

Activating the Self-Importance of Consumer Selves: Exploring Identity Salience Effects on Judgments

AMERICUS REED II*

Two studies examine the identity salience construct in a judgment formation context. Study 1 manipulates identity salience by heightening the self-importance of a consumer social identity, resulting in systematic changes in purchase intent of an identity relevant product. Study 2 shows that judgments of identity relevant stimuli are a function of exposure to an identity cue and the consumer's measured self-importance associated with the identity, particularly when the identity is diagnostic to the judgment. These results are discussed in terms of how they extend prior work on social identity, product preference formation, and attitude change.

Social identities are mental representations that can become a basic part of how consumers view themselves. For example, a consumer may see herself as a Democrat, a professor, tomboy, or working mother. Indeed, marketers often create or (re)position products and brands to embody a particular *social identity oriented lifestyle*. The implicit assumption is that consumers who possess or desire to possess that social identity will look upon such lifestyle presentations favorably, connect the lifestyle to the advertised brand, and generate a favorable judgment toward the brand. However, consumer judgments are more likely to be affected by social identification when a social identity is highly salient (Forehand and Deshpandé 2001). Therefore, *identity salience*—a temporary state during which the consumer's identity is activated (Forehand, Deshpandé, and Reed 2002)—can bring to mind attitudes and behaviors consistent with the social identity. This is important because there are a number of potentially controllable environmental and situational stimuli that may evoke or instantiate a particular social identity, thereby making it an important factor in a resulting judgment (see Reed and Forehand 2003).

The link between social identification and judgments has been investigated in numerous consumer domains, including the persuasiveness of spokespersons (Deshpandé and Stayman 1994), gender and ethnic differences in advertisements (Grier and Deshpandé 2001), food consumption preferences

(Wooten 1995), media usage (Saegert, Hoover, and Hilger 1985), brand loyalty/organizational patronage (Deshpandé, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986), and even information-processing tendencies (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991). These research studies have clearly demonstrated that classifying consumers based on some social identity leads to differences in the descriptions of how consumers behave or respond to marketing stimuli.

In fact, the notion that a consumer's sense of who he is should relate to his consumption and choice has been an important idea discussed by several scholars (e.g., Levy 1959), whether in terms of an abstract notion of congruency between the self and a brand (Sirgy 1982), in terms of precise roles that the consumer wishes to enact (Solomon 1983), or in terms of particular personality associations embodied within the brand itself (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, and Garolera 2001). Although prior work has clearly heightened the awareness of social identification and measured some of the key relationships between social identity and product judgments, specifying and experimentally testing the role of identity salience in attitude and judgment formation processes may allow researchers to enhance the nature and scope of research inquiry in this area. Moreover, the notion of identity salience takes on particular importance because consumers each have so many identities that, without knowing how and when which ones become chronically or situationally salient, one cannot predict the impact of identity cues on persuasion.

IDENTITY SALIENCE AND JUDGMENTS

The Self-Importance of a Social Identity

One critical individual difference variable that may influence identity salience is the self-importance that the con-

*Americus Reed II is assistant professor of marketing at University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School of Business, 764 Jon M. Huntsman Hall, 3730 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6371 (amreed@wharton.upenn.edu). This research is based on a portion of the author's doctoral dissertation. Joel Cohen, Rich Lutz, Alan Sawyer, Barry Schlenker, and Dolores Albarracín are graciously thanked for invaluable discussions and comments on earlier drafts.

sumer has with a given social identity.¹ The following thought exercise illustrates this. Consider two consumers who both possess athlete as part of their sense of who they are. Because of past experience, self-affirming reflected appraisals from others, (Laverie, Kleine, and Kleine 2002) and future aspirations (Markus 1981), consumer A's identity as an athlete might carry more personal meaning than consumer B's (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). The fact that this identity is much more engulfing to consumer A may lead to a higher likelihood that many of consumer A's attitudes will be based on the athlete aspect of consumer A's social identity (Reed 2002). Therefore, it is quite reasonable to argue that, to the extent that a particular social identity is relevant to evaluating a brand, making that identity more salient by heightening the self-importance of the identity in question is likely to increase the weight that identity-relevant information is given in evaluating the brand.

The priming literature supports the premise that contextual cues can increase the weight given to attributes in brand evaluation. However, that does not necessarily mean that the evaluation is enhanced (see Wheeler and Petty 2001). Even if a social identity is made salient through direction of self-important thoughts about the social identity, it might not be a basis for a favorable judgment. The social identity must be relevant to the object that is to be evaluated. For example, self-image congruence models have suggested that a consumer is likely to be attracted to a brand, product (Malhotra 1988), or retail environment (Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg 2000) to the extent that there is a cognitive match between positive value-expressive attributes and the consumer's self-concept. The aforementioned theoretical arguments suggest an interaction between identity salience triggered by the self-importance of a particular social identity and the relevance of the object to be evaluated:

H1: When a social identity is perceived as more (less) self-important, higher (lower) evaluations of an object relevant (object irrelevant) focal stimulus will be observed when the message is framed to appeal to the identity in question.

The Interactive Effects of Identity Cues, Self-Importance, and Diagnosticity

Information may take on more or less perceived identity relevance to the extent that the corresponding identity is salient. Again, however, this does not necessarily mean that the information will become more persuasive. Much depends on the relative cogency of the identity implications in the information (compared to the nonidentity implications). For example, suppose that a consumer's political identity (e.g., Democrat) is highly salient (e.g., the consumer

is attending a political rally) at the time an attitude toward an identity-relevant object is called for (e.g., the consumer is asked to assess and sign a petition against estate taxes). The identity cue (in this case a situational cue), the self-importance of her political identity, and the relevance of the petition to be evaluated are all likely to interact through identity salience to affect her judgment. However, suppose that the consumer is asked to either judge the persuasiveness of the estate tax or to judge the readability of the real estate tax petition itself. The first judgment may be highly diagnostic to her Democrat identity (i.e., a clear norm might exist—see Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini [2000]) in which case the identity salience of her political identity is likely to affect the response. The second judgment (readability of the petition) may be less diagnostic to her political identity, somewhat minimizing the effect of her political identity's salience on her subsequent judgment. This is important because another possible impact of a salient social identity could be to change the degree to which ambiguous information is interpreted in identity-relevant terms. Hence, the process of forming an identity-based judgment may be driven by several factors. If, when a judgment is formed, the social identity is salient—the consumer is thinking about herself as being that kind of person (Forehand et. al 2002), self-important—the consumer strongly identifies with that social identity, relevant to the object to be evaluated—is functionally linked to the object (Shavitt, Lowrey, and Han 1992), and provides a basis to respond—gives meaningful evaluative direction for the consumer (Feldman and Lynch 1988), then there is an increased likelihood that the judgment will be generated on the basis of social identification:

H2: The self-importance of a social identity will be more (less) correlated with diagnostic (nondiagnostic) judgments of an identity relevant (irrelevant) stimulus when identity salience is (not) triggered by exposure to an identity cue.

STUDY 1: TESTING SELF-IMPORTANCE AND OBJECT RELEVANCE EFFECTS

The purpose of study 1 was to test hypothesis 1 by experimentally demonstrating the effect of self-importance on consumer judgments of identity relevant stimuli. Participants expressed purchase intentions under two conditions: when a social identity was perceived as being relatively self-important and when the social identity was relevant to the object that was to be evaluated.

Participants and Experimental Design

Participants were randomly assigned to the cells of a 2 (self-importance: high or low) × 2 (object relevance: relevant or not relevant) fully crossed between-subjects factorial design. The dependent measure was purchase likelihood for a focal product and purchase likelihood for two filler products.

¹In this context, the term "self-importance" is not a pejorative term (see Aquino and Reed 2002). Rather, it refers to the potency or "depth" by which a person affiliates with a particular identity. It has been given various names, such as "schematicity" (see Bem 1981; Markus 1977) and "strength of identification" (Deshpandé et al. 1986), among others.

Procedure

In the first task, participants completed a handwriting assessment study that investigated the link between consumer characteristics (e.g., being frugal) and handwriting style. Participants were asked to give samples of their handwriting. As part of the cover story, participants first wrote three neutral sentences in their natural handwriting style in order to provide a baseline. The cover story also stated that part of the research looked at whether what people wrote about was related to their handwriting style. Therefore, participants were instructed to write five independent statements concerning a particular topic. When participants provided their handwriting samples, they wrote about self-conceptions of their family social identity (Baldwin and Holmes 1987). Identity salience via self-importance of participants' familial identity was manipulated as high (low) by having participants write about a particular self-important experience or event that emphasized the interdependent (independent) nature of their connectedness with their family (see Brewer and Gardner 1996). Therefore, in the high-self-importance (low-self-importance) conditions, participants read the following directions:

We'd like you to write 5 independent statements—complete sentences in your usual handwriting style, i.e., cursive or not—each with about 10 to 15 words. The statements should convey some positive, deeply moving, emotionally involving thoughts, and/or sentiments that describe the commitment to your relationship with one or both of your parents. Concentrate on how you have maintained your family ties while also STRENGTHENING the sense of connectedness as a member of your family (a sense of independence as an individual young adult).

After participants completed the first task and after a 10 min. delay, a different experimenter administered an ostensibly unrelated new product assessment study. Participants were asked to evaluate three different product concepts. The first product was a palm-held interpersonal telecommunication device (e.g., palm pilot). The second and third products were filler products. For the three products, participants were presented with a picture and a description of the product. The focal product (interpersonal telecommunication product) was manipulated to be object relevant to the social identity primed by the self-importance manipulation in the first task by framing the interpersonal telecommunication product in terms of the family social identity (e.g., as in a product positioning strategy). In the object relevant to the family social identity condition, the focal product description included utilitarian features (e.g., calendar, address book, e-mail) but with an emphasis on the product as a basis for staying connected to parents and family. The object-not-relevant condition was identical to the relevant condition except that it did not mention a connection to family.

Predictions

For study 1, a significant two-way interaction of design factors on purchase likelihood of the focal product was expected. Purchase intention (toward the focal product) should depend on whether a social identity is self-important. The particular social identity that is relevant to the stimulus to be evaluated combined with the heightened self-importance of that social identity should increase the likelihood that the attitude object (new product concept) will be considered in terms of the particular social identity. There should be a higher likelihood that the evaluative content of the social identity should be the basis for forming a judgment to guide purchase intention—that is, higher purchase intentions for the focal product.

Manipulation Checks

To check the self-importance manipulation, a separate pretest was run. Twenty-seven participants first completed the handwriting assessment study. After completing the handwriting task and after a 10 min. waiting period, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated set of personality measures administered by a different experimenter. Buried in this packet of surveys were 15 manipulation check items intended to assess the effectiveness of the self-importance manipulation (e.g., I strongly identify with my family, Being a member of my family often affects how I tend to view the world around me, etc.). Items ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree, and four of the items were reverse coded. The 15 manipulation check items were collapsed into one measure of self-importance ($\alpha = .78$), and the means of the self-importance measure were calculated as a function of the low- and high-self-importance conditions. The averages in the low- and high-self-importance conditions were $M_{\text{low-self-imp}} = 3.57$ and $M_{\text{high-self-imp}} = 4.19$ ($F(1, 25) = 29.58, p < .001$), respectively, indicating that the self-importance manipulation altered participants' perceptions of the self-importance of their family identity.

Results

In the main study, 121 participants from a southeastern university were randomly assigned to experimental treatments. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested the main effects and all possible higher-order interactions of self-importance of the family identity (low vs. high) and object relevance (relevant: framed in terms of features + family; not relevant: framed in terms of just features) on mean purchase likelihood for the focal product and the two filler products. Consistent with hypothesis 1, for the focal product, main effects of self-importance ($F(1, 113) = 11.30, p < .01$) and object relevance ($F(1, 113) = 14.28, p < .01$) were qualified by a significant two-way interaction of self-importance by object relevance ($F(1, 113) = 4.33, p < .05$). Participants' purchase likelihood of the focal product depended on whether the self-importance of their family identity was low or high and whether the focal product was

framed in an identity-relevant or identity-irrelevant fashion. Table 1 shows mean purchase likelihood of the focal product and the two filler products as a function of self-importance and object relevance.

To better understand the nature of the two-way interaction, a planned contrast was conducted. The key prediction is that the highest purchase likelihood should be observed when a social identity is self-important and identity-relevant. The responses of participants who had perceived their family social identity as being highly self-important and who evaluated an identity-relevant product were contrasted against the average responses of all other treatments. Also supportive of hypothesis 1, participants who perceived their family social identity to be self-important and who evaluated an identity-relevant product reported higher purchase likelihood ($M = 5.33$) than participants who had perceived their family social identity as being self-important, but did not evaluate an identity-relevant product ($M = 3.63$), participants who did not perceive their family social identity as self-important but did evaluate an identity-relevant product ($M = 3.76$), and participants who neither perceived their family social identity as self-important nor evaluated an identity-relevant product ($M = 3.28$; $F(1, 119) = 30.76$, $p < .01$).

Discussion of Study 1

The pattern of data in study 1 suggests that identity salience triggered when people see a particular aspect of their social identification as being relatively self-important results in a higher likelihood to favorably evaluate an identity-relevant object when the message is framed to appeal to the identity. This pattern was found for the focal product framed in terms of the salient identity but not for the filler products. Although one may argue that the effect is the result of demand artifacts, there are several aspects that argue against that alternative explanation. Every attempt was made to minimize the perceived connection between the two tasks in the main study. Distinct cover stories were carefully constructed for each task; the two tasks were separated in time, admin-

istered by different experimenters, and consisted of aesthetically distinct stimulus materials. Moreover, when queried in postexperimental inquiries, no participants indicated suspicion that the two tasks were related. In addition, artifactual demand is less likely to be an alternative explanation for study 1 because a higher-order interaction was found (Shimp, Hyatt, and Snyder 1991), making it difficult in a between-subjects design for participants to calibrate responses to other nonobserved experimental conditions.

Self-Importance versus Identity Salience

Although the self-importance of an identity may trigger identity salience, these two constructs are not the same. Self-importance is a relatively enduring association between an individual’s sense of self and his or her social identity (see Deshpandé et al. 1986). Identity salience reflects the momentary activation of a particular social identity. Given the operationalization of self-importance in study 1, there might be two possible effects. It is possible that the manipulation of self-importance in study 1 also made the social identity differentially salient, leading to difficulty in distinguishing possible effects of salience and self-importance of participant’s family identity on purchase likelihood for the product stimuli. A number of research studies have examined the impact of making an aspect of one’s identity temporarily salient—for example, when students are informed that a critical change is being considered for their university, their student identity is presumably made salient (Haugtvedt, Petty, and Cacioppo 1992). Hence, a consumer’s social identity may be accessible in a certain decision situation to the extent that it is contextually salient, or is chronically self-important to them. Since any manipulation of self-importance of a social identity is also likely to make that social identity salient, the absence of a manipulation check on salience (as in study 1) makes it harder to disentangle differential salience and chronic self-importance effects. Similarly, a strong association between a brand or a product (as was probably created by using the framing manipulations) and an aspect of a social identity may make that identity

TABLE 1

STUDY 1: EFFECTS OF SELF-IMPORTANCE AND OBJECT RELEVANCE ON PURCHASE LIKELIHOOD OF FOCAL PRODUCT AND FILLER PRODUCTS

| Products evaluated | Object relevance | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Relevant | | Not relevant | |
| | Self-importance low | Self-importance high | Self-importance low | Self-importance high |
| Focal product | 3.76 ^b (1.38) | 5.33 ^{a, *} (1.61) | 3.28 ^b (1.89) | 3.63 ^b (1.35) |
| Filler product 1 | 2.45 ^{a, *} (1.74) | 2.91 ^b (1.94) | 2.21 ^{a, *} (1.32) | 3.40 ^b (1.89) |
| Filler product 2 | 4.86 ^a (1.79) | 5.48 ^a (1.34) | 5.62 ^a (1.29) | 5.53 ^a (1.38) |

NOTE.— $n = 121$ participants. Standard deviations are in parentheses. In each row means with different superscripts (a, b) are statistically different from each other based on planned contrasts.

* $p < .05$.

more salient when the object is encountered in a decision (e.g., ethnic food items on a menu may heighten ethnic salience when looking at the menu). An important extension of study 1 would involve simultaneous examination of both the effects of identity cues and the self-importance construct on identity salience but with operationalizations that do not potentially confound the two constructs.

STUDY 2: TESTING EFFECTS OF IDENTITY CUES, SELF-IMPORTANCE, AND DIAGNOSTICITY

The purpose of study 2 was to test hypothesis 2. Moreover, study 2 is a partial replication of study 1, but it goes beyond that study by including several other aspects. To enhance generalizability, study 2 uses a different social identity, a different attitude object, and a different sample (non-college undergraduates). In addition, rather than manipulating self-importance, study 2 measures self-importance in advance (see Deshpandé and Stayman 1994), allowing for the study to examine the effect of identity cues and self-importance constructs separately without confounding identity salience derived from exposure to identity cues with identity salience triggered by chronic self-importance.

Study 2 addresses the aforementioned issues by demonstrating the interactive effect of identity salience and the self-importance of a social identity coupled with exposure to identity cues in the context of diagnostic and nondiagnostic judgments (see Feldman and Lynch 1988). During the study, participants made judgments under three different conditions: after exposure to an identity cue, when the attitude object was relevant (not relevant) to the social identity, and when the social identity in question was self-important. Finally, to more clearly distinguish differential effects of identity cues and self-importance, the evaluative responses given toward the attitude object were either diagnostic or nondiagnostic judgments. More details follow.

Participants and Experimental Design

Participants were drawn from a sample of 140 freshman and sophomore students, ages 14–16, at a southeastern high school. They participated for part of course credit. In study 2, the students were randomly assigned to the cells of a 2 (salience: high or low) \times 2 (object relevance: relevant or not relevant) between-subjects factorial design. In addition, participants' identification (self-importance) with the social identity was included as a covariate.

Procedure

At time 1, a pretest was conducted to determine various social identities for this particular sample. Based on their open-ended responses to the prompt "describe yourself," a list of various social identities was generated (see Rosenberg and Gara 1985). Several weeks later, at time 2, a series of social identity scales was administered. The scales measured the self-importance (i.e., whether participants identified

with, admired, and characterized themselves as being a person who holds the identity) of a subset of social identities generated at time 1. Based on a preliminary analysis of the data generated at time 2 and to avoid ceiling or floor effects, a social identity (described below) was chosen for use in the main study in which the distribution of self-importance scores was roughly uniformly distributed among participants. Approximately 2 wk. later, at time 3, each participant was given a series of various surveys and research tasks. Buried within the tasks was a consumer Web page assessment study. Participants were told that marketers often want to understand the potential persuasiveness of Web page content. In order to understand how to create Web page media that have the most impact, message content and Web page design is often pretested on relevant populations. Participants were told that this study would assess their perceptions regarding types of message content, types of Web page content, Web page ads, and or products/services.

Independent Variables

The self-generated social identity chosen from the pretest at time 1 and time 2 was Future College Educated Leaders of America. Although the social identity chosen for this study represents an aspirational reference group for the sample, it is consistent with the work by Markus and Nurius (1987), who argued for how the existence of various possible selves reflects motivational aspects of specific hopes, fears, and fantasies (see also Hart, Fegley, and Brengelman 1993), which, through self-conceptions, can affect judgments. Self-importance of the social identity consisted of the average of three items ($\alpha = .85$). In a prior survey conducted at time 2, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which future college-educated leaders of America described them, ranging from (1) does not describe to (7) describes me perfectly; the extent to which they identified with that group, ranging from (1) do not identify with group in any way to (7) strongly identify with the group; and whether they admired the group ranging from (1) do not admire the group to (7) really admire the group.

The appendix shows the background information participants read prior to the main study, which exposed half the participants to an identity cue. In the main study conducted at time 3, participants examined the target product/service of interest, which was a Smithsonian Magazine Association membership. The participants saw an example of the Web page. Participants were then asked to take several seconds to inspect the Web page. They were told to read all information carefully. Afterward, participants read a description of the service that was depicted on the Web page. The appendix also shows the object relevance manipulation. The product was framed in terms of the social identity in question (object relevant) or in terms of strict utilitarian attributes—(object not relevant). After reviewing the information, participants rated the Web page on various evaluative dimensions and then reported their attitude toward the Smithsonian Associate membership.

Dependent Measures

Participants were asked to rate the example Web page on the following six dimensions: interestingness, readability, visual appeal, persuasiveness, complexity, and design quality. Participants were also asked to rate the extent to which they felt favorable or unfavorable toward the Smithsonian Association membership, which ranged from unfavorable (1) to very favorable (7).

Predictions

Of the seven dependent measures that were chosen, three were expected to be highly diagnostic to the salient social identity: interestingness, persuasiveness of the Web page, and attitude toward the product depicted on the Web page. The other four dimensions—readability, visual appeal, complexity, and design quality of the Web page—were expected to be relatively less diagnostic. Therefore, the self-importance of a social identity should interact with exposure to an identity cue to affect judgments of an object relevant stimulus—Smithsonian National Associate Membership framed in terms of the social identity—but it should be relatively more positively correlated with those dimensions that are diagnostic—interestingness, persuasiveness, and attitude—than dimensions that are nondiagnostic—readability, visual appeal, complexity, and design quality.

Manipulation Checks

A hold-out sample was used to check both the salience and the object relevance treatment manipulations. To check the salience manipulation, participants were asked to read the introduction and background information to the Web page assessment study. They then answered several cover story questions. One of the questions asked the participants to indicate, at that particular moment, to what extent did the information make them think about their identity as a future college-educated leader of America? The scale ranged from (1) did not make me think about it to (7) made me really think about it. The difference across the high-salience and low-salience conditions was significant ($n = 34$, $M_{\text{high salience}} = 4.47$, $M_{\text{low salience}} = 3.53$; $F(1, 32) = 4.59$, $p = .04$). To check the object relevance manipulation, participants were asked to read the descriptions of the service. One of the questions asked the participants to indicate to what extent the service seemed relevant to what it means to be a future college-educated leader of America ranging from (1) not relevant to (7) very relevant. The difference across the object relevant and object-not-relevant conditions was highly significant ($n = 32$, $M_{\text{relevant}} = 5.25$, $M_{\text{not relevant}} = 2.44$; $F(1, 30) = 65.60$, $p < .001$).

Results

The key effects tested in this study were the relationships between evaluative dimensions and the self-importance of

the social identity in question. An analysis examined each of the six evaluative dimensions (interestingness, readability, visual appeal, persuasiveness, complexity, and design quality) and the participants' attitude toward joining the Smithsonian Associate membership. Self-importance of the social identity that was measured 2 wk. prior to the main study was included in the analysis as an independent continuous variable. Predictions were tested in an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) including main effects of salience and object relevance and all possible two- and three-way interactions of self-importance, salience, and object relevance. The analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction of self-importance \times object relevance \times salience ($F(1, 90) = 18.84$, $p < .0001$). The effect of self-importance of the social identity on participants' perceptions of the interestingness of the Web page depended on two things, whether the participant's social identity (future college educated leaders of America) was made salient via cue exposure and whether the object was relevant (message was framed in terms of the social identity or object features). Table 2 reports means and slope estimates for each evaluative dimension of the self-importance continuous variable in each treatment condition.

The effect of self-importance of the social identity is related to the interestingness dimension only when the social identity is salient via cue exposure and when the attitude object is relevant to the social identity (i.e., when the message has been framed in terms of the social identity). So in the high-salience and object-relevant condition, every one unit change in self-importance of the social identity results in a statistically significant .62 positive unit change in perceptions of interestingness ($t = 6.95$, $p < .0001$) of Web page. This is indirect evidence that self-importance of the social identity influences the judgment of this diagnostic evaluative response. As self-importance of social identification increases, perceptions of the Web page's interestingness also increase, particularly after exposure to an identity cue. According to hypothesis 2, the self-importance should be more strongly related to evaluatively diagnostic dimensions. It should have less of an effect in determining perceptions of readability or visual appeal. Consistent with predictions, no effects were found to be significant on these dimensions (F 's < 1). However, a significant two-way interaction was found of self-importance \times salience for the persuasiveness dimension ($F(1, 90) = 6.53$, $p < .0123$). The effect of self-importance of the social identity on participants' perceptions of the persuasiveness of the Web page depended on whether the participant's social identity was made salient through cue exposure. Similar to the interestingness dimension, the effect of self-importance is more strongly positively related to this relevant dimension when a social identity is salient. More specifically, in the low-salience condition, every one unit change of self-importance results in a .483 unit change of persuasiveness ($t = 5.34$, $p < .0001$), while in the high-salience condition, every one unit change of self-importance results in a .729 unit change of persuasiveness ($t = 7.23$, $p < .0001$). This is, again, con-

TABLE 2

STUDY 2: EFFECTS OF SELF-IMPORTANCE ON EVALUATIVE DIMENSIONS AS A FUNCTION OF IDENTITY CUES AND OBJECT RELEVANCE

| Evaluative dimensions | Object relevance | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------|--------------|-------------------------------|---------|--------------|----------------------------------|---------|--------------|-------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| | Relevant | | | | | | Not relevant | | | | | |
| | Cue not present/ low salience | | | Cue present/ high salience | | | Cue not present/ low salience | | | Cue present/ high salience | | |
| | Mean | β | (<i>t</i>) | Mean | β | (<i>t</i>) | Mean | β | (<i>t</i>) | Mean | β | (<i>t</i>) |
| Interestingness | 3.99 | -.004 | (-.050) | 3.82 | .620 | (6.95)* | 3.97 | .114 | (1.31) | 4.04 | .003 | (.043) |
| Readability | 3.91 | .111 | (1.21) | 4.10 | .018 | (.204) | 4.04 | -.106 | (-1.26) | 3.69 | -.754 | (-.802) |
| Visual appeal | 3.76 | -.782 | (-.822) | 3.90 | .067 | (.757) | 4.07 | -.090 | (-1.03) | 3.73 | .112 | (1.15) |
| Persuasiveness | 4.07 | .483 | (5.34)* | 4.41 | .729 | (7.23)* | 3.88 | -.152 | (-1.54) | 3.69 | .091 | (.993) |
| Complexity | 3.84 | -.037 | (-.482) | 4.35 | .155 | (1.18) | 4.08 | .098 | (1.18) | 4.00 | -.043 | (-.546) |
| Design quality | 3.81 | -.046 | (-.533) | 3.91 | .088 | (1.08) | 3.89 | .048 | (.606) | 4.08 | .052 | (.591) |
| Overall attitude | 4.27 | .543 | (4.73)* | 4.00 | .695 | (5.43)* | 2.76 | -.039 | (-.311) | 2.74 | -.072 | (-.623) |

NOTE.—*n* = 120 participants. β is the slope of self-importance of the social identity nested in each condition. The *t*-values are in parentheses.

*Significant at the .05 level.

sistent with the notion that self-importance influences the formation of a diagnostic evaluative response. Unexpectedly, the analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction of self-importance \times object relevance \times salience for the complexity dimension ($F(1, 90) = 4.19, p < .0435$). The effect of self-importance of the social identity on participants' perceptions of the complexity of the Web page depended on whether the participants' social identity was made salient via cue exposure and the attitude object's relevance (i.e., the type of message that they were exposed to). More specifically, in the high-salience condition, every one unit change of self-importance results in a weak, albeit significant, .155 unit change of perceptions of complexity ($t = 1.81, p < .10$). No significant interaction was observed between self-importance of the social identity and the design quality judgment ($F < 1$). After evaluating the Web page on the six dimensions previously outlined, participants were asked to give their (attitude: [1] very unfavorable to [7] very favorable) toward the Smithsonian Associate membership. An analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction of self-importance \times object relevance for the attitude dimension ($F(1, 90) = 30.84, p < .0001$). The effect of self-importance on participants' attitude toward the Smithsonian membership depended on whether the message was framed in terms of the social identity (object relevant) or object attributes (object not relevant). The effect of self-importance of the social identity is related to attitudes toward the Smithsonian Associate membership only when the message is framed in terms of the social identity. In the low-salience conditions, every one unit change of self-importance results in a .543 unit change in attitudes toward the Smithsonian membership ($t = 4.73, p < .0001$), while in the high-salience condition, every one unit change of self-importance results in a .6947 unit increase in favorable attitudes toward the Smithsonian membership ($t = 5.43, p < .0001$). The effect of self-importance of the social identity in these two treatment conditions closely mirrors the pattern of results found for the persuasiveness dimension.

Discussion of Study 2

The results of study 2 provide additional preliminary evidence for differential salience and self-importance effects on identity relevant judgments. The self-importance of the social identity positively covaried with interestingness of the Web page for participants who were led to form an attitude based on social identity and for whom the social identity was made salient through cue exposure. This effect was somewhat stronger for the persuasiveness dimension, where an effect of self-importance of the social identity was found when social identity salience was high versus low. Although it was a much weaker effect statistically, the pattern of results for the complexity dimension somewhat mirrored the results for the interestingness dimension. This was not expected. However, an effect of self-importance of the social identity was also found for the attitude dimension as a function of object relevance. This pattern of slope effects was very similar to the results found for the persuasiveness dimension. In sum, self-importance was related to all the diagnostic judgments via its interaction with exposure to an identity cue, and the relevance of the attitude object. Self-importance was not related to three out of the four nondiagnostic dimensions. Therefore, in general, this study provides tentative evidence that the self-importance of social identification (more specifically, the potency of group identification as captured by the measured self-importance variable) can be related to the formation of judgments in conditions where conceptually a consumer is more likely to be drawn to a salient social identity that provides a basis for a response (message framed in terms of social identity) on measures that are relatively more evaluatively diagnostic to the social identity.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A consumer's sense of self is the sum total of his or her social identities, and at any given moment, a particular social

identity can be activated by a variety of social, contextual, and individual difference factors (Forehand et al. 2002). The two studies presented here suggest that this heightened salience combined with object relevance (i.e., when the particular social identity is relevant to the stimulus to be evaluated) should increase the likelihood that the object will be thought of in terms of the particular social identity, resulting in a favorable judgment if adopting the identity provides a favorable basis to respond to the object. Indeed, some products appear to relate functionally to consumers through a particular social identity they possess (see Shavitt et al. 1992). For example, Kleine et al. (1993) demonstrated a strong positive relation between a consumer's social identity and the particular possessions that enable consumers to enact that identity. The authors also showed that the frequency with which behaviors are enacted in the service of some social identity is influenced by the importance of an identity to a consumer's self-structure (Kleine et al. 1993, study 2) and feedback from others on how well the consumer is enacting the social identity (Laverie et al. 2002). These results suggest that products are attractive to the extent that they fit the consumer as part of a constellation (see Solomon 1983) of complementary products and "as a facilitating artifact for some identity that is important" (Kleine et al. 1993, p. 229). Marketers can attempt to link consumer social identities to their product offerings, for example, a soft drink (e.g., Sprite) may attempt to position itself as the beverage of choice for some social identity of interest (e.g., Generation-X nonconformists); however, according to the empirical work in this article, consumers are more likely to adopt social identities that they consider to be self-important in terms of a basis for self-definition. Moreover, at any given moment, a consumer who strongly associates with an identity is more likely to have that identity activated than is a consumer who weakly associates with the social identity. For example, social identities that are personally significant, such as religious identification (Charters and Newcomb 1958), racial or ethnic group membership (McGuire, McGuire, and Winton 1979), and so forth, may be frequently activated and highly potent. The subsequent potency over time may produce chronic and predictable differences in a consumer's self-definitions. However, possessing a strong association with an identity need not necessitate its salience. Instead, identity salience is often elicited by factors, cues, and situations external to the consumer. While it may be less difficult to elicit salience in a strong identifier, a strong identifier is not necessarily in a constant state of salience (Forehand et al. 2002). However, as the two studies presented here suggest, self-importance should positively relate to the activation potential (i.e., identity salience) of a particular consumer social identity and should affect reactions to identity relevant marketing stimuli. Marketing communications that attempt to connect a brand to some social identity of interest must consider the extent to which a social identity is valued by consumers in its particular target market and what aspects can be leveraged to increase perceptions of self-importance associated with the identity in question. Otherwise, marketing efforts that try to induce social identity-based attitude and/

or judgment formation toward brands and products will be ineffective. Although prior research has measured relationships between self-importance of ethnic identity in quasi-experimental contexts, (Stayman and Deshpandé 1989) as well as the correlation between self-importance and behaviorally relevant outcomes in cross-sectional surveys (Deshpandé et al. 1986; Kleine et al. 1993; Laverie, et al. 2002), the current work (study 1) builds upon those articles by showing direct causal linkages between self-importance of a social identity and differential processing of identity-relevant stimuli in an experimental context. Correlational evidence presented here also suggests that salience derived from exposure to identity cues that activate self-important social identities are more likely to influence evaluative responses that are diagnostic to the social identity (see Feldman and Lynch 1988). In other words, possessing a salient, self-important, and object-relevant social identity is particularly useful as a guide to judgments if it provides a person with a meaningful basis to respond to some stimulus. Consider a consumer who is evaluating a consideration set of shoe brands. Further suppose that the person's social identity (e.g., urban youth) is highly salient at the time an attitude is generated (e.g., the person is watching a program on Black Entertainment Television). Even if the consumer is evaluating a set of brands (e.g., Sketcher's, FUBU) that is clearly relevant to her self-important social identity, she may not be clear on which brand best embodies her urban youth identity. Her social identity in this case would be evaluatively nondiagnostic relative to evaluating the brands of shoes (see Feldman and Lynch 1988). Her social identity as an urban youth and the fact that there is no clear identity-related norm (see Kallgren et al. 2000) provide her with an inadequate basis to respond to the object (i.e., in this example, choosing among the two brands). Hence, if a social identity is evaluatively diagnostic, there is an increased likelihood that the evaluative content linked to that social identity will influence the formation of a consumer attitude. Therefore, social identification may be salient, self-important, and relevant to a product or brand but may also leave the consumer unable to generate a judgment if that identity does not provide some direction with regard to how that type of person will or should respond.

CONCLUSION

Recent research suggests that it may be important to examine which internal and external factors are likely to affect identity salience and, hence, subsequent responses to identity-relevant marketing stimuli (Forehand et al. 2002). This research attempts to provide additional evidence of the interplay of identity salience via identity cues and the self-importance of consumer social identities in determining responses to brands and products that are designed or positioned to embody particular social identity oriented life styles. Such an understanding is important in marketing because, if a brand can connect to the consumer's social identity, the consumer may feel that the brand is *part of me* (Kleine et al. 1995) and cannot conceive of himself or herself as whole without it (see Oliver 1999).

APPENDIX

STUDY 2: IDENTITY CUE AND OBJECT RELEVANCE MANIPULATIONS

In the *identity-cue-present conditions*, the last of three segments read as follows:

This research has also been conducted on a segment conveniently entitled Towns and Gowns. This segment makes up about 1.2% of U.S. households. The towns and gowns segment earns on average about \$57,862. Members of the Towns and Gowns segment typically range from ages 18 to 34. *They have been described as college educated, and highly likely to be the future leaders of this country.* They are likely to read magazines like *Natural History* and watch television shows like *Good Morning America*. Sample ZIP codes include College Station, Texas 77840; Bloomington, Indiana 47401; Ithaca, New York 14850; and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida 33324.

In the *identity-cue-not-present conditions*, the last of three segments read as follows:

This research has also been conducted on a segment conveniently entitled Blue Blood Estates. This segment makes up about 1.2% of U.S. households. The blue blood estates segment earns on average about \$57,862. Members of the blue blood estates segment typically range from ages 18 to 34. *They have been described as high school educated, and highly likely to possess reasonable spending power.* They are likely to read magazines like *Natural History* and watch television shows like *Good Morning America*. Sample ZIP codes include College Station, Texas 77840; Bloomington, Indiana 47401; Ithaca, New York 14850; and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida 33324.

In the *object-not-relevant condition*, the Smithsonian Association membership was described in terms of strict, utilitarian benefits (attributes):

Why would you want to be a Smithsonian National Associate Member? Just think about the pros and cons! Being a Smithsonian National Associate Member has many advantages. For example, each member receives twelve total issues of the *Smithsonian Magazine* at a special rate that has been discounted specifically for Association members. Twelve issues sent directly to your home or office. In addition to book, record, and video discounts as well as other discounts at various museum shops, each member is also kept up to date on various notices of important events and intellectual activities going on in your area. Also, members of the Smithsonian National Association receive eligibility for specially designated travel programs, as well as free admission to a number of the country's best museums and other cultural events. All of these amazing features for just \$26.00 for the entire year! Why don't you just weigh the costs and benefits! How can you lose?

In the *object-relevant-condition*, the Smithsonian Asso-

ciation membership was described in terms of the social identity in question:

Why would you want to be a Smithsonian National Associate Member? Just think about whom might be likely to possess such a membership? Think about the type of people who would receive the twelve issues of the *Smithsonian Magazine* that is included in the membership. What type of person? Individuals who always present themselves with the highest level of intelligence and future success. For example, college educated individuals of this country might keep up to date on various notices of important events and activities going on in their area. These Smithsonian National Association members are the future leaders of this country. The magazines that they read tell others that they appreciate the more culturally involving things in life. Can't you imagine yourself as this type of person, i.e., a college educated, future leader of this country and Smithsonian Associate Member? All of these amazing features for just \$26.00 for the entire year! How can you lose?

[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Durairaj Maheswaran served as associate editor for this article.]

REFERENCES

- Aaker, Jennifer, Veronica Benet-Martínez, and Jordi Garolera (2001), "Consumption Symbols as Carriers of Culture: A Study of Japanese and Spanish Brand Personality Constructs," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81 (3), 492-508.
- Aquino, Karl F. and Americus Reed II (2002), "The Self-Importance of Moral Identity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83 (6), 1423-40.
- Baldwin, Mark W. and John G. Holmes (1987), "Salient Private Audiences and Awareness of the Self," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52 (6), 1087-98.
- Bem, Sandra L. (1981), "Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing," *Psychological Review*, 88 (4), 354-64.
- Brewer, Marylin B. and Wendi Gardner. (1996), "Who Is This 'We'? Levels of Collective Identity and Self Representations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71 (1), 83-93.
- Charters, W. W. and T. M. Newcomb (1958), "Some Attitudinal Effects of Experimentally Increased Salience of a Membership Group," in *Readings in Social Psychology*, 3d ed., ed. E. E. Maccoby, T. M. Newcomb, and E. L. Hartley, New York: Holt, 276-81.
- Deshpandé, Rohit, Wayne D. Hoyer, and Naveen Donthu (1986), "The Intensity of Ethnic Affiliation: A Study of the Sociology of Hispanic Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13 (2), 214-20.
- Deshpandé, Rohit and Douglas M. Stayman (1994), "A Tale of Two Cities: Distinctiveness Theory and Advertising Effectiveness," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 31 (1), 57-64.
- Feldman, Jack and John G. Lynch (1988), "Self-Generated Validity and Other Effects of Measurement on Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 73 (3), 421-35.
- Forehand, Mark R. and Rohit Deshpandé (2001), "What We See Makes Us Who We Are: Priming Ethnic Self-Awareness and

- Advertising Response," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 38 (3), 336–48.
- Forehand, Mark R., Rohit Deshpandé, and Americus Reed II (2002), "Identity Salience and the Influence of Activation of the Social Self-Schema on Advertising Response," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87 (6), 1086–99.
- Grier, Sonya A. and Rohit, Deshpandé (2001), "Social Dimensions of Consumer Distinctiveness: The Influence of Group Social Status and Identity on Advertising Persuasion," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 38 (2), 216–24.
- Hart, Daniel, Suzanne Fegley, and Doris Brengelman (1993), "Perceptions of Past, Present, and Future Selves among Children and Adolescents," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 11 (3), 265–82.
- Haugtvedt, Curtis P., Richard E. Petty, and John T. Cacioppo (1992), "Need for Cognition and Advertising: Understanding the Role of Personality Variables in Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 1 (3), 239–60.
- Kallgren, Carl A., Raymond R. Reno, and Robert B. Cialdini (2000), "A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: When Norms Do and Do Not Affect Behavior," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26 (8), 1002–12.
- Kleine, Robert E., Susan S. Kleine, and Jerome B. Kernan (1993), "Mundane Consumption and the Self: A Social Identity Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2 (3), 209–35.
- Kleine, Susan S., Robert E. Kleine, III, and Chris T. Allen (1995), "How Is a Possession 'Me' or 'Not Me'? Characterizing Types and an Antecedent of Material Possession Attachment," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (4), 327–43.
- Laverie, Debra A., Robert E. Kleine III, and Susan S. Kleine (2002), "Re-examination and Extension of Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan's Social Identity Model of Mundane Consumption: The Mediating Role of the Appraisal Process," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (4), 659–69.
- Levy, Sidney J. (1959), "Symbols for Sales," *Harvard Business Review*, 37 (4), 117–24.
- Malhotra, Naresh K. (1988), "Self Concept and Product Choice: An Integrated Perspective," *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 9 (1), 1–28.
- Markus, Hazel (1977), "Self-Schemata and Processing Information about the Self," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35 (2), 63–78.
- (1981), "The Drive for Integration: Some Comments," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 17 (3), 257–61.
- Markus, Hazel and Paula Nurius (1987), "Possible Selves: The Interface between Motivation and the Self-Concept," in *Self and Identity: Psychosocial Perspectives*, ed. Krysia Yardley and Terry Honess, New York: Wiley & Sons, 157–72.
- McGuire, William J., Claire V. McGuire, and Ward Winton (1979), "Effects of Household Sex Composition on the Salience of One's Gender in the Spontaneous Self-Concept," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 15 (1), 77–90.
- Meyers-Levy, Joan and Brian Sternthal (1991), "Gender Differences in the Use of Message Cues and Judgments," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 28 (February), 84–96.
- Oliver, Richard L. (1999), "Whence Consumer Loyalty?" in special issue, "Fundamental Issues and Directions for Marketing," *Journal of Marketing* 63, 33–44.
- Reed, Americus, II (2002), "Social Identity as a Useful Perspective for Self-Concept Based Consumer Research," *Psychology and Marketing*, 19 (3), 235–66.
- Reed, Americus, II, and Mark Forehand (2003), "Social Identity and Marketing: An Integrative Framework," unpublished, Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania.
- Rosenberg, Seymour and Michael A. Gara (1983), "Contemporary Perspectives and Future Directions of Personality and Social Psychology," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45 (1), 57–73.
- Saegert, Joel, Robert J. Hoover, and Marye T. Hilger (1985), "Characteristics of Mexican-American Consumers," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12 (1), 104–9.
- Shavitt, Sharon, Tina M. Lowrey, and Sang-pil Han (1992), "Attitude Functions in Advertising: The Interactive Role of Products and Self-Monitoring," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 1 (4), 337–64.
- Shimp Terence, Eva Hyatt, and David Snyder (1991), "Critical Appraisal of Demand Artifacts in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18 (December), 273–83.
- Sirgy, Joseph M. (1982), "Self-Concept in Consumer Behavior: A Critical Review," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9 (3), 287–300.
- Sirgy, Joseph M., Dhruv Grewal, and Tamara Mangleburg (2000), "Retail Environment, Self-Congruity, and Retail Patronage: An Integrative Model and a Research Agenda," *Journal of Business Research*, 49 (2), 127–38.
- Solomon, Michael R. (1983), "The Role of Products as Social Stimuli: A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10 (3), 319–29.
- Stayman, Douglas M. and Rohit Deshpandé (1989), "Situational Ethnicity and Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16 (4), 361–71.
- Wheeler, Christian and Richard Petty (2001), "The Effects of Stereotype Activation on Behavior: A Review of Possible Mechanisms," *Psychological Bulletin*, 127 (6), 797–826.
- Wooten, David B. (1995), "One-of-a-Kind in a Full House: Some Consequences of Ethnic and Gender Distinctiveness," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 4 (3), 205–24.