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WHEN DOES IDENTITY SALIENCE PRIME APPROACH AND AVOIDANCE?

A balance-congruity model

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Identity salience is defined as the activation of a particular identity dimension within an individual's social self-schema and typically heightens sensitivity to identity-relevant stimuli. For example, being at work (home) might increase the salience of one's organizational (family) identity. In addition, being consciously or non-consciously exposed to symbols, words, pictures, ideas, brands or people can increase the salience of any identity related to these cues. Indeed, identity salience generally follows consumer evaluation of relative similarity or dissimilarity (cf. Eiser *et al.* 2001, Forehand *et al.* 2002). Interestingly, some instances of this self-categorization process may undermine one's basis for identification. (e.g. if one's ethnic identity salience is increased by exposure to a threatening stereotype prime). Although such self-categorizations *can* threaten the consumer's identification with a group, the literature shows both approach behaviors, such as seeking high–status products when power identity is threatened (Rucker and Galinsky 2008) and avoidance behaviors, such as shunning gender–associated products after gender identity is threatened (White and Argo 2009, White *et al.* 2012), are possible. Given these mixed findings, the extant literature would greatly benefit from a theoretical exploration of when identity salience is threatening and what factors determine whether such threats prompt approach or avoidance.

To illuminate these issues, we propose a model of identity salience and threat that intentionally defines threats in terms of specific associations. For example, when a *man* hears a statements like "all men are pigs" the association of his gender with positive valence is threatened. On the other hand, when he is told "you are a poor excuse for a man" his association of self with male is challenged without saying anything positive or negative about being a man. As we will show conceptually, analyzing the threat in terms of specific associations enables more refined theoretical predictions for when and why threatening salient identities can produce identity approach or identity avoidance. In addition, the proposed model identifies important mediating mechanisms yet to be examined.

Identity salience precursors and outcomes

Identity salience can be increased by a variety of factors, including stable individual traits, stimulus cues, and social context (Forehand *et al.* 2002). Individuals vary in how strongly they associate themselves with an identity. Stimulus cues and social context also often produce increases in identity salience, albeit more temporarily. Simply seeing a member of a particular group (Marques *et al.* 1988; Torres 2007) or encountering identity-related images or words (Forehand and Deshpandé 2001; Mastin *et al.* 2007; Reed and Aquino 2003) can heighten identity salience. One's social context can also increase identity salience by making one feel more distinctive or unusual (McGuire *et al.* 1978) or by highlighting one's inclusion in the statistical majority (Yip 2005). These triggers can function singularly or interact with other situational variables to produce behaviors that either reinforce an identity or create distance from it.

Identity salience can produce approach

A salient identity shapes the perspective with which consumers view the world and influences the perceived relevance of new information (Maitner *et al.* 2010; Turner 1988). In many cases, heightening awareness of a particular identity leads consumers to think, feel, or behave in an identity-consistent fashion (Reed 2004). For example, those with chronically salient moral identities are more apt to donate to charity (Reed *et al.* 2007). Similarly, individuals who scored higher on global (versus local) identity, preferred products tailored to the global (versus local) marketplace (Zhang and Khare 2009), and bicultural subjects primed with cultural symbols increased their preference for objects associated with the primed culture (Chattaraman *et al.* 2009; LeBoeuf *et al.* 2010; Chattaraman *et al.* 2010; Hong *et al.* 2000; Zou *et al.* 2008). Furthermore, consumers tend to favor products endorsed by spokespeople of shared ethnicity (Forehand and Deshpandé 2001), and minority consumers prefer service encounters in which more customers of the same race are present (Baker *et al.* 2008). In the educational domain, students primed with education-dependent future selves (doctor, lawyer, etc.) were more likely to take on extra credit assignments (Destin and Oyserman 2010).

Identity salience can produce avoidance

It should not be assumed, however, that identity salience uniformly results in enhanced evaluation of identity-related objects (Wheeler and Petty 2001). For example, exposure to Spanish-language advertisements made Hispanic participants less likely to spontaneously acknowledge their ethnicity (Dimofte *et al.* 2003), and minority workers in Southeast Asia placed lower dollar values on their own work after being asked to identify their ethnicity on a demographic questionnaire (Cheung and Hardin 2010). Furthermore, informing consumers that a salient identity is non-diagnostic can turn identity approach into avoidance (Zhang and Khare 2009). In general, consumers tend to avoid a salient identity when that self-association has negative consequences for the self (Steele and Berkowitz 1988) or if the self-association triggers a feeling of loss of freedom to express an identity (Bhattacharjee *et al.* 2011).

Given that these findings indicate that identity salience can produce both approach and avoidance, a comprehensive model that identifies the moderators and key mediators of identity-based consumer behavior would be very useful.

Identity salience and threat

The studies mentioned thus far typically employ stable individual differences, contextual variables, or stimulus primes to make salient a particular identity. These sorts of activations can be either threatening or non-threatening. A self-concept threat is anything that presents potential negative consequences for the self, and simply making a particular identity salient can constitute a threat, as demonstrated by social–distinctiveness theory (McGuire *et al.* 1978; McGuire *et al.* 1979). Steele and Aronson's (1995) seminal work on stereotype threat illustrates this perfectly, as the activation of a stereotyped identity can be threatening enough to impede cognitive function and lead to ironic and unintentional confirmation of the stereotype. Such threats can be overcome by making salient in-group members highly competent in the negatively stereotyped dimension (Marx and Roman 2002).

Self-concept threats, however, are not driven solely by stereotypes. Simply casting a salient group identity in a negative light or manipulating its status is enough to constitute a threat. For instance, high-status group members tend to feel threatened when they perceive group boundaries to be unstable (Scheepers 2009; Grier and Deshpandé 2001). Alternatively, identity is threatened when group membership is challenged, leading highly identified group members to exert greater effort on the group's behalf (Ouwerkerk *et al.* 2000). Such demonstrations are consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Threatening salient identities also impacts self-esteem, but it is not clear that the effects are uniformly negative. For example, many studies have demonstrated decreased explicit self-esteem in response to social rejection (for a review, see Leary and Baumeister 2000) or performance feedback (Williams *et al.* 2000), yet increases in implicit self-esteem have been observed in the face of similar threats (Rudman *et al.* 2007). Finally, more recent work shows that messages that restrict the ways in which a consumer can express an identity can sometimes backfire because they threaten the sense of freedom and personal agency in identity expression (Bhattacharjee *et al.* 2011).

Self-threats can also dramatically shape consumer preference, although the mediating mechanisms involved are not well understood. For example, threatening a consumer's salient identity with negative information about that identity leads to avoidance of identity-related products (White and Argo 2009; White *et al.* 2012). Specifically, women confronted with negative information about female intelligence avoided low-intellect female products such as biographies of Britney Spears and Whitney Houston (White and Argo 2009). This avoidance of identity-related products is a form of self-protection. On the other hand, this self-protection strategy can also produce identity approach effects. Challenging the strength of association between the self and a salient identity will lead individuals to take action to restore threatened associations (Tetlock *et al.* 2000; Zhong and Liljenquist 2006). When Gao *et al.* (2009: experiment 2) threatened health identity, their subjects responded by choosing an apple over a pack of M&Ms, most likely in a effort to reaffirm the pressured identity.

Although all of the findings to date are motivated by self-protection, the actual threats involved are fundamentally different. We propose that self-concept threats are best understood in terms of the precise associations they target. Specifically, does the threat target the association of a group with positive valence, or the association of the self with the group? Conceptualizing salient identity threat along associational lines leads to a better understanding of when to expect identity approach or avoidance.

To parsimoniously model when identity threats lead to approach versus avoidance, we present a single theoretical framework that can explain the current findings and offer predictions for consumer behavior in the face of a variety of self-threat situations. Using the unified theory

of implicit social cognition (Greenwald *et al.* 2002) as an organizational lens, the proposed framework explains identity salience and threat response in terms of three types of associations: self-valence, self-group, and group-valence. Conceptualizing identity salience and threat in this fashion leads directly into a comprehensive model of threat that provides predictions for both identity approach and avoidance behaviors and the mediating mechanisms that drive them. Furthermore, this framework illuminates key potential moderators of threat response.

The concept of balance is central to the unified theory. The balance-congruity principle states that self-object relationships can develop non-consciously via the formation of balanced triads of associations through a mechanism similar to cognitive consistency theory (Festinger 1957; Heider 1958; Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955; Greenwald *et al.* 2002). A balanced triad consists of the *self*, any *object* (e.g. social group) associated with the self, and a mental conception of *valence*, ranging from positive to negative. Implicit self-esteem is defined as the measured association between self and valence (Farnham *et al.* 1999; Greenwald and Farnham 2000), an attitude is a measured association between a group and valence (Greenwald *et al.* 1998), and an implicit identity is the measured association between a group and the self (Rudman *et al.* 2001). Balanced triads form when any two associations share a common association with a third concept. For example, if self is associated with both male and positive valence, an association of male with positive will develop, completing the triad. A balanced triad can be thought of as an equilibrium state and a threat to any single association in the triad leads to predictable and specific strategies for restoring balance.

Unified theory of threat response: theoretical predictions

Applying the concept of *balance-congruity* to the different operationalizations of self-threat intimates key distinctions in how threats to salient identities operate and the responses they produce. For example, telling an American citizen, "all Americans are bad," may weaken the association between the group and positive valence and thereby throw the triad of associations between the self, the group and valence out of balance. Restoring balance requires either some form of counterargument that will re-establish the association of the group with positive valence, or a weakening of the self-group association (in unusual circumstances, this could also lead to changes in self-valence association, but this final association is comparatively resistant to change). If the threat to group-valence association proves too strong to move via counter-arguing (Eisenstadt *et al.* 2006) or source derogation (Dechesne *et al.* 2000), the self-group association is likely to weaken. As White and Argo (2009) found, one expression of this weakened association is the avoidance of products related to the threatened group. We refer to threats of this sort as *identity valence threats*.

Alternatively, self-group association can be threatened with the statement, "you are un-American." This threat could be met with a variety of responses, including acceptance of the message and the resultant detachment from the American identity, a motivation to restore balance and actively rebuild the self-American association, or a desire to reaffirm the self-concept in an unrelated domain (Shrira and Martin 2005). Gao *et al.* (2009) utilized threats of this type and observed that consumers faced with such threats sought products that would restore the threatened self-group association. We refer to threats of this sort as *identity strength threats*.

Using this framework we can predict approach and avoidance behaviors based on threat type and the expected shifts in *implicit* associations that the threat produces. Implicit, rather than explicit, associations drive this model for two critical reasons. First, they have greater predictive validity of social behavior in sensitive domains (Greenwald *et al.* 2009). Since salient identities and threats to them often involve social categories with the potential for stigmatization, the

focus on implicit associations can lead to more meaningful insights. Second, their measurement via the implicit association test offers a straightforward methodological mechanism for observing the associational changes driving threat response.

Identity valence threat mechanism

Identity valence threats pressure the association of a salient social group with positive valence. If there is no opportunity to counter-argue the threat or derogate the source of the threat, a weakening of the group–valence association should be observed. Evidence of this weakening should be detectable by a group–valence implicit association test or other similar implicit measure. When this weakening occurs, the triad becomes unbalanced and the primary path to restoring balance is to dissociate the self from the group, observable through an implicit measure of self–group association. This self–group disassociation should motivate specific consumer behaviors, such as the avoidance of products associated with the threatened group.

Identity strength threat mechanism

Identity strength threats also involve shifts within the balanced triad, but the process focuses solely on the self–group association. For example, a college student's school spirit could be threatened if he learns he is the only one not attending an important school sporting event. If the threat is credible, a weakening of the self–group (university) association is expected. This threat, however, says nothing about the positivity of the group, and therefore the group–valence association remains unchanged. The self–valence association (self-esteem) is also expected to remain unchanged. To restore balance, the only possibility in this instance is for the student to do something that reaffirms the threatened association. Behaviors that exhibit school spirit, such as attending future games, wearing university-branded clothing, or purchasing university-branded products, would be expected expressions of the self–group association. These sorts of approach responses reaffirm the association of the self with the group.

Implicit self-esteem predicts strength of threat response

Investigations of identity salience and self-concept threat have largely ignored the role of implicit self-esteem. Implicit self-esteem is integral to identity salience and self-threat because it may function as a monitoring system that determines which identities within a social self-schema become salient (Reed and Forehand 2012). In addition, implicit self-esteem is a central component of *balance-congruity*, and it should play an important role in moderating threat response. Prediction 1 of the unified theory of implicit social cognition states that the strength of any single association in the balanced triad is a multiplicative function of the strength of the other two associations (Greenwald *et al.* 2002). For example, in a balanced triad of self–gender, self–valence, and gender–valence associations, the strength of the self–gender association can be calculated by multiplying the self–valence (implicit self-esteem) and gender–valence associations. It therefore follows that initial implicit self-esteem can be used to predict strength of response to both identity strength and identity valence threats.

In the case of identity valence threat, the avoidance response operates through a weakening of the group–valence association, which manifests in avoidance of products related to that group. As a consumer's self-esteem increases, his or her motivation to protect the self through this avoidance strategy also increases, resulting in more vigorous response. Implicit self-esteem should similarly predict strength of response to identity strength threats. These threats weaken
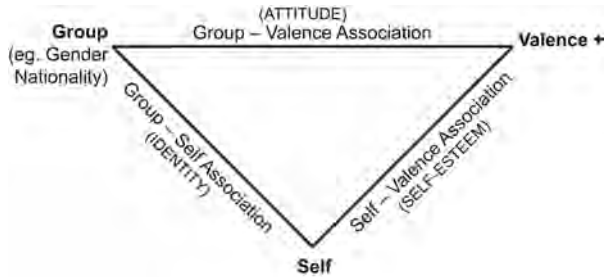
Figure 38.1

the self-group association yet do not affect the group–valence association. In the resultant state of imbalance, higher implicit self-esteem yields stronger threat response because the multiplication of the unchanged group–valence association with a higher self-valence association indicates that a stronger self-group association is required to respite balance. Consumers with high implicit self-esteem will thus engage in more forceful effort to re-associate with the group through group-related product choices.

Conclusions and future directions

This chapter presents a unifying theoretical framework for understanding threats to salient identities. Although other threat taxonomies have been presented (for example, see van Dellen *et al.* 2011; Branscombe *et al.* 1999), they have bucketed threats in terms of situational variables or outcome behaviors. We argue it is more constructive to classify threats according to the specific associations they target as this generates specific predictions for consumer threat response and illuminates mediating mechanisms as well as potential moderators. *Balance-congruity* provides the structure for our conceptualization in a single, parsimonious model. Self-threats can be conceived as attacking one of three associations in a balanced triad: self-group, self-valence, or group–valence. Whichever association is targeted will determine the predicted path to restore balance. These paths, in turn, can inform predictions for consumer behavior. This conceptualization offers a more flexible model and one that can be used to guide research projects aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the mechanisms involved when a salient identity is threatened.

In addition to illuminating the associational processes involved in both identity valence and identity strength threat, the proposed model opens the door to two particularly interesting and important research areas. First, if identity is defined in terms of component associations, what happens to the self-concept when a brand closely associated with the self is threatened? Is the brand simply an extension of the self? If so, will threats to brands function the same as threats to groups? Preliminary evidence suggests this is indeed the case. Consumers are more responsive to corporate social responsibility campaigns when self-brand identities are made salient (Marin *et al.* 2009). In addition, threats to brands closely linked to the self can produce patterns of approach and avoid response similar to those observed with direct threats to the self (Angle and Forehand 2012). More research is needed to fully understand the processes driving these effects.

Another fruitful area for future research involves the processes by which threats shape identity over time. Repeated exposure to threats may not only reinforce or weaken the salience of an identity, but may also influence the relationship between multiple identities. One way to model these interrelationships using the proposed framework is based on the notion of *pressured concepts*. A pressured concept is any identity object that comes under consistent pressure to associate with two concepts that are bipolar opposed (Greenwald *et al.* 2002). For example,

what happens when Nike, a brand often associated with both the self and positive valence, becomes associated with something negative, such as sweatshops? Nike becomes a pressured concept and the consumer's mental representation of the brand could split into two concepts – one piece of Nike associated with the self, and a distinct piece of Nike associated with sweatshops (Greenwald *et al.* 2002). From an attitude standpoint, the consumer would develop two distinct attitudes toward Nike (Cohen and Reed 2006). To date, this process of differentiation has not been empirically observed, but in practice, situations like this come up time and time again. The balanced-congruity perspective provides an excellent starting point for research projects aimed at clarifying this process.

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