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Identity-based Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

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.

Keywords: identity, consumer behavior

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 figure 1).

 Insert figure 1 about here

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 figure 2.

Insert figure 2 about here

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 that "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 themselves as members of that political party, they shift from being unaffiliated individuals who happened to behave 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 (Laverie, 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, figure 3 provides a typology with explicit examples and illustrative features.

 Insert figure 3 about here

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, & 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 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 figure 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.

 Insert Figure 4 about here

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, 2011). 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, McGuire, & Fujioka, 1978; McGuire 1984) 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, & Rijsman, 1988), and even visual images and words (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 1999).

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). 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, 2010). Many individuals are likely to endorse both a local and a global culture, at least to some degree, and to have both mental frames available to them (Arnett, 2002). For example, Zhang and Khare (2009) used a priming procedure to increase the accessibility of either a local consumer identity or a global consumer identity, and they were able in that way to produce differences in the subjects' expressed preferences for local and global brands.

Linking these areas of research, we propose that the English language may often serve as a cue for a person's cosmopolitan identity. For example, Alden and colleagues (1999) argue that because "English has come to signal modernism and internationalism to many consumers" an important way for brands to communicate their position in a global consumer culture is to "use English words, written and/or spoken, in [their] communications" (p. 77). In other words, in the same way as Chinese has been shown to cause Chinese-English bilinguals to "think Chinese" (Chen & Bond, 2010), it seems plausible that English may sometimes cause Dutch consumers, for example, to "think global".

If this reasoning is correct, what are the likely consequences for this new breed of "bicultural" consumers of being confronted with messages in English? The features of a cosmopolitan identity may vary among people of different generations in different countries.

In some contexts, a cosmopolitan identity is likely to be associated with tolerant and ecumenical values. In these cases, we predict that individuals may display less discrimination and bias in an English-language environment. In some other contexts, a cosmopolitan identity may be strongly associated with the US culture and values. In these cases, exposure to English may trigger, for example, a more individualistic self-construal.

Another interesting area for future research is the way language activates consumer culture among individuals depending on whether global and local consumer cultures are in a harmonious relationship or a conflicting relationship. In many countries, global consumer culture is often portrayed as being in conflict with traditional (e.g., religious) values. In such cases, it is possible that English may trigger more complex identity effects for some consumers. In particular, for consumers who experience global consumer culture and local consumer cultures as conflicting, it is possible that English leads to behaviors that are consistent with *local* culture rather than with the global 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 and 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, 2011). 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 & 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, but will be greatly facilitated if the associated concepts are part of the common discourse of a group that embodies the identity. Social media are particularly suited to developing identity-associated discourse. Facebook specifically offers a convenient toolbox for its users to coalesce into 'like' groups. These groups make it possible for their members to affirm and enact an identity (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012), but the identity-related discourse in these groups also affords an efficient selection of concepts (objects, people, places, brands, slang words, ...) that come to connote the identity and will receive the associated affective meaning. The continuously reinforced array of meaningful associations will in turn strengthen the identity itself.

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, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012).

Symbolic relevance exists when the expression of a belief or the possession of an object communicates or reinforces one’s identity in the eyes of others (Belk, 1988; Shavitt & Nelson, 2000). Observers readily make impression judgments about others based on their knowledge of other people’s purchase decisions. Therefore, products provide a “social stock of knowledge that people use in typifying those they meet” (Shavitt & Nelson, 2000, p. 40). Moreover, this general concept of symbolic congruence has been used to explain consumer attraction to products, brands and retail environments (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000).

Goal relevance exists when a potential belief or behavior is related to an *issue* or *outcome* that is important to the individual’s accessible identity. These beliefs or behaviors could include the expression of an attitude, specific group-related behaviors, or simply affiliation with a product or brand. For example, a consumer who benefits from affirmative action would encounter greater goal relevance during an affirmative action debate than would an individual who is unaffected by such policies (Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006). Applied to consumption contexts, goal relevance clearly influences relative preference for US car brands in areas where US automakers manufacture. Ownership of a US automobile in these areas signals external support for the industry and can reinforce the consumer’s identification with it. Such effects are particularly strong when the identity is self-important (Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009).

Stimuli may possess action relevance for an identity if the stimuli allow an individual to perform some action related to a particular identity. For example, a “baseball player” may require a bat, glove and cleats to perform within that identity (Kleine et al., 1993). Similar to

“behavioral involvement” (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004), action-relevant objects and behaviors allow the consumer to perform behavioral functions associated with a particular identity. A corollary of this idea is that the more identity-related possessions a consumer has, the more empowered a consumer should feel about his ability to perform in that identity (Ahuvia, 2005) and the more confident the consumer will be that he holds appropriate opinions (Jones & Gerard, 1967).

Finally, evaluation relevance refers to the extent to which the evaluative content of the identity has sufficient clarity and specificity to inform the consumer’s evaluation of the object or brand and to guide a behavioral response. As a case in point, when an “urban youth” evaluates shoe brands, he or she may find several brands that have co-opted young, urban imagery in their advertising and are thus not differentiable on this identity dimension. In this situation, the absence of a clear identity-related norm provides her with an inadequate basis for choice (Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000), and thus her identity therefore fails to discriminate between the available options.

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 lose 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, Scott, Morales, & Dahl, 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 (Klesse, Goukens, Geyskens, & de Ruyter, 2012; 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 pursuit 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; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McKlarty, 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, Wheeler, & Shiv, 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, Karbowski, Monty, & Perlmutter, 1986;

Norman & Aron, 2003). This suggests that brands should be careful not to highlight imagery that is aspirational but unattainable (Klesse et al., 2012).

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). 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 (Muniz & 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 et al., 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 constitute a threat to males who identify with the brand and can trigger a range of coping responses (Avery, 2012).

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 (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Amiot, de la Sablonnière, Terry, & Smith, 2007; Benet-Martinez et al., 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-Martinez et al., 2002; Mok & Morris, 2009, 2010; Zou, Morris, & Benet-Martinez., 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-Martinez 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 enacting a particular identity or 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-Martinez 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 has received virtually no attention in psychological research (for a recent discussion, see North & Fiske, 2012). An identity perspective could provide a fruitful approach to investigate intergenerational relations in a consumer context.

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 nondeliberative—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.

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