction signifi-
cantly influenced perceived credibility ($F(4, 446) = 5.47, p < .001$). With Model 2, we determined that the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction was non-significant ($F(4, 445) = 1.86, p > .10$), whereas the influence of credibility was positive and significant ($F(1, 445) = 259.47, p < .001$). To test the significance of the indirect effect, we used Preacher and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping mediation script (as recommended by Zhao et al., 2010), after recoding respondent ethnicity and model ethnicity into two dummy variables each, such that we created four two-way interaction terms with the products of the dummy variables (see Table 4 for the coding). Preacher and Hayes's (2008) SPSS macro can estimate the indirect effects of the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction on Aad and the 95% confidence interval around these estimates (5000 bootstraps). The results show that the indirect effect for all four interaction terms was significant (see Table 4), and thus the conditions for mediation were met (Zhao et al., 2010). Credibility mediated the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction on Aad, in preliminary support of H2a.

To assess the mediating role of credibility versus similarity, we ran the same analyses (Model 1 and Model 2 estimations) with similarity and then pit the two competing mediators against each other in a single model, using Preacher and Hayes's (2008) approach. In the Model 1 es-
timate, the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction signifi-
cantly influenced perceived similarity ($F(4, 446) = 10.223, p < .001$). As expected, exposure to models of one's own ethnic group translated into improved judgments of similarity to the model among both minority groups ($F(2, 242) = 10.57, p < .001$). Black respondents felt significantly more similar ($F(2, 119) = 26.09, p < .001$) to the Black model ($M = 3.15, SD = 1.18$) than to the North African ($M = 1.69, SD = .92; p < .001$) and White ($M = 1.91, SD = .81; p < .001$) models. The North African respondents felt significantly more similar ($F(2, 120) = 2.95, p < .05$) to the North African ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.30$) and Black ($M = 2.17, SD = 1.06; p > .05$) models than to the White model ($M = 1.88, SD = .93; p < .05$). For Black respondents though, the patterns for simi-
larity and for credibility with Aad clearly varied (see Table 3). Black respondents found the Black and White models more credible and displayed more positive attitudes toward ads depicting Black and White models. In contrast, they did not perceive similarity between themselves and the White model. In addition, and in contrast with ex-
tant claims, Black respondents did not indicate feeling less similar to the non-distinctive (White) model than to the distinctive (North African) model, whereas North African respondents expressed more similarity to distinctive (North African and Black) models than to the non-distinctive models. These results offer preliminary support for H2b.

With the estimation of Model 2, we determined that the influence of similarity was positive and significant ($F(1, 445) = 62.104, p < .001$), as was the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction effect ($F(4, 445) = 3.399, p < .01$). This latter significant influence implies an incomplete theoretical framework (Zhao et al., 2010). Preacher and Hayes's (2008) SPSS macro estimates for the indirect effect of the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction on Aad show that the indirect effects of two interaction terms were non-significant (see Table 4), in further support of H2a. Similarity is not a “one-size-fits-all” mediator; that is, it does not work for all types of respondents or models.

With Preacher and Hayes’s (2008) approach, we can unravel the unique ability of each putative mediator to mediate the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction effect on Aad; this approach compares the strength of specific indirect effects to determine which

### Table 4
Mediation of the effect of respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity on attitudes toward the ad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>Independent variable (respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity)</th>
<th>Indirect path point estimate</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
<th>Confidence lower bound</th>
<th>Interval upper bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Credibility (C)</td>
<td>Black respondent × Black model</td>
<td>1.112</td>
<td>.311</td>
<td>.618</td>
<td>1.645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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* This significant indirect effect indicates that the effect of portraying a Black model vs. a North African model differs depending on whether the respondent is Black vs. North African, and this effect is mediated by credibility.

* The contrast results can be interpreted as follows: the effect of portraying a White model vs. a North African model differs depending on whether the respondent is Black vs. North African; the effect of portraying a Black model vs. a North African model differs depending on whether the respondent is White vs. North African; and the effect of portraying a White model vs. a North African model differs depending on whether the respondent is White vs. North African. These effects are mediated by credibility rather than similarity. The effect of portraying a Black model vs. a North African model differs depending on whether the respondent is Black vs. North African, and this effect is equally well mediated by credibility or by similarity.
mediation theory is dominant. We used Preacher and Hayes's SPSS macro to estimate the total and specific (i.e., through credibility versus through similarity) indirect effects of the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction on Aad, as well as the contrast value (i.e., indirect effect through credibility versus indirect effect through similarity) and the 95% confidence interval around these estimates (5000 bootstraps). The contrasts compared the two mediators' unique abilities to mediate the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction effect on Aad, beyond any other mediators or covariates in the model. The results, which we summarize in Table 4, show that credibility was a significantly better mediator of three interaction terms and equally good for the fourth ("contrast C–S"). Therefore, credibility has more credence than similarity as a mediator of the respondent ethnicity × model ethnicity interaction effect on Aad, in support of H2a.

Also in accordance with H2b, the Black respondent × White model indirect effect, mediated by credibility rather than similarity, highlights the dissociation between similarity and credibility for better integrated minorities; if integration did not matter, this effect would have been equally well-mediated by credibility and similarity. This is because similarity and credibility mediation routes are confounded for less integrated minorities, whereas credibility and similarity show a clear dissociation in their pattern of influence for better integrated minorities.

5. Discussion

We put forth a fine-grained account of differences across minority groups to provide a better theoretical understanding of the effect of ethnic model portrayals on advertising effectiveness. This issue is important from a practical standpoint because reliance on faulty assumptions about how minorities perceive ethnic and mainstream models could lead advertisers to select suboptimal models for their campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns. We used a 3 (respondent ethnicity) × 3 (model ethnicity) between-subject design to raise and examine multi-ethnic advertising campaigns.

In particular, we show that ethnic minorities who differ in their level of integration into the host society do not display the same response patterns when exposed to ads that portray distinctive and non-distinctive models. Compared with relatively less integrated minorities, ethnic minorities who are well embedded within the host culture respond in ways that indicate their shift toward the responses of the majority. For less integrated minorities, ads portraying a distinctive model, regardless of the model's ethnicity, are the most effective, in line with prior target marketing literature. In contrast, for more integrated minorities, ads exhibiting a distinctive model are less effective if the model belongs to a less integrated minority.

These differences offer an important theoretical contribution to existing advertising literature, which so far has implicitly assumed that all minorities react similarly when exposed to advertising models. This study offers a first step toward engaging the complexity of consumer identities beyond single categorical labels. The next step is to consider individual differences among members of minorities; for example, how do better integrated members of less integrated minorities react to distinctive models? Although we do not explore this within-group difference, it remains an important conceptual issue worthy of further research.

Because our study also highlights how perceived model credibility mediates the effect of ethnic models (majority and minority) on attitudes toward the ad, we offer two additional contributions. First, we show that the level of integration of ethnic minorities into the host society truly matters. We empirically demonstrate that the common “minority versus majority” categorization (e.g., Bush et al., 1999) is an oversimplification of reality. Treating African Americans and Asians in the United States or South Americans and North Africans in Spain as undifferentiated minority groups likely has negative consequences for advertisers. In France, exposing members of the Black minority to ads portraying North African models prompted more negative responses. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the integration levels of ethnic minorities in any geographical area is an important prerequisite before approaching specific markets for segmentation, communication, or advertising efforts. Further research should increase the precision of measures of integration over time (e.g., Arnold et al., 2004), especially as the number of people of mixed heritage continues to rise (Coleman, 2008).

Second, our study significantly increases the theoretical precision of the drivers of ad model effectiveness that result from exposure to minority models (e.g., Brumbaugh, 2002; Bush et al., 1999). A sole consideration of similarity to the model, as observed in current literature, is the wrong approach when a minority member is better integrated into the dominant society. We challenge the importance of perceived similarity; model credibility better explains the persuasive capability of ethnic models and allows for a more parsimonious modeling of ethnic models' influence in advertising. It might be challenging for advertisers to select and portray credible models rather than merely building on similarity. However, because credibility is the true mediation route traveled by all ethnic (majority or minority) groups, it also enables advertisers to comprehend a market's multi-ethnic reality more parsimoniously.

In this study, we did not formulate hypotheses about the specific pattern of means for White respondents. However, as Table 3 shows, White viewers give higher similarity and credibility ratings to the Black model than to the other models (White and North African). At least two other studies also have found unexpected higher scores for ads portraying a Black model by White viewers (Appiah, 2004; Brumbaugh, 2002). Although White viewers may not perceive themselves as similar to the Black model on the basis of ethnicity, they may identify with the Black model on stereotypical characteristics associated with Black individuals that fascinate them (e.g., urban, cool, musical, athletic, dance, hip-hop fashion) (Appiah, 2004). This explanation would be worthwhile to test in further research.

The process of social comparison related to body shape is another process that might be worth examining in further research. Models depicted in ads may have a lower body mass index than that of the viewers, which would negatively affect their self-esteem (Smeesters, Mussweiler, & Mandel, 2010) and, in turn, their attitude toward the ad. Therefore, introducing factors such as the body mass index might be valuable, especially if ethnic differences in actual or ideal body mass exist.

We also acknowledge some limitations. In particular, our study includes only French women, a single product category, and ads portraying only one ethnic group; further studies should try to replicate our findings using different settings.

Our study fits into a larger stream of research studying how individual differences associated with the viewer might moderate the impact of identity portrayals (e.g., Reed, 2004). Specifically, it adds to a growing body of work that investigates how individual differences influence an ethnic spokesperson's effectiveness among different ethnic groups (e.g., Grier & Deshpandé, 2001). This stream of research could be expanded to incorporate identity markers other than ethnicity, as well as the potential interaction effects between these markers. Further research could study how bases of identification, such as social roles (e.g., being a mother), personal traits or characteristics (e.g., being extraverted, successful, or attractive), or moral values (e.g., religion) moderate the relative effectiveness of ethnic models, in addition to the level of integration. For example, portraying a model from a minority enjoying a low level of integration might not be more effective among the minority group than portraying a model from the dominant group if the role the model portrays (e.g., a self-centered professional woman versus a caring mother) is at odds with the values of the minority group. In this case, it might be preferable to portray a model in that role from another minority (because less integrated minority viewers prefer distinctive models, from their minority or another minority, to models from the dominant group). Viewers' religious beliefs might offer another interesting avenue for further investigation.


How to say “no”: Conviction and identity attributions in persuasive refusal

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A B S T R A C T

This research investigates the influence of refusal frames on persuasiveness in an interpersonal context. Specifically, the refusal frame “I don’t” is more persuasive than the refusal frame “I can’t” because the former connotes conviction to a higher degree. This perceived conviction is tied to the identity-signaling function of the refusal frame. Two studies demonstrate that 1) the “don’t” frame is more persuasive than the “can’t” frame, 2) perceived conviction mediates the influence of the refusal frame on persuasiveness, and 3) attributions to the refuser’s identity explain the perceived conviction.

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1. Introduction

No man is an island. To function in society, we must interact, negotiate, and communicate with other people. A large part of that interaction involves conversing effectively, not only to get what we want but to avoid what we do not want.

One of the key factors that determines whether a refusal is effective is compliance from others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For instance, anecdotal evidence from attendees of the Weight Watchers program reveals that one of the key reasons why individuals gain weight is because their friends, family, and spouses tempt them with unhealthy food and they do not know how to refuse when confronted with this type of social pressure. From weight loss programs to Nancy Reagan’s famous “Just Say No” campaign against drugs, individuals are often advised to say no to temptation. However, little research focuses on exactly how to do so effectively.

In the current research, we propose that the persuasiveness of a refusal depends on how it is framed. Recent research demonstrates that saying “I don’t” is more empowering than saying “I can’t” in the context of self-talk (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012). In the present research, we investigate the effectiveness of these two refusal frames in interpersonal communication. We theorize that when a refusal evokes one’s identity, it speaks of one’s traits, characteristics, goals, and beliefs (Oyserman, 2009). This attribution increases the perceived conviction of the refuser and consequently enhances the persuasiveness of the refusal. Specifically, we demonstrate that when refusing others 1) the “don’t” frame is more persuasive than the “can’t” frame, 2) this persuasiveness stems from the conviction conveyed by the frame, and 3) the perceiver attributes this conviction to the refuser’s identity.

For example, if a hostess offers a rich slice of cake to a guest who declines by saying “I don’t eat cake,” we argue that the refusal would engender the hostess’ compliance and not typically invite negotiation. It reflects who the person is and what he or she stands for. However, if the guest declines by saying “I can’t eat cake,” this statement reflects an impediment or inability, and thus, it connotes less force or determination. In fact, it may connote external concerns that are often relied upon in excuse-making (Snyder & Higgins, 1988) and therefore is more likely to provoke discussion, debate, and negotiation.

This research contributes to theory in five key ways: 1) It contributes to the extant literature on consumer identity by illustrating how language, in terms of the actual words used, can signal consumer identity; 2) It contributes to the literature on language in social interactions to demonstrate how subtle differences in language can have a profound influence on the outcome of the interaction; 3) It contributes to the literature on compliance-gaining and negotiation by demonstrating the effectiveness of refusal frames in an interpersonal context; 4) It contributes to the emerging literature on semantic framing (as distinct from logically equivalent framing effects in the context of choice under uncertainty; Levin & Gaeth, 1988), in which two words used interchangeably in conversation can have substantially different effects; 5) Because the current work is prescriptive, it provides recommendations for how individuals can adopt refusal frames to more effectively navigate interpersonal interactions in everyday life.

2. The power of words: a brief review of the literature

Whorf (1956) proposed that there is no thought without language and suggested that individuals’ perception of the world and their
interaction with it are based on the linguistic system that they use. Indeed, the semantic meaning of words depends on when and how the words are used (Chafe, 1970; Grice, 1975). In the context of social interactions, Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer (2003, p. 566) assert that “remarkably little research has been conducted on the ways the interactants use words with each other.” However, a distinction between linguistic content (what is said) and linguistic style (how it is said) can be seen in, for instance, two ways to make a simple request. “Would it be possible for you to pass me the butter?” and “Pass the butter” both express the speaker’s desire for butter and direct the listener’s action, but the two utterances also reveal different features of the interactants’ relationship, the speaker’s personality, and perhaps the way the speaker understands himself.

Indeed, a growing body of literature has demonstrated that listeners make inferences about the attitudes and characteristics of speakers based on the words those speakers employ. For instance, Douglas and Sutton (2005) find that descriptors who use relatively abstract language are perceived by others to have biased attitudes and motives compared with descriptors who use more concrete language. In the context of favorable (unfavorable) word of mouth, Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts (2010) demonstrate that abstract language leads receivers to infer that the sender has a more (less) favorable product attitude and a higher (lower) buying intention for the product under consideration. It does not seem unreasonable, then, that listeners can also infer aspects such as conviction and identity based on language use.

2.1. Semantic framing

Extant research has examined the role played by message framing in persuasion processes (Mayer & Tormala, 2010), especially in health-related communications (Rothman, Salovey, Antonello, Kelli, & Drake, 1993; Tykocinski, Higgins, & Chalken, 1994). Language use has been shown to impact domains as disparate as sensory perception (Hoegg & Alba, 2007), categorical perception (Schmitt & Zhang, 1998), perceived durations of time intervals (Cheema & Patrick, 2008), health outcomes (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003), and even the ability to distinguish colors (Athanasopoulos, Damjanovic, Krajcova, & Sasaki, 2011). In the research on duration estimates, for example, framing deadlines one way (“only three months to finish”) made individuals feel subjectively closer to that deadline and highlighted the difficulty of completion compared to framing the deadline a different way (“still have three months to finish”), keeping the objective amount of time constant (Sanna, Parks, Chang, & Carter, 2005). Similarly, Cheema and Patrick (2008) demonstrate that the framing of a time interval for coupon redemption as “anytime between” or “only between” significantly influences coupon redemption behavior. The current research contributes to an emerging area of work that investigates semantic framing in which words that are used interchangeably “may not always be psycholinguistically interchangeable” (LeBoeuf, 2006, 60) and can have profoundly different influences on behavioral outcomes.

2.2. The role of conviction in persuasive refusal

The present research is concerned with the effective framing of a refusal in an interpersonal context, the assumption being that effectiveness is indicated by compliance with the refusal. In other words, if X says “no” and Y complies, the refusal is deemed effective. A great deal of prior research on compliance-gaining strategies has focused on how to influence the actions of others. Overarching themes such as “promise” (If you do this, I will reward you) or “threat” (If you do not do this, you will be punished) reflect common compliance-seeking strategies (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967; Schend-Hamlin, Wiseman, & Georgacarakos, 1982). For a summary of compliance-gaining and compliance-resisting strategies, see Wilson (2002). While broad themes have been identified, the use of specific words to gain compliance represents a gap in the extant literature.

Patrick and Hagtvedt (2012) identify the words “don’t” and “can’t” as differentially effective in resisting temptation and motivating goal-directed behavior because the former provides a sense of psychological empowerment. For instance, study participants concerned with healthy eating were more likely to choose granola health bars (vs. chocolate candy bars) if they engaged in self-talk by saying they “don’t” (vs. “can’t”) eat unhealthy foods. In the current context of interpersonal communication, we theorize that the “don’t” frame is more persuasive than the “can’t” frame because the former conveys conviction to a higher degree. As a speech act, “don’t” conveys more force or determination and is therefore more final and non-arguable (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969/1999). While expressed commitment to a cause, attitude, or behavior encourages individuals to be swayed by requests in line with that commitment, the same commitment signals the unlikelihood of being swayed by requests that are incompatible with it (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Indeed, a determined stance thus tends to discourage argument or negotiation and increases compliance with the refusal (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012; Searle, 1969/1999).

2.3. The role of identity in perceived conviction

One way to convey conviction is to provide a reason for the refusal. As Cialdini (2006) suggests, sometimes providing a reason that makes no sense is more effective than not providing a reason at all. Reasons for refusal typically fall into two basic categories: those stemming from within oneself and those stemming from outside oneself (Ross & Nisbett, 2011). We propose that the former tends to convey more conviction.

A great deal of research has shown that consumers are likely to behave in accordance with their identities, even if the identity is primed by something as simple as a signature (Kettle & Häubl, 2011). They may even distance themselves from others who do not resonate with their own identity (Berger & Heath, 2007; White & Dahl, 2007). One’s identity is deeply entrenched; it is not something one changes on a whim. If a refusal is tied to one’s identity, then it reflects conviction: a committed, unwavering stance that does not invite negotiation. Conversely, when external causes are invoked, they come across as excuses (Snyder & Higgins, 1988), thereby inviting discussion and negotiation.

Much extant research in sociolinguistics supports the notion that our choice of language may be used to construct and signal identity (Eckert, 2000). This stream of research has roots in early work that revealed that even seemingly trivial indicators such as sound changes could serve as symbols of local identity (Labov, 1963). In research on voting behavior, Bryan, Walton, Rogers, and Dweck (2011) demonstrate that invoking the self is sufficient to significantly influence whether individuals vote in presidential and gubernatorial elections. In their case, the manipulation of identity relied on framing questions about voting behavior as a verb or a noun (e.g., “How important is it to you to vote (be a voter) in the upcoming election?”). Nouns were expected to invoke identity to a higher degree, and indeed, they encouraged voting to a higher degree.

In the current context, we suggest that attributions to the refuser’s identity result in “don’t” conveying a strong sense of conviction. The “I don’t” refusal frame emphasizes that one simply does not do something or is not the kind of person to make that choice. It thus reflects a permanent state. Conversely, the “I can’t” refusal frame emphasizes impediments or abilities that may be temporary and not permanently linked to one’s identity. We propose the following hypotheses based on the above arguments:

H1. The “don’t” refusal frame is more persuasive than the “can’t” refusal frame.

H2. Perceived conviction mediates the influence of refusal frame on persuasiveness.

H3. Attributions to identity mediate the influence of refusal frame on perceived conviction.
3. Study 1: persuasive refusal and the role of conviction

3.1. Method and procedure

The objective of this experiment was to investigate the effectiveness of identity-based refusal framing in an actual interpersonal context. The study was focused on the domain of personal finance. Forty-four undergraduate students (male = 63%) participated in this role-playing experiment as part of a lecture on professional selling. All of the participants were told that they would be participating in a role-playing exercise in which they were to make a sales pitch to a prospective customer. Their task was to sell an annual subscription of the local newspaper. They were provided with information about the newspaper deal (frequency, price, discount rates, etc.). The participants were told that the “first few minutes of the negotiation determines the success of the sale,” so they had approximately 3 minutes to make their pitch. Each participant individually made a sales pitch to a prospective customer. The prospective customers were confederates of the experimenter. There were five of these confederates (two male and three female), who were told that they had a goal of saving money and that they were to use the given strategies to refuse any attempt by the salesperson to sell them the subscription. Each confederate was given a script that acted as a rough guideline regarding how the refusals were to be handled during the actual sales negotiation experiment. Each confederate was individually trained by one of the authors to rehearse their refusals. The script included suggestions such as “I don’t/can’t make spontaneous decisions about money,” or “I don’t/can’t spend money without checking my budget first.” Each participant was randomly assigned to one of five confederates who refused the salesperson’s attempts with either the “don’t/can’t” or the “the can’t” framing. Neither party was informed of the goals of the study. After the dyad completed the sales negotiation, the respondents were given a feedback questionnaire in which they evaluated the prospective customer. Specifically, they reported how convinced they were by the prospective customer’s response (1 = not at all, 9 = extremely), the degree of effectiveness of the response (1 = low degree, 9 = high degree), and how likely they would be to respect the customer’s response (1 = not at all, 9 = extremely); these items were later combined in a persuasion index: α = .75. The participants also evaluated the customer in terms of how determined, committed, and confident they were (1 = not at all, 9 = very much; later combined in a conviction index: α = .88).

3.2. Results

A one-way ANOVA with the persuasion index as the dependent variable revealed the predicted main effect of framing (*M*don’t = 7.05, SD = 1.32 vs. *M*can’t = 5.80, SD = 1.70, *F*(1, 42) = 2.37, *p* < .05, *η*² = .15). This result supports H1.

A similar ANOVA with the conviction index as the dependent variable revealed a similar pattern of results (*M*don’t = 7.06, SD = 1.64 vs. *M*can’t = 5.52, SD = 1.54, *F*(1, 42) = 10.85, *p* < .05, *η*² = .19); see also Table 1. Bootstrap estimation (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) with 5000 resamples, as well as a Sobel test, confirmed that conviction mediates the influence of framing on persuasion (*M* = -.97, SE = .40, 95% CI = -1.84, -.29; Sobel test: *z* = -2.71, *p* < .01). This result supports H2.

4. Study 2: persuasive refusal and the role of identity

This study replicates Study 1 in a laboratory experiment in the health domain. An additional goal was to demonstrate that the influence of the “don’t” framing on conviction stems from attributions to the refuser’s identity.

### Table 1

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<th>Study 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Persuasiveness</td>
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<td>1.32</td>
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</table>

All means within each study significantly different across rows. *p < .05. †p < .001.

4.1. Pretest: refusal frames as identity signals

As a pretest, 60 participants completed a survey designed to test whether the words “I don’t” are a stronger signal of identity in the current context than the words “I can’t.” The participants were told that one can use different words or phrases when refusing to do something and that the purpose of this study was to understand the language of refusal. They were asked to indicate the extent to which the two phrases “I don’t” and “I can’t” connote identity. They completed 3 sets of items with both the “don’t” phrase and the “can’t” phrase within-subjects on 9-point scales anchored by 1 = not at all and 9 = definitely. The items were as follows: “Saying “I don’t/can’t” do something reflects who one is as a person,” “Saying “I don’t/can’t” do something reflects one’s identity,” and “Saying “I don’t/can’t” do something reflects one’s beliefs as an individual.” The three “don’t” items were combined to form an index (α = .89), and the three “can’t” items were combined to form an index (α = .86). A within-subjects means analysis revealed that the phrase “I don’t” is a stronger signal of identity compared to the phrase “I can’t”: (Mdon’t = 7.12, SD = 1.55 vs. Mcan’t = 4.29, SD = 1.94, F(1, 59) = 59.11, *p* < .05, *η*² = .48).

4.2. Method and procedure

Fifty-five individuals participated in this between-subjects experiment regarding the use of refusal framing in a health domain. The participants were asked to imagine that they were hosting a party. As they were serving rich chocolate cake for dessert, one of their guests refused the cake, saying either “I don’t eat chocolate cake” or “I can’t eat chocolate cake,” depending on the condition. The participants reported the persuasion index (α = .69) and the conviction index (α = .82) on the same scales as in Study 1. Additionally, they reported the degree to which the guest’s response conveyed his/her identity (1 = low degree; 9 = high degree) and stance as an individual (1 = low degree; 9 = high degree); the items were later combined in an identity attribution index (r = .77).

4.3. Results

A one-way ANOVA with the persuasion index as the dependent variable revealed the expected main effect of framing (*M*don’t = 6.76, SD = 1.43 vs. *M*can’t = 5.89, SD = 1.53, *F*(1, 53) = 4.73, *p* < .05, *η*² = .08). This result supports H1.

A similar ANOVA with the conviction index as the dependent variable also revealed the expected main effect of framing (*M*don’t = 6.80, SD = 1.61 vs. *M*can’t = 5.63, SD = 2.08, *F*(1, 53) = 5.43, *p* < .001, *η*² = .09).

A similar ANOVA with identity attribution as the dependent variable revealed a main effect of framing (*M*don’t = 6.21, SD = 1.72 vs. *M*can’t = 5.17, SD = 1.74, *F*(1, 53) = 5.05, *p* < .05, *η*² = .09), thereby corroborating the pretest; see also Table 1.

Taken together, H2 and H3 predict a three-path mediation with identity attribution and conviction as successive mediators of the
effect of refusal frame on persuasiveness (refusal frame \(\rightarrow\) identity \(\rightarrow\) conviction \(\rightarrow\) persuasiveness). We tested this with the approach developed by Baron and Kenny (1986), as adapted to three-path mediation by Taylor, MacKinnon, and Tein (2008) (see Hamilton, Puntoni, & Tavassoli, 2010 for an example). Following this procedure, we estimated a regression for each of the dependent variables (identity attribution, conviction, and persuasiveness) with the preceding variables in the proposed mediation chain as predictors. In other words, mediation was assessed by estimating the regression of (a) identity attribution on the refusal frame, (b) conviction on the refusal frame and identity attribution, and (c) persuasiveness on the refusal frame, identity attribution, and conviction; see Table 2 for the results. In step (a), the refusal frame is a significant predictor of identity attribution (\(b = .52, t (53) = 2.25, p < .05\)). In step (b), identity attribution is a significant predictor of conviction (\(b = .61, t (52) = 4.99, p < .001\)), but the effect of the refusal frame is not significant. In step (c), conviction is a significant predictor of persuasiveness (\(b = .52, t (51) = 5.76, p < .001\)), but the effects of the refusal frame and identity attribution are not significant. The results of these regressions are consistent with the hypothesized three-path mediation.

We next estimated the magnitude of the indirect (i.e., mediated) effect by using the bias-corrected bootstrap test developed by Taylor et al. (2008), drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Hamilton et al., 2010). This bootstrap sample served as the basis to construct a bias-corrected confidence interval and thus test whether the indirect effect is significantly different from 0. The indirect effect from the original sample is the product of the effects revealed in the regressions from steps (a), (b), and (c); in other words, \(0.52 \times 0.61 \times 0.52 = .17\) (allowing for more than two decimals in the rounding). The 95% confidence interval (.03, .44) excludes 0, indicating a significant indirect effect. The results thus support the three-path mediation model predicted by hypotheses 2 and 3.

Table 2
Study 2: regressions for the mediation of the influence of refusal frames on persuasiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Conviction</th>
<th>Persuasiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.52*</td>
<td>.58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>.61†</td>
<td>.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conviction</td>
<td></td>
<td>.46†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Frame is a binary variable (1 = don’t, −1 = can’t). Each column (numbered in second row) is a separate regression. Regressions (1), (3), and (6) correspond to steps (a), (b), and (c), respectively. Regressions (2), (4), and (5) are included for completeness. The first row indicates DV. The first column (rows 3–5) indicates predictors. The table reports unstandardized regression coefficients.

* \(p < .05\).
† \(p < .001\).

5. General discussion

This research is concerned with how to effectively say no. Empirical findings from two experiments support the notion that the “I don’t” refusal frame is more persuasive than the “I can’t” refusal frame and conveys greater conviction on the part of speaker. This conviction mediates the influence of the refusal frame on perceived persuasiveness. Furthermore, identity attributions explain the perceived conviction of the refuser. A three-path mediation is therefore hypothesized and supported, in which conviction mediates the influence of framing on persuasiveness and identity attributions mediate the influence of framing on conviction. Study 1 is a role-playing experiment, whereas Study 2 is a scenario-based experiment. Together, these studies provide insights into refusal framing as well the role of language-based identity attributions in an interpersonal context.

5.1. Implications and directions for future research

The current research contributes to the identity literature by demonstrating not only how specific words may serve as identity signals but also how an identity signal may be used as a tool in persuasion. As previously discussed, this research also contributes to the literature on compliance-gaining and on language in social interactions. Furthermore, the practical implications are notable, especially given that communication strategies based on the use of specific words such as “don’t” or “can’t” may be easily implemented. However, future research could investigate other word pairs of this kind to broaden the relevance of the current findings. Additionally, a limitation of the current research is that conviction is argued conceptually close to persuasiveness; therefore, future research could provide both increased precision and increased richness to our understanding of the underlying process. Further, although the word “don’t” conveys conviction and represents the firm stance of the speaker and consequently works well in a negotiation, there is a fine line between firmness and rudeness. In adopting this refusal frame, we suggest that the manner in which the words are spoken is as important as the words themselves. Firm but polite refusals are presumably the most effective. Future research should investigate linguistic differences, not only in terms of content but also in terms of style. It is also likely that additional words presented alongside the refusal frames could influence the extent to which they convey conviction and identity. For instance, providing a time expression such as “always” may reduce the difference in impact resulting from the “don’t” and “can’t” framing because “always can’t” implies a permanent rather than temporary stance.

As a general observation, the intersection between language and identity is a fruitful domain of investigation. Although research has suggested that in order to be successful, brands need to tailor themselves to fit a consumer’s identity (Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007), the language used to forge this bond needs to be further investigated. How does one effectively communicate identification with a consumer or another brand?

Recent research on identity signals in the health domain (Berger & Rand, 2008) also presents some interesting avenues for future investigation. Expanding this work to understand how best to communicate health risks that implicate and make accessible a consumer’s identity is a critical issue that remains relatively unexamined. A recent research article by Puntoni, Sweldens, and Tavassoli (2011) investigates how communication cues can make gender identity salient and consequently trigger defense mechanisms that prevent consumers from responding to the information communicated. Further research of this nature will help close the gap in our knowledge about how identity salience can facilitate or interfere with consumer information processing.

A related question pertains to how linguistic framing effects might interact with other identity cues such as sentence structure, tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions. In general, future research could investigate how such cues signal identity and perhaps also serve as a feedback mechanism for the individual exhibiting the cues.

Language is a tool that is so broadly used and has such far-reaching applications and consequences that it is difficult to overestimate the importance of mapping out the influences it has on consumers. Importantly, these influences may not be universal and might depend on dimensions of accessible identity, cultural differences, or even the specific circumstances in which they are used. Furthermore, there may be linguistic influences that are common, or that diverge markedly, across different languages. Undoubtedly, language use in communication is a complex issue, as is the concept of identity, and much research remains to be conducted to increase our understanding in both these fields of inquiry.
References


Consumers' use of brands to reflect their actual and ideal selves on Facebook

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A B S T R A C T

How do consumers represent their identities on online social media platforms? In this article, we focus on consumers’ use of brands on their Facebook pages as subtle cues to represent their selves. Although recent research suggests that consumers present an actual, not an ideal self, our data reveal that veridical presentations of the actual self through brands rarely exist. Furthermore, we contribute to an understanding of how multiple selves interact to inform brand connections. We offer insights into how and why consumers either blend or integrate their actual and ideal selves or choose one of them exclusively when these selves conflict. Additional contributions and future directions in the areas of self, branding, and social media are discussed.

1. Introduction

Scholars have investigated the presentation of the self online since the early days of the internet (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000). One key question of interest in this stream of research has concerned whether people present an accurate version of themselves online, a more idealized version of themselves, or blend aspects of their ideal and actual selves on Facebook (Bargh et al., 2002; Walther, 1996). For instance, a study of a prominent online gaming site shows that players create virtual, alternate selves who embody aspects of the players’ ideal selves (Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007).

As the media landscape has changed dramatically in recent years, new online platforms have altered the ways in which people interact with one another. At least 75% of adults who use the internet use social media (Stephen & Galak, 2010; Urstadt, 2008). Social networking sites (SNSs), which fall under the umbrella of social media, have recently become prominent. SNSs such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, attract more than 90% of young adults and teens, and represent over a quarter of all internet traffic (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010).

Consistent with the growing research on human brands (Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011; Thomson, 2006), there is a renewed interest in how people present themselves online, especially in the context of these SNSs. A great deal of interest is centered on Facebook, the largest SNS, boasting 640 million members worldwide, with 165 million of these members residing in the United States (Stone, 2010). There are key characteristics of Facebook that distinguish it from other forms of social media, and even from other social networking sites such as Twitter and MySpace. Facebook users are “primarily communicating with people who are already part of their extended social network” (Boyd & Ellison, 2009, p. 210), and these users, or “friends,” are all visible within their networks. In other words, Facebook represents a means for individuals to continue their offline relationships and conversations in an online medium. In addition, within each network lies a certain degree of visibility through features including wall posts and public displays of connections. Indeed, Facebook use is shown to be significantly associated with the maintenance and creation of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Recent research on Facebook examined the conveyed personalities of users’ profiles to test the validities of the idealized virtual identity hypothesis (that Facebook users’ profiles display idealized information that does not reflect their personalities) and the extended real-life hypothesis (that Facebook users’ profiles display information to communicate their real personalities) (Back et al., 2010). The research concluded that consumers present an actual, but not an ideal, version of themselves on this social networking platform. The authors’ proposed explanation for this finding that an idealized version...
of the self is not reflected in users’ profiles is that creating idealized identities should be hard to accomplish, primarily because “friends provide accountability and subtle feedback on one’s profile” (Back et al., 2010, p. 372). In other words, Facebook “friends” might question the validity of information if it does not reflect their perceptions of the person.

With the current research, we aim to build on this literature studying consumers’ expressions of self via Facebook to complement and extend these findings. Specifically, we focus on consumers’ use of brands as subtle cues to represent their selves. Brand mentions are arguably the most relevant and important aspect of this medium to marketers, and can include “liking” a brand by publicly linking it to one’s profile, as well as mentions of brands in other subtle ways, such as through narratives, photographs, and profile activities and interests. While it has been noted that consumers may use brands to identify themselves with specific subcultures and/or identities online (Stern, 2004), we have a limited understanding of what purpose these brand linkages serve in the expression of consumer identities in SNSs. Thus, we aim to shed light on two important questions. First, how do users present their identities through brands on Facebook—do they represent the actual self, the ideal self, or both? As a limiting condition to recent research concluding that Facebook profiles reflect actual but not ideal selves, we propose and show that consumers may present both actual and ideal versions of themselves through the brands that they publicly associate with on Facebook. Second, and perhaps more importantly, how do consumers use brands to blend their actual and ideal selves when these identities are congruous, or cope when these identities are incongruous? As we will discuss later in more detail, Facebook has a number of characteristics (e.g., its ubiquitous nature, high visibility, direct connection to a sizable and heterogeneous network of known individuals) that provide unique and interesting conditions for investigating the interaction of multiple selves and the incorporation of brands in consumer self-expression.

We aim to make at least three important contributions with this article. First, we respond to a call for further research on identity and brands. Kirmani (2009, p. 274) notes that research is needed “to pursue issues dealing with the intersection of identity and brands” to offer theoretical and substantive insights in this area. According to congruity theory, consumers tend to prefer brands that are congruent with certain aspects of their identities (Sirgy, 1985). However, this literature is relatively silent on how multiple identities interact to inform brand preference. We aim to extend this theory by shedding light not only on how consumers choose brands that are congruent with their selves but also how and why consumers publicly link themselves to brands to resolve conflicts engendered by different salient aspects of the self.

Second, we extend the current knowledge on how consumers use brands as cues to represent themselves, in the context of the most well-known and most used social networking platform: Facebook. Whereas most prior research has examined brand-self congruence in the context of offline measures, such as brand perceptions and purchase intent, we examine the ways in which consumers directly and publicly link themselves to a brand to present their selves on a prominent social networking platform. This is important as it has been noted that the particular self that consumers choose to express may be dependent on contextual factors (Schenk & Holman, 1980).

Third, this research builds on the recent literature by providing an improved understanding of consumers’ self-presentations on SNSs. To complement recent research showing that Facebook profiles reflect only actual, and not ideal, versions of the self (Back et al., 2010), we show that by using brands as subtle cues, consumers do indeed communicate idealized versions of their selves, and even more so in aggregate than their actual selves. Overall, this research builds on a strong foundation of work employing qualitative methods to explore new media (e.g., Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, & Winer, 2010).

The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows. Next, we review the literatures on brands and the self and self-expression with regard to different aspects of the self. Then, we introduce our methodology and findings. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications for firms and future research directions.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Brands and the self-concept

Self-concept is defined as a person’s perception of him or herself (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Importantly, the self consists of multiple aspects, or dimensions (James, 1890; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Although the self-concept is relatively stable over time, the self is also malleable in that it may be influenced by social roles and cues, causing people to behave differently in varying situations. Thus, any of these dimensions can be activated at any time due to a number of factors that may become salient as a function of a situation (Aaker, 1999).

According to self-concept theory, people behave in ways that maintain and enhance their sense of self. One way to do this is through the use of brands (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008, 2011), which are imbued with symbolic meanings that develop as early as middle childhood (Chaplin & John, 2005). Through these meanings, brands can serve as a means for a consumer to express different aspects of his or her self (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Levy, 1959; Torelli, Monga, & Kailkati, 2012). Indeed, the congruence between brand and self-image is shown to be positively related to consumers’ evaluations of products (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982). For instance, self-congruity has been shown to significantly influence promotion effectiveness (Close, Krishnen, & LaTour, 2009), quality perceptions of stores in shopping malls (Chebat, Sirgy, & St-James, 2006), and brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006). Furthermore, consumers choose brands with appealing personalities to enhance their selves (Swaminathan, Stiley, & Ahluwalia, 2009) and may develop more positive self-perceptions in line with the brand’s personality even after using a brand for only a brief amount of time (Park & John, 2010).

With the current research, our aim is gain a deeper understanding of how and why consumers choose to link themselves to brands on Facebook. Our first question is: Do consumers link to brands on this platform to reflect their actual selves, their ideal selves, or both? Recent research concluded that only actual, and not ideal, selves are reflected in Facebook profiles (Back et al., 2010). However, that research was conducted in the context of Facebook users’ general profiles, which contain more explicit statements about the self, including descriptions of one’s activities and behaviors, and not on Facebook users’ utilization of brands as more subtle cues about their selves. In the next section, we discuss brands as reflections of self.

2.2. Brands as reflections of actual and ideal selves

While there are numerous conceptualizations of the self, the prominent facets of the self-concept that we focus on here are the actual and ideal selves. Scholars have long debated the relative influence of the actual versus ideal selves on consumers’ evaluations of and preferences for branded products (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Landon, 1974). One important aspect of brands is that they can be used by a consumer to express to others their actual (i.e., who they are) and ideal selves (Belk, 1988; Dolich, 1969; Holt, 2002; Landon, 1974), with the ideal self representing either an expansion of self (self-representation; Belk, 1988) or a contraction of self (self-presentation; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; more information on this point will be provided in the findings section).

In the context of Facebook, there is reason to expect that consumers will reflect their actual selves by linking themselves to brands.
Users are linked to the people in their network and they tend to know each other to some degree. As such, users may be less likely to deviate from others’ perceptions of themselves on Facebook because “friends” might consequently question the user’s authenticity (Back et al., 2010). One reason for using this platform is to keep in touch with friends (Ellison et al., 2007), such that traditional offline relationships are facilitated by this technology in nontraditional ways. Thus, because Facebook friendships may be grounded in offline relationships, social sanctions could result from grossly misrepresenting oneself.

At the same time, there is reason to expect that consumers may also reflect their ideal selves by linking themselves to brands on Facebook. Although Facebook users tend to use this platform to keep in touch with friends, most of these relationships can be characterized as “weak ties” (Ellison et al., 2007; Granovetter, 1973; Trusov et al., 2010) and part of a person’s “extended social network” (Boyd & Ellison, 2009, p. 210). Thus, the meaning of “friend” on Facebook does not carry the traditional connotation. Consider that the mean number of Facebook friends is approximately 250 (Walther, Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), whereas the typical number of close relationships offline is approximately 10–20 (Park, 2007). Consequently, a user’s “friends” may not know him very well, making it possible to present a more idealized version of oneself using subtle cues, with a relatively low risk of social sanction. Furthermore, following from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Schenk & Holman, 1980), extant research suggests that consumers’ publicly observable behaviors may be driven to a greater extent by their ideal (vs. actual) selves (Alpert & Kamins, 1995; Dolich, 1969; Graeff, 1996; Ross, 1971). Most recently, the findings of Swaminathan et al. (2008) suggest a signaling role of brands in public (vs. private) consumption settings. These authors find that individuals with anxious attachment styles tend to associate themselves with brands and favorable personality characteristics only when the product is consumed in a public setting, where they can manage others’ impressions of themselves.

Building on prior research, we expect that many users will connect with a combination of brands on Facebook, representing both their actual and ideal selves. Furthermore, as consumers appear to be especially driven by their ideal selves in public circumstances, and because Facebook enables them to deliberately and publicly link themselves to brands, one might expect the ideal to outweigh actual self, regardless of whether the branded product or service is publicly or privately consumed.

2.3. Expressing different aspects of the self

Our second question is as follows: How do users make decisions when expressing multiple selves by linking to brands? As implied in the previous discussion, the self develops not in isolation but through the process of social experience (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Thus, feedback and reactions from others affect the growth of the self, and consumers strive to elicit positive reactions from others. Leary and Kowalski’s (1990) two-factor model posits that impression management consists of both impression motivation, which is the extent to which the desire to control the self-image that is projected to others is activated, and impression construction, which involves the selection of the appropriate impression to convey to others and how to go about doing so.

As Facebook users are linked to other people whom they know, their desire to control the image projected to others, or impression motivation, tends to be high in this context. Indeed, Facebook use is shown to be significantly associated with the maintenance and creation of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). Linking oneself to brands on Facebook serves as a means of impression construction, which involves determining the type of impression to make on others and how to go about it (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For instance, in linking oneself to a brand, others’ perceptions of a brand owner’s personality may be affected by carry over from the personality of a brand (Fennis, Pruyn, & Maasland, 2005).

Importantly, however, it is rare that individuals who are constructing impressions will have a single persona that they use in virtually all situations and with virtually all targets (Leary & Allen, 2011). One of the major research programs in consumer culture theory (CCT) focuses on the means by which consumers achieve balance among their multiple selves (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). Some of this research focuses on how individuals in a liminal state may generate both positive and negative possible selves and weigh these against one another in a mental balance (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991) or develop addictions as a means of escaping an inauthentic self (Hirschman, 1992).

Most central to our main arguments is research from both the CCT and experimental consumer research literatures demonstrating that individual consumers tailor their public images to different targets (i.e., display different selves in different situations) as a means of coping in creating their identities. For instance, Aaker (1999) notes that conflicting personality traits may be present in an individual’s self-concept (e.g., sociability and intelligence). To reconcile these traits, an individual may express sociability at a party and express intelligence when focusing on his/her work, which is consistent with Sirgy’s contention that the consumption of brands may be strongly related to an individual’s self-image in one situation but not in another (Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983). Similarly, James (1890) and Mead (1934) contend that individuals have a separate self (“me”) for each of their social roles.

Building on this theory, research has shown that as they transition from role to role, consumers use varying product cues to signify their occupation of each new role (e.g., political, religious; Fournier, 1998; Solomon, 1983). In some cases, consumers may even use different elements of the same consumption object as a means of representing varying aspects of the self. For instance, it has been suggested that a home’s interior décor may reflect the true self (representing family), with the home’s exterior representing a different aspect of the self (Belk, 1988). Notably, each of these examples from the literature illustrate that consumers tailor their public images to different targets in an effort to achieve balance among multiple selves (Leary & Allen, 2011; Otnes, Lowrey, & Shrum, 1997).

There is increasing interest in how individuals reveal multiple identities in the digital space, such as through blogs (Zhao & Belk, 2007) and personal websites (Schau & Gilly, 2003). As will be further elaborated in the findings section, Facebook has a number of distinct properties (e.g., direct connections to multiple audiences) that distinguish it from offline and other online venues. Importantly, these properties increase the likelihood of conflict between the actual and ideal selves of Facebook users who may wish to construct several identities simultaneously. While congruity theory demonstrates that consumers tend to choose brands that are congruent with some aspect of their selves, we aim to shed light on how the congruity (or lack thereof) between selves (actual and ideal) affects conspicuous displays of brand preference.

Next, we describe our methodology for studying how consumers use brands on Facebook as reflections of their identities.

3. Method

To investigate how brands are used on Facebook to depict aspects of the self, our study employed multiple methods over a two-year research period. To gain a perspective of action (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988) we utilized observational research, diaries, focus groups, in-depth interviews and electronic journal entries. The researchers observed the activity on 84 volunteer participants’ Facebook pages (123 observational sessions lasting 45 min resulting in over 200 pages of notes). All volunteers gave consent to be observed, and volunteers were not “Facebook friends” with the researchers. During the observations, the researchers looked for subtle uses of brands on the
participants’ walls and in their photos and narratives. Special attention was given to how participants integrated brands in their interactions with other Facebook users. Table 1 demonstrates how the researchers categorized the brands observed on these Facebook pages. Participants expressed themselves using “brand” cues via various Facebook tools (e.g., profile activities, likes, ordinary routines). The participants were male and female undergraduate college students, ranging in age from 20 to 28. Eighty percent of them were Caucasian, while 10% were African-American, 5% were Asian, and another 5% were of Hispanic descent.

To triangulate across data points (Belk et al., 1988), all 84 of the volunteer participants were asked to keep a consecutive seven-day diary with the goal of identifying brands on their Facebook pages and explaining why particular brands were on their pages, describing the image of each brand, and comparing the brand’s image to his/her personality, goals, and aspirations. At the end of the week, the participants created two collages depicting the following: brands on their Facebook pages that represent their actual selves (qualities a person feels describe him/her at the present time) and brands on their Facebook pages that represent their ideal selves (an expansion or limitation of their actual selves, see Table 4). The collages were used as projective vehicles to elicit participant commentary during eight focus group sessions with approximately 10–12 participants in each session. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 min. During the focus groups, the participants discussed why they have certain brands on their Facebook pages and how each brand is related to their self-concepts. Participants discussed brands that represent both their actual and ideal selves. The projective task with their collages engaged participants through storytelling and allowed for more personal and meaningful insights during the focus groups to further elaborate on why and how brands are used to reflect aspects of the self.

The findings from the first phase revealed that consumers use brands on Facebook to represent both their actual and ideal selves. We found evidence of iconic brands (Holt, 2004), relational brands (Fournier, 1998), and mundane brands (Coupland, 2005). In particular, participants were probed to elaborate on their linkages with mundane brands, such as athletic brands (e.g., a university sports team); functional brands (e.g., Gillette); or not-for-profit brands (e.g., the American Red Cross). The most easily identifiable brands were iconic, well-known brands (e.g., Nike, Starbucks). Hence, focus groups began with a discussion of iconic brands and then proceeded to discuss the less obvious brands (from the perspectives of the participants). The mundane brands provided equally insightful data and were typically used to express aspects of the actual self.

In the second phase of our research, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with volunteer graduate students. All of the participants in the study were assured of anonymity. Table 2 provides a list of participants’ pseudonyms and a brief description of their backgrounds. The participants were male and female, ranging in age from 22 to 36.

Before the interviews, participants were asked to maintain an electronic journal for two weeks and given instructions to record their use of brands, the number of times they encountered brands (on their own Facebook pages and those of their friends), and their observations of their Facebook friends’ uses of brands. Table 2 highlights the most prominent brands recorded in the participants’ electronic journals. After the two-week period, interviews were conducted in a private setting with access to a computer (e.g., library, office).

During the interviews, participants were shown a figure demonstrating the actual and ideal selves on opposite ends and were asked to place the brands mentioned in their journals on the figure (to represent more actual, more ideal, or equal). Table 2 demonstrates whether participants felt the majority of brands on their pages were more actual or ideal. The interviewer followed a semi-structured guide beginning with the brands that represent the actual self and then proceeded to discuss the brands that represent the ideal self (see Table 3); however, the interviews were informal in nature and characterized by a conversational quality in which the discussions were largely driven by the participants. The interviews concluded with an analysis of the participant’s Facebook page. Each participant logged onto his/her Facebook page and walked the interviewer through his/her page(s) discussing points where brands were present. Participants were asked to elaborate on how they expressed their online identities and how they coped if/when their actual and ideal selves conflicted.

Our data analysis utilized the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991). Our analysis of verbatim interview and focus group transcripts involved an iterative, part-to-whole strategy in which the researchers aimed to develop a holistic understanding of how brands are used to represent the self. Aided by Atlas software, we used prior theories to guide our analysis of the diaries, focus groups, interviews, journal entries, and observational data. Following Burawoy’s (1991) suggestion to utilize existing bodies of literature in search of theories to explain behavior, the data analysis process involved going back and forth between the data and existing theories on actual and ideal selves and, more generally, self-concept.

4. Findings

The findings are organized as follows. First, we will briefly discuss participants’ reflections of their actual and ideal selves through self-brand linkages on Facebook. Next, we will review how they view Facebook as a means of communicating identity through brands. Finally,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observational data illustrative of brands displayed on participants’ Facebook pages.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facebook tools</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profile activities (22%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profile interests (21%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likes (24%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudes displayed in narratives form (5%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ordinary routines displayed in narrative form (17%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photos of consumption (11%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
we will elaborate on how these Facebook users make decisions in expressing multiple salient identities by linking to brands as cues. We identify conditions that lead to greater actual- or ideal- self-congruity, exclusive ideal, or neither (see Fig. 1). A holistic representation of our findings is visually demonstrated in the conceptual model in Fig. 1. As shown in Fig. 1, participants’ situational contexts will influence their motivations in terms of presenting aspects of their actual or ideal selves. As such, participants may experience a decision conflict among various ways of presenting the self. The identity decision is a background for which participants use brands as a means to express aspects of the self.

### 4.1. Brand linkages to reflect the actual and ideal selves

The self-concept, as suggested earlier, is a multidimensional construct reflecting more than one type of self-perspective (Sirgy, 1985). As prior research has suggested that only one aspect of the self-concept (actual, and not ideal) is represented in Facebook profiles (Back et al., 2010), we sought first to examine whether this is also the case specifically for brands, which serve as more subtle cues of identity due to their symbolic meanings. As a limiting condition to prior research, our findings revealed that Facebook fosters expressions of both actual and ideal aspects of the self, each of which can be made salient by individual traits and situational factors. We found evidence of users linking to brands that represent the actual self, as well as two subcomponents of the ideal self: ideal self-representation and ideal self-presentation (see Table 4).

As noted in Table 4, ideal self-presentation and ideal self-presentation stem from the actual self, but the three have different motivations in terms of self-expression. When expressing aspects of the actual self, participants typically selected brands that maintained the self-concept. As Brooke demonstrates below, Facebook users utilize brands to clarify personality ambiguities and highlight individual characteristics that maintain the self-concept.

I publicize brands that I like. I want you to know more about me, so I will use brands to tell others things about me and who I am now (Brooke, maintain the self-concept).

When expressing aspects of the ideal self, participants described two distinct motives associated with linking to brands: to enhance the self and to protect the self. Self-presentation refers to an expansion of the self-concept that relates to the many possible selves an individual could be. Ideal-self-presentation refers to a purposeful, restrictive version of the actual self, with strategic implications aimed at influencing others’ perceptions. The underlying motive for ideal self-presentation is self-enhancement, whereas the motive behind ideal self-presentation is protection. Alicke and Sedikides (2009) elucidate the motives underpinning the two concepts by explaining that people tend to exaggerate their virtues (self-enhancement) and minimize their shortcomings (self-protection). The narratives below are examples of ideal self-representation and ideal self-presentation.

One day I want to be involved in research that benefits society as a whole. I want to contribute to something bigger...I can express my desires to others by linking these brands (not for profit brands) on Facebook and I’m able to connect with other people (who also like the brand) who have similar goals...Facebook streamlines my efforts (Emma, ideal self- representation exemplar).

I really have a reserved personality because I like being alone, reading books, and spending time in the library. But, on Facebook all you see is my social side. If you just looked at my Facebook page, you’d probably think I’m a social butterfly...the brands I associate with are popular brands and all seems like I’m this dynamic, outgoing person (Diane, ideal self- presentation exemplar).

### 4.2. Demographics of interview participants

We asked interview participants to reflect on three questions: (1) How do you actually see yourself? (2) How would you like to see yourself? (3) What brands on your Facebook page represent your real or ideal aspects of the self? We also asked: (4) What brands would you like for your Facebook page to be associated with? Table 2 provides a list of the participants and the brands they selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Brands publically viewed on their Facebook page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Red Socks, Nike, Nacoochee Village Tavern and Pizzeria, Great Clips, Slack Auto Parts, local library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Chanel, Lancome, Serena Williams, Local Newspaper, Menchie’s Frozen Yogurt, Five A Day Café, Justin Bieber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>New York Yankees, Salty Dog Cafe, Harry Potter, Publics, Quell, Red Hot Chili Peppers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Audi, Patek Philippe, Barnes and Noble, Adidas, Amazon, Sports Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Starbucks, Easy Bistro and Bar, Shoedazzle.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chet</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>BMW, Georgio Armani, Levi’s jeans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>New York City Ballet, Ann Taylor Loft, Lifeway Christian Stores, Rite Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Prada, Guess jeans, Versace, Akif Hakan Celebi Photography, Porterhouse Grill, Chili’s Bar and Grill, Red Lobster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alisa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ann Taylor Loft, Mad Men, Chick-fil-A, Grumpys Pizza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Great Big Bertha golf bag, John Lobb golf shoes, Oakley’s Romeo 2 sunglasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Brioni, Columbus Blue Jackets, Landon Donovan, Italy, Umbro, Amazon, Chicago’s Pizza, Franklin Covey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vararie</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Katie Couric, Pete Sampras, Rick Steves, Clinique makeup, Bob Marley, Keri lotion, Papa John’s Pizza, Internet Movie Database</td>
</tr>
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<td>Food Network, Oprah, The Galaxy Concert Theater, Wholly Cow, Grocery Coupon Network, 4 Walls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jody</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Dogfish Head beer, Human Rights Campaign, Gillette, Anchor White Toothpaste,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Scrubs, Grey’s Anatomy, Coca-Cola, American Cancer Society Relay for Life, March of Dimes, Churches in Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
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<td>Nintendo, Kappa Total Cereal, Gatorade, Megan Fox, Two and a Half Men, Delta, Groupon, Taco Bell</td>
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<td>World Wrestling Entertainment, Derek Truck Band, Nike, Notre Dame, Smoker’s Joe’s BBQ &amp; Blues, Fox News, Texas Holdem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Wilsons Leather, Jersey Shore, BP, Naked Juice, Papa John’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shea</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Lil Wayne, Costa Del Mar, Ann Taylor, Banana Republic, Jared, Athleta, Duck Life 3, Nayan Cat</td>
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<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Atlanta Braves, Lady Gaga, Outback Steakhouse, Domino’s Pizza, Jack &amp; Daisy, Disney World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
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<td>Armani, Corvette, Usher, I’mo’s pizza, Swiss Army, Raze</td>
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Table 2

Demographics of interview participants.

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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 3

Classification of in-depth interview questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Actual Self</th>
<th>Ideal Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do you actually see yourself?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What brands displayed on your Facebook page represent your real or actual self?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do you like others to actually see you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What brands would you like for your Facebook page to be associated with?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The self-concept is the totality of the consumer’s thoughts and feelings toward him or herself.
Emma connects with brands that are associated with social improvements (e.g., the American Cancer Society, Relay for Life, the March of Dimes). In the future, Emma desires to engage in meaningful research to provide functional knowledge that could improve the quality of life for the broader society. She is involved with non-profit brands on her Facebook page, which allows her to connect with others who have similar goals. In addition, Emma wishes to convey an idealized version of herself by signifying to others that she not only wants to support non-profit organizations with her time but also with her talents. Emma’s motive for connecting with non-profit brands is to enhance the self-concept, and this represents an expansion of her actual self (the person she could be and wants to become). Turning to the second exemplar, Diane presents an ideal self that is a restriction of her actual self where the underlying motive is to protect the self-concept. Although Diane enjoys socializing with others, she confessed that she prefers being alone. When faced with the option of either spending time at home reading a good book or meeting up with her friends at a restaurant, she derives more enjoyment spending time alone at home. However, she shows the social side of herself and identifies with socially oriented brands (e.g., the Atlanta Braves, Disney World) on Facebook because this is the part of herself that she wants to show others. Diane suggests, “people like social people” and “popular people are not loners;” therefore, she presents a strategically selected self, motivated by public perception (how I want to be perceived). Diane feels that she will be more popular and well-liked if she presents the outgoing side of herself on Facebook, and this is an attempt to protect her self-concept.

Importantly, Diane and Emma demonstrate distinct motives in relation to expressing the ideal self. Diane aims to protect the self, while Emma desires to enhance the self. Both are aspects of the ideal self. However, motives associated with the ideal self are in contrast to motives associated with linking to brands that represent the actual self, which serve to maintain the self-concept (see Table 4).

4.2. Facebook as a means of communicating identity through brands

Facebook profiles allow for self-expression through brands, which are a subtle but powerful means of non-verbal communication. Our participants are aware of using Facebook for their own purposes in punctiliously managing their self-identities. They discussed the ability to link to brands instantaneously and deliberately on this platform, with this linkage being public and observable by all members of a user’s social network. The linkage can be more powerful than offline brand identifiers because brands on Facebook can be continuously showcased using Facebook tools (see Table 1).

If you like a brand just for yourself, then you know you like it and you don’t have to remind yourself of that. You want other people to see a brand when you “friend” a brand on Facebook because you want people to characterize you that way. If you don’t, then

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of the self</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Relation to the self-concept</th>
<th>Motive for linking to brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual self</td>
<td>The authentic self related to who I am now (who I am)</td>
<td>How I actually see myself</td>
<td>To maintain the self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal self-representation</td>
<td>The aspirationally-defined self related to the many selves a person could be (who I could be)</td>
<td>An expansion of my actual self</td>
<td>To enhance the self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal self-presentation</td>
<td>The strategically-chosen self related to concerns about public perception (how I want to be perceived)</td>
<td>A limitation of my actual self</td>
<td>To protect the self-concept</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I don't know why you would click "like" anything or even be on Facebook... brands show your true self and the self you want to be (Tom, M, 24).

As Tom notes, brands can send powerful messages in online social networking sites such as Facebook, and his linkage to brands is more deliberate and perceptible than his offline means of communication. Our participants suggest that they are able to present aspects of their self-concepts, and brands allow them to highlight certain characteristics to the larger network. Tom elaborates on this idea by stating: “If you buy a new shirt with a popular brand, only a few people will take notice of the brand on that given day.” However, on Facebook, consumers can publicize brands to the broader network, and the level of visibility is controlled by the individual. For example, the consumer can simply “like” a brand, or the consumer may elevate the visibility by adding brand-related photos and narratives (see Table 1). In addition, the ubiquitous nature of Facebook allows for ongoing visibility and immediate recognition among friends. For instance, when an participant updates or makes changes to his or her profile, other users can check in at any point during the day to view these updates. Facebook allows for a unified awareness among people in a network. Because it is just as easy to “unfriend” a brand as it is to “friend” a brand, users have the autonomy to manage their self-expressions by selecting brands with high self-brand congruity. As such, brands can be used to communicate aspects of the self to the larger network instantaneously.

Importantly, our participants noted that Facebook allows greater opportunity (than offline self-brand expressions, for example) for the simultaneous expression of multiple salient identities. Consequently, this simultaneous expression provides an environment for conflicting identities. As discussed by Shea, users are perplexed when they want to show different aspects of the self to different audiences.

Facebook has its downsides. It is like you are on stage for the masses to see. You can’t just be casual about the brands you have. It’s like you have to rehearse for a play. What part of myself am I going to show today? (Shea, F, 25)

Shea uses the metaphor of a play. In essence, Facebook is the stage, brands are the props, and the users are the actors. The users must utilize brands to present themselves to their audiences. As Shea explains, Facebook users must consciously and calculatingly consider the person that they want to portray. Actors (users) are easily able to engage their audiences (the network) through the use of props (brands). The specific reflection of the self-concept through brands on Facebook depends precisely on the level of congruity among participants’ multiple selves. Next, we will discuss how linking with brands represent aspects of the self.

4.3. Identity decision and brand linkages

Our data revealed that Facebook users often have multiple salient identities and must choose how to present aspects of their actual and ideal selves on a single platform to widespread viewers with whom they are connected in a network. Importantly, these identities could be either congruous or incongruous with one another, depending largely on current goals elicited by situational contexts and individual traits. A high level of congruity means that consumers are able to find harmony between their actual and ideal selves and, thus, present a blending of the two identities on their Facebook profiles. Overall, this congruity led to a subjective blending of the two identities. A high level of incongruity, however, implies an inharmonious relationship between the actual and ideal selves. We first discuss the case of congruity, and its manifestations in terms of greater actual or ideal self-expression through brands. Then, we review incongruity and its related tradeoffs and coping mechanisms: exclusive ideal self-expression or the avoidance of self-expression.

4.4. Congruous actual and ideal selves

When the actual and ideal identities were congruous, participants expressed both their actual and ideal selves through brand linkages. The relative strengths of these selves depended on their relative accessibility; that is, participants described situations when they would want to show more of their actual selves and other times when they would want to show more of their ideal selves. Notice that the situational context influences self-expression. For example, Callie subjectively rates her Facebook identity as 20% actual and 80% ideal (meaning that 20% of the brands on her profile represent her actual self while 80% represent her ideal self), while John rates his Facebook profile as 45% actual and 55% ideal. As described here, both of the participants feel that they show more of their ideal selves, but they selected different proportions to demonstrate their own perceived blending of the two identities through brand linkages. In a follow-up interview, Callie was asked to rate her Facebook profile again, and during the second interview Callie rated her Facebook identity as 40% actual and 60% ideal. Thus, the “liked” brands had changed slightly between the first and the second interviews. When probed to explain why she identified with more brands representing the actual self in the second interview, Callie explained that her situation had changed.

I think I was in a new place and was meeting new friends so I wanted to show more of my ideal self, but now I’ve just had some good things happen to me recently...I got a new car and I’ve got a new boyfriend... I want to show more of my actual self now (Callie, F, 22).

As demonstrated by Callie, we found evidence among our participants that their identities are continually evolving and, as a result, the subjective calculation of the actual and ideal selves can change from day-to-day and minute-to-minute. Facebook offers a platform that allows consumers to change their identities to reflect personal goals and interests that are current and relevant to the situational contexts of their own lives. In other words, situational context influences self-expression motives on Facebook. This platform facilitates the redefinition of identity over time, as users are easily able to link to and update their identifications with brands, regardless of current ownership or prior use. Next, we describe two manifestations of brand linkages when actual and ideal selves are congruous: greater actual self-expression and greater ideal self-expression.

4.4.1. Greater actual self expression

During the interviews, 30% of participants self-reported that more brands represented their actual selves (vs. ideal selves). When these participants were asked about the brands that represent their actual selves, they described inconspicuous brands that have utilitarian meanings. For example, narratives describing brands that represent the actual self typically followed this script: “I use this brand and therefore it represents me.” In the following exemplar, Matt discusses pizza as a utilitarian brand that expresses his actual self.

The brands that I am friends with are similar to my own interests and activities...I have brands on my page that I use every day, like Chicago’s Pizza and Papa John’s Pizza. My friends know that I eat pizza every week (Matt, actual exemplar).

As conveyed by Matt, Papa John’s Facebook friends receive discounts and promotions. Matt suggests that eating pizza is a part of his day-to-day life routine. Therefore, Matt connects with various brands of pizza. The pizza brands do not serve as a means for self-enhancement or self-protection. Rather, the pizza brands represent his actual self (who I am now).

Participants who identified with more brands representing their actual selves seemed less concerned about the opinions of others and
tended to seek out brands that represent who they are in the present moment (e.g., links with brands to maintain the self-concept). Brands representing the actual self tended to be currently owned or used. The participants that linked with more brands to maintain the self-concept expressed higher self evaluations (e.g., more confidence, higher self-esteem), and, interestingly, we found evidence that several of the participants were prompted to link to actual-self-brands by distinctiveness motives. Distinctiveness motives refer to the ways in which a particular individual is willing to deviate from the normative image that most people attempt to convey (see Leary & Allen, 2011). In other words, participants expressing more of their actual selves desired to be distinct and aimed to use brands as a means for setting themselves apart from their peers, and, in some cases, they linked with brands that many of their peers would shun. For instance, Jeff associates with low cost brands such as Great Clips and Wal-Mart, whereas most people in his peer group would not publicly link to such economical brands.

I don’t really care about what people think about the brands I like. I like them because I like them, not because other people are going to accept me more. I think some people are too concerned with other people’s opinion...I know most people would not friend Wal-Mart, but it doesn’t bother me (Jeff, higher self-evaluation exemplar).

During his interview, Jeff expressed a high level of self-confidence and conveyed that he enjoys deviating from the norm by associating with economical brands because it reinforced his own sense of self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Jeff suggests that being economical is part of his own personality and he likes displaying this distinctiveness trait to his network of friends.

4.4.2. Greater ideal self expression

During the interviews, 70% of participants self-reported that more brands represented aspects of their ideal selves (vs. actual selves). When these participants were asked to describe the brands that represent their ideal selves, they typically discussed iconic, luxury brands. Furthermore, they expressed more concerns about either promoting or expanding parts of the self that they felt good about (ideal self-representation) or altering the opinions and feelings of others to obviate the risk of rejection or criticism (ideal self-presentation). Both self-enhancement and self-protection are instrumental in maintaining, promoting, and safeguarding pivotal self-interests (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Participants expressing more of their ideal selves demonstrated lower self evaluations (e.g., seemed less confident, expressed lower self-esteem). When probed to explain why they selected brands to represent the ideal self, participants discussed linking with brands for the sake of highlighting certain characteristics or goals to others in their networks (ideal self-representation) or only showing certain parts of the self thus restricting the information available to others in their networks (ideal self-presentation). These participants described instances when they would link with brands to receive higher normative evaluations from the acquaintances in their networks. Normative motives refer to the degree to which the individual’s image resembles the types of impressions that most people attempt to make (see Leary & Allen, 2011). Our participants were inspired to link with iconic brands because these brands are recognizable, and most people associate desirable traits with such brands. Sirgy (1985) suggests that conspicuous brands embody more congruity with the ideal self and inconspicuous brands are more consistent with the actual self. Our findings revealed similar themes. The following exemplar relates to Derek’s use of conspicuous, iconic brands to demonstrate his ideal self on Facebook.

I want people to know that I play golf, so my page shows different golf brands. But, I really want people to think I am better than I really am at golf, so I intentionally pick golf brands that are reputable and expensive. Like I talk about my Great Big Bertha golf bag and my dream John Lobb golf shoes, and my Oakley’s Romeo 2 sunglasses (Derek, ideal self-representation exemplar).

Derek believes that iconic brands such as John Lobb and Big Bertha convey to others his desire to become a proficient golfer player. This is an expansion of his actual self. Derek plays golf currently; he wishes to become a better player and suggests, “I think most people want to be really good at something.” Derek’s connection with iconic golf brands is driven by normative motives. Although Derek does not own all the golf brands displayed on his page, he identifies with recognizable brands to express an idealized image of himself that is consistent with the normative expectations of superior golf brands (e.g., high performance).

With the noted examples above (greater actual self or greater ideal self), the actual and ideal selves are congruous because the multiple identities (actual self, ideal self-representation, and ideal self-presentation) can be blended on a unified platform. Although participants may present more of the actual selves, ideal self-representation, or ideal self-presentation, the identities are still harmonious. For instance, Matt believes that he presents more of his actual self on his Facebook profile, but, during his interview, he also discussed brands that represent his ideal self such as Umbro that mirrors his dream of becoming a pro soccer player.

4.5. Incongruous actual and ideal selves

In the following two sections, we discuss situations in which aspects the actual and ideal selves conflict or, in other words, are incongruous. In such instances, participants conveyed that they used two very different coping strategies: an exclusive ideal strategy (to enhance and protect) or an avoidance strategy.

4.5.1. Exclusive ideal self expression

As previously noted, Facebook provides greater opportunity (vs. offline environments or other online venues) for the actual and ideal selves to conflict. In fact, our findings reveal that the social networking platform may elevate conflict between the actual and ideal selves because there is only one means for communicating the self to a large network of friends, and there is a continual opportunity to do so. In contrast, during face-to-face interactions, consumers may show many selves to various acquaintances at different points in time (Leary & Allen, 2011). For example, Leary and Allen suggest that the persona consumers may adopt in interactions with a minister may be very different than in interactions with a person to whom they are romantically attracted.

When the actual and ideal identities conflict on a networking platform such as Facebook (e.g., the participant does not want to show both the actual and ideal selves to his/her network), consumers must find a means to cope. Chet describes the increased likelihood of conflict between his actual and ideal selves on Facebook and his efforts to cope.

I like for people to know about the brands that I like, but you have to be careful because you have so many viewers on Facebook. Sometimes I may really like a brand but don’t want everyone to see it...like Wal-Mart because I want my professional acquaintances to see me as professional and in-chARGE and I don’t think Wal-Mart conveys that kind of image. I’m careful about my selection of brands and I know that I’m creating a certain image. I guess there is more room to show different aspects of myself, but also more variance or inconsistency with what parts of myself to show different people. I’m always on display, so that means I’ve got to really watch what I say and do online...so sometimes I just show one side of myself (Chet, M, 24).

As noted by Chet, Facebook allows for self-expression, but at the same time there is more opportunity for incongruity between the actual and ideal selves. A popular strategy among our participants when their actual and ideal selves are incongruous is exclusive ideal self-expression. The
primary goal of participants using this strategy is to construe their Facebook presence in such a way that brand linkages place their personal attributes in the most favorable light. Using the exclusive ideal strategy, participants seek credibility from others in their network, and this strategy includes both self-enhancement and self-protection. According to Alike and Sedikides (2009), a commonality between self-enhancement and self-protection is that both concepts are based upon the notion of viewing oneself more positively, or less negatively, than objective circumstances warrant, and both concepts can be used to advocate a desired self-view (ideal self). As demonstrated below, when identities conflict, users may choose to solely display aspects of their ideal selves.

When I'm not sure, I go all ideal from brands to pictures... When I first came to college I think that I was all ideal, but now I am a little of both... I feel like I am at a point in my life where I feel more comfortable with my actual self (Deb, exclusive ideal self strategy).

Facebook has become a place where people go to promote themselves as models. My cousin does this. She posts certain brands on her News Feed all the time. She thinks that people are going to form different opinions about her based on the brands she identifies with. She wants to become a movie star so she associates with movie star brands (Daisy, cousin uses exclusive ideal self strategy).

As illustrated above, Deb explains that she used an exclusive ideal self strategy as she transitioned from high school to college. She described her actual self during this transition period as immature and insecure, but her ideal self desired to become mature and confident. During the transition period, Deb linked with brands solely to either enhance the self or to protect the self. As her situation changed (e.g., “made new friends,” “made good grades,” “joined university clubs”), she gained more confidence and began to use a blended strategy of the actual and ideal selves. The exclusive ideal self was simply a coping strategy Deb used during a transitional period in her life. “I was very insecure, so I didn't really want to reveal my insecure self” (Deb). Similarly, Daisy provides an example where her cousin uses an exclusive ideal self strategy by posting pictures of herself as a model. “If the pictures are not model worthy, she's not gonna post it” (Daisy). Linking with brands provides one means for deriving success with this strategy. For instance, Daisy's cousin uses brands to embellish her desired model image and to protect her sense of self in terms of public perception. “She's far from model material in my opinion... but the brands she friends makes people think she's the real thing” (Daisy). Daisy's cousin is consumed by her ambition to become a model, and she uses an exclusive ideal self strategy to cope with conflicting identities (she lacks model-like attributes but desires to become a model).

4.5.2. Avoidance of self-expression

A second coping strategy when the actual and ideal identities conflict is the avoidance of self-expression. Mick and Fournier (1998) describe how consumers use an avoidance strategy to cope with the paradoxes of new technology. Similarly, several of our participants suggested that as they formerly engaged in job search initiatives, they closed their Facebook accounts and avoided self-expression altogether. Daniel's narrative illustrates this point.

I know employers use the internet to get information about people interviewing so I closed my Facebook account so that my personal information couldn't be used against me. My character shown on Facebook is not who I really am. I have the ability to be really professional, but you wouldn't know that by looking at my Facebook page (Daniel, avoidance strategy).

Driven by the situational context of the job search, Daniel's actual and ideal selves conflicted. As a result, Daniel coped by using the avoidance strategy. When Daniel was asked to describe his actual self, he used descriptors such as “party animal,” “ladies' man,” and “get this party started kinda person.” When asked to talk about his ideal self, Daniel explained that he wanted to be “professional and clean cut,” “a successful corporate American man,” and “ethical.” When Daniel was faced with searching for a summer internship, he avoided using Facebook by suspending his account temporarily. The avoidance strategy provided a viable means for coping when his actual and ideal selves conflicted.

Participants realize that brands communicate characteristics about the self, and when the actual and ideal identities conflict, they may choose to avoid self-expression altogether. Donna explains this idea well.

Brands speak identity and if I don't want to show myself to others for whatever reason, I'm not gonna like a brand. I'm gonna stay away from saying anything about myself online. Whatever you put on Facebook, it's there for the world to see... sometimes it's just best to say nothing (Donna, avoidance strategy).

As suggested by Leary and Allen (2011), it is rare that individuals have a single persona that they use in virtually all situations and with virtually all targets. Therefore, SNs such as Facebook present more opportunity for conflict between the actual and ideal selves. Facebook, due to its connected nature, forces consumers to be more consistent and authentic in their self-expressions compared to offline and other online personas. Therefore, consumers must make trade-offs when their actual and ideal selves are incongruous. This means that consumers may solely link with brands that represent aspects of their ideal selves or avoid linking to brands altogether.

5. Discussion

Individuals represent aspects of their selves to others in their online social networks. Even in the absence of the nonverbal cues that characterize offline communications, people use whatever information is available online to form impressions of others (Walther & Parks, 2002). In the context of Facebook, most prior impression formation research focuses on sociometric data regarding the user’s “friends” (Tong, Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Walther et al., 2008). Less research, however, is focused on impressions formed based on information posted directly by a user (for an exception, see Back et al., 2010). Importantly, the information that is directly created or posted by a Facebook user (e.g., brands “liked” by the user) can also be used to mold others’ impressions of him or herself. Consumers are networked to other users on this platform, and within each network lies a certain degree of visibility through features including wall posts and public displays of connections. Indeed, the online environment allows for a transcendence of physical and material constraints, thus facilitating consumers’ extensions of self, even in the absence of material possessions (Zhao & Belk, 2007).

Whereas earlier research suggests that Facebook users’ profiles reflect only the actual self (Back et al., 2010), our findings present evidence of the use of brands to express both the actual and ideal selves. Back et al.’s (2010) study of self-expression on Facebook was conducted at a relatively high level of inquiry, examining users’ Facebook profiles as a whole. Our unique methodology and tighter focus on brands allow for a deeper understanding and discovery of more subtle ideal-self expressions that slipped “under the radar” in earlier research. Indeed, we find that most people edit their presented selves in some motivated way. Over half of our participants self-reported expressing the ideal self to a greater extent than the actual self in their linkages to brands. Furthermore, participants revealed two subcomponents of the ideal self: ideal self-representation and ideal self-presentation. Ideal self-representation involves an expansion of the actual self (self-enhancement), while ideal self-presentation is a limitation of the
actual self (self-protection). Thus, we identify reflections of self in this novel context that appear to have gone undetected in prior work.

An interesting finding of this research is that the ideal and actual selves often conflict on Facebook. Consequently, we contribute to the literature on how multiple selves interact to inform brand connections. Due to the virtual nature of Facebook as a unified platform for networking, consumers are forced to present a single persona to a wide range of acquaintances. In deciding how to express the self on Facebook, we find that participants’ actual and ideals selves either blend (congruous) or conflict (incongruous). Users express their identities through brand linkages depending on the nature of the congruity (or lack thereof). When the identities are congruous, participants present either the actual or ideal self to a greater extent by linking with brands; however, aspects of both the actual and ideal exist. Therefore, we found evidence of a blending of the two identities. In other words, participants use a mix of brands representing both the actual and ideal selves, but typically more brands will represent either the actual or ideal self. When the identities are incongruous, participants take one of two routes in an effort to resolve the incongruity: linking with brands to enhance and protect the self-concept (i.e., ideal only strategy), or abstaining from linking to brands altogether. The avoidance of some brands and the embrace of others is a means through which users express aspects of their self-concepts. As the usage of social media platforms such as Facebook continues to increase, it is important for marketers to understand why consumers link with certain brands and avoid others as a form of self-expression.

Our study sheds light on the importance that marketers need to place on their social media promotional efforts. Participants in our study conveyed that brands can send powerful virtual messages. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that a brand’s online image is just as important as its offline image, and possibly more important. Consistent with self-concept theory, consumers behave in ways that maintain, enhance, and protect their senses of self (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010), and one way consumers do this is by linking with brands on Facebook to portray a certain image to others.

6. Further research opportunities

There are several avenues for extending this research. First, future research could explore how individual difference factors moderate consumers’ uses of brands to express their selves on Facebook. One individual difference factor is a person’s attachment style. Recent research shows that anxiously attached individuals use brands as a way to signal their ideal self-concepts to others in a public setting (Swamnathan et al., 2009). Thus, these individuals might be especially likely to link themselves to brands on Facebook to communicate their ideal (vs. actual) selves. A second individual difference factor of interest is self-monitoring, which reflects the extent to which a person observes and controls expressive behavior and self-presentation in accordance with social cues (Snyder, 1979). As they are highly concerned with the social environment, high self-monitors might also have a strong tendency to express themselves with brands on Facebook. In addition, future research should examine the relationship between image congruence and brand evaluations among high self-monitors compared to low self-monitors within the context of a consumer’s online social network.

Second, future research should investigate how “liking” a brand on Facebook affects the way in which the user perceives him or herself. In essence, future research could attempt to apply the notions of self-extentions (Belk, 1988) to the social networking medium. Recent research shows that using a brand for only a short time leads consumers to alter their own self-perceptions (Park & John, 2010), and a similar effect may be found for consumers who link themselves to brands on Facebook. Our preliminary findings suggest that participants who linked with more brands to maintain the self-concept expressed higher self-evaluations (e.g., more confidence, higher self-esteem). However, expressing an ideal self may also have positive implications for consumers’ self-esteem. As self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) notes that large ideal-actual self-discrepancies are related to lower self-esteem, it has been suggested that consumers can increase their well-being (i.e., reduce this discrepancy) by presenting an ideal self online (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000).

Third, future research can examine the effectiveness of using brands as subtle signals for impression construction. Recent research shows that consumers’ use of brands as signals of one’s characteristics can backfire if perceived by others as inauthentic (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2011). Thus, using brands to represent the self on Facebook could possibly have unintended, adverse consequences for users’ impression formation attempts. This seems especially relevant in the context of expressions of one’s ideal self-image (which might be perceived by others as inauthentic) by linking oneself to brands on Facebook.

Fourth, our research could be leveraged to develop a number of new theories. For instance, one new area of study could investigate how consumers use brands in social media to simply “hint” at an underlying identity, tease, or manage an impression of modesty or conservatism. Another possibility would be to develop a theory that moves beyond a polarized view of presentation as private versus public to suggest more interactive concepts. Yet another area for theory-building in relation to our work is to explore how and why consumers choose to “unfriend” brands.

Finally, future quantitative research may be useful for complementing and validating our findings. Such research could explore the effects of social norms bias on individuals’ responses, as well as the effects of other users of the brand on self-congruity. Additional research could investigate these and other possibilities within Facebook and other platforms in the growing social media landscape.

References
