

Consumer Identity and Purchase Behavior

Insights

Consumers possess and can adopt a variety of identities (demographic, psychographic, and behavior-based) and these identities positively (negatively) influence attitudes and purchase intentions for products that align (misalign) with those identities. The influence of consumer identity on product evaluation generally depends on the momentary salience of the identity (how much the consumer is temporarily thinking about the identity) and how relevant the identity is at the moment a consumer judgment is called for.

To summarize:

- Consumers have multiple identities that are highly flexible across time and situations. Some identities within a consumer facilitate each other, while others may conflict. Consumers consciously and unconsciously balance the identities they strive for.
- Momentary activation of an identity increases when a consumer is “distinctive” in their social environment (usually because they are in the numeric minority) or when a consumer is exposed to images, exemplars, and other symbols in the media that direct attention to the identity.
- Consumers are generally more receptive to products that are associated with an activated personal identity—even when the consumer is unaware that the identity has been activated. Although consumers will also avoid products that are associated with identities that oppose their activated personal identity, receptivity to products associated with one’s identity is generally more robust than the avoidance of products associated with opposing identities.
- Consumers will perceive the functional attributes of products associated with their identity as superior to other brands, even when they are objectively not.
- Consumers who choose products aligned with a personal identity often report subsequently more positive attitudes toward both the identity and themselves (self-esteem). Further, they will starkly defend brands that are aligned with their identity as if they were defending themselves.

Evidence Base

Compilation of 83 academic papers, reporting over 200 empirical studies. Evidence base includes both laboratory-based experiments and field studies.

Managerial Implications

- Marketers cannot assume that a consumer will always have a given identity “active,” especially across different consumption contexts.
- Managers should incorporate identities into their promotions to the extent that the identities “fit” well with their brand’s values, associations, and equity.
- There are often trade-offs between consumer identities such that targeting one identity may conflict with other identities the consumer possesses. Managers should therefore consider how their products and appeals may heighten or lessen internal conflict.
- Managers should incorporate imagery into their advertising that evokes the personal identity that the product is intended to activate.
- Managers should use social media and other promotions to connect a product to relevant consumer identities.
- Managers should reinforce identity linkages by producing complementary constellations of products that consumers can use to signal their identities to others. For example, an athletic brand is wise to produce general purpose clothing that prominently displays its brand name and imagery as this allows its consumers to signal that they are an avid fan of the sport.
- Managers should routinely carefully monitor and reassess the identity chosen and its ongoing linkages, to ensure that it remains authentic, relevant, timely, and distinct from competitor offerings.

Contributors

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References

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