



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.

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1. Introduction

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

identity-consistent memories (increased ease of recalling past athletic triumphs). These types of identity-driven behaviors have been observed across numerous identities, and an increasing interest in these effects has emerged in the academic marketing literature over the last two decades (see Fig. 1).

2. The three goals of this paper

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

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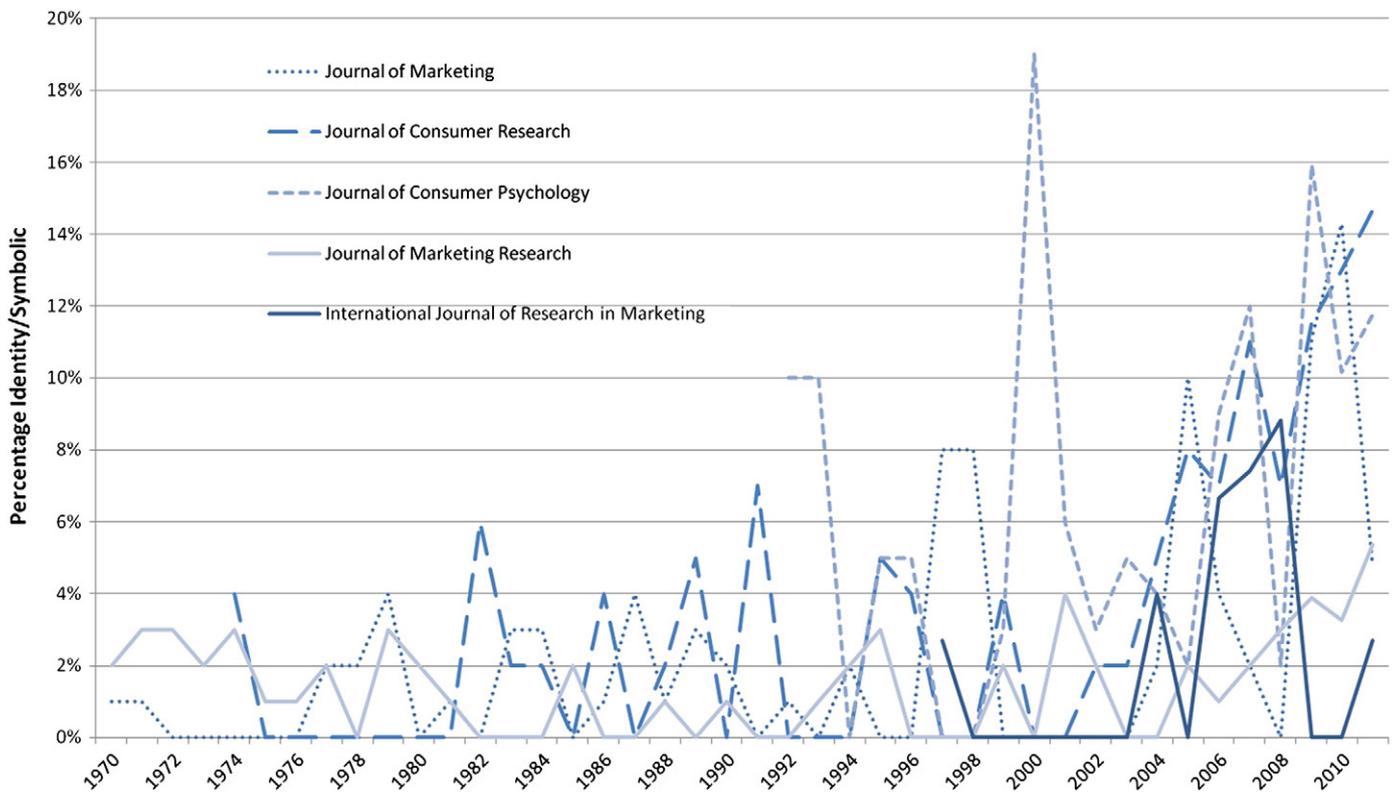


Fig. 1. Number of articles published in mainstream consumer research journals (Identity and the self as a percentage of total articles in that particular year).

Consumer Culture Theory (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), and sociology (Callero, 2003; Howard, 2000); as well as the approaches that arose from more specific investigations of identity in areas like impression management (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000) and implicit social cognition (Greenwald, Pickrell, & Farnham, 2002).

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

The basic identity principles reviewed in this article are the foundations upon which researchers can build to further examine the theoretical underpinnings of identity-based consumption. The final objective of this paper is to extend these principles into avenues of future research on identity that hold great promise (see Kirmani, 2009) and that may, in particular, be critical areas of inquiry for research in consumer behavior. From a substantive point of view, the basic principles can also serve as points of departure for future research to achieve a better understanding of how an identity perspective can address important managerial and public-policy problems. The goal in these sections of the article will be to illustrate the usefulness of these principles for guiding and illuminating future identity research

in marketing and consumer behavior. We selected current trends that we deemed unprecedented in human history (at least in scale and pace) and that also have wide-ranging implications for identity-based consumption as they relate to the five aforementioned identity principles.

Every issue that is discussed to illustrate the way the identity principles can be applied relates either to globalization or to technological progress, especially in computer-mediated communication. Globalization refers to the increasing interconnection of economic, social and technological processes across regions and countries. Although rapid globalization did occur in some earlier historical eras (e.g., the late colonial period), the current scale and pace of globalization are unprecedented. Globalization has wide-ranging consequences for both psychological processes (Arnett, 2002) and for consumer responses to market offerings (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999). Importantly, globalization often requires consumers to make difficult trade-offs and to hold potentially conflicting beliefs (e.g., Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2012; van Ittersum & Wong, 2010). This opens up many exciting new areas of research. One of the major engines of globalization, in present times as in the past, is technological progress. In particular, improvements in computing and communication technology are radically changing people’s lives by introducing new ways of working and communicating and by leading to a reassessment of established behaviors. Furthermore, improvements in information technology, transport, and other forms of technology make it possible for more and more people to interact and to join an integrated world economy. By creating a “global village” (McLuhan, 1964), computer-mediated communication channels (social networks, email, and any Internet-based communication platform) are changing the way people around the world relate to each other. These trends have important ramifications for identity processes (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). For example, the possibility for a person to develop a “digital self” (Schau & Gilly, 2003) that can differ in important respects from the person’s “offline” persona opens many exciting new research questions. These trends are already impacting

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