Identity-based motivation: Constraints and opportunities in consumer research

Sharon Shavitt [a],[*], Carlos J. Torelli [b], Jimmy Wong [a]

[a] *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA*
[b] *University of Minnesota, USA*

Abstract

This commentary underscores the integrative nature of the identity-based motivation model (Oyserman, D. (2009). Identity-based motivation: Implications for action-readiness, procedural-readiness, and consumer behavior. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 19(3) (this issue)). We situate the model within existing literatures in psychology and consumer behavior, and illustrate its novel elements with research examples. Special attention is devoted to, 1) how product- and brand-based affordances constrain identity-based motivation processes and, 2) the mindsets and action tendencies that can be triggered by specific cultural identities in pursuit of consumer goals. Future opportunities are suggested for researching the antecedents of product meanings and relevant identities.
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Daphna Oyserman (2009) provides an integrative review of how identity-based motivations activate both contents and processes for making sense of the world. Psychologically salient identities serve as organizing schemas for integrating new information and experiences into the self-concept. These elaborated self-schemas, or salient identities, function as meaning-making interpretive structures that can be activated by environmental cues and operate below consciousness to influence perception, judgment, and self-regulation.

Integrating and extending existing perspectives

Oyserman's model fits well with existing theories on the self-concept and on cultural differences. Those theories cover similar ground, including social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), and symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). The identity-based motivation model (IBM) shares with social identity theory and with self-categorization theory the notion that making a social identity salient activates relevant meaning associated with the in-group identity, which results in actions that increase one's perceived similarity to the in-group and enhance one's positive social identity. The IBM model shares with symbolic self-completion theory the idea that people compensate for challenges to their valued social identities through choices and actions that can reinforce those identities. At the cultural level, the IBM model also echoes prior work. For instance, Oyserman cites priming data as evidence that cultural differences in identity expression reflect differences in the relative salience of individual and collective identities, not differences in the existence of such identities. Indeed, this notion is central to Triandis's (1989; 1995) seminal conceptualization of individualism and collectivism: "Individuals have *both* individualistic and collectivistic cognitive elements" (Triandis, 1995, p. 8, emphasis in original) and they "sample these [different] kinds of selves with different probabilities, in different cultures" (Triandis, 1989, p. 506).

By integrating these perspectives into a unified framework, the IBM model illuminates the social and cultural nature of self-concepts (Oyserman, 2007). In so doing, the model offers some novel insights on identity-driven processes and their outcomes. For instance, although previous theories generally predict positive appraisals of in-group members and their actions, the IBM model extends to negative identity-relevant beliefs. It anticipates the conditions under which identity-consistent

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[*] Corresponding author. Department of Business Administration, University of Illinois, 350 Wohlers Hall, Champaign, IL 61820, USA.

E-mail address: shavitt@illinois.edu (S. Shavitt).

behaviors would be enacted even when they have known negative consequences. Particularly important is the notion that a salient identity can trigger mental processes that guide subsequent action. Stereotypical behaviors can be made accessible and more likely to be enacted, increasing perceptions of in-group membership. In this way, making an identity salient activates identity-consistent processes that can operate outside of awareness and, in effect, sabotage the self while strengthening one's group identity (e.g., through disengaging from academic performance or from healthful lifestyles).

Trends in consumer research

As Oyserman notes, the links between brands and identity have long been of interest to scholars of consumer behavior. Indeed, these links now comprise a mainstream research topic in this field. At the Association for Consumer Research 2008 conference, research on "The Brand and The Self" represented the most common subtheme (McGill & Shavitt, 2009), with dozens of studies addressing brand symbolism, self-expressive motivation, reference group influences, uses of brands to signal status, among other topics. Thus, consumer research has embraced a variety of identity-based motivation issues, and these issues are at the core of current work in the discipline. It is not hard to find evidence consistent with the IBM model that consumer's choices are identity-congruent. Before describing work in this domain, we turn to some relevant trends in social psychological research.

Trends in social psychology: Constraints in the stimulus environment

The notion that a given product or a situation could be associated with specific meanings, including identity-relevant meanings, seems natural to any brand manager. Similarly, consumer researchers have long been interested in the specific meanings of products and consumption patterns (e.g., Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Englis & Solomon, 1996; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Lessig & Park, 1978). However, social psychologists have been slow to accept these notions. Twenty or so years ago, most social psychologists would have viewed meanings as fluid and unbounded, not as attached to particular stimuli or situations. Given the right set of circumstances, anything could mean anything. The focus was on the stability of cognitive representations (Smith & Semin, 2007). Those cognitive representations drove meaning, not the stimulus environment. According to this perspective, an object such as an American flag, usually understood as a potent symbol of identity (Shavitt, 1990), could in principle have an alternate and more utilitarian meaning—for instance, as a blanket. Until recently, social theorists were less concerned with whether these alternate meanings were far-fetched or pragmatically relevant to everyday situations. Believing in the arbitrariness of meanings legitimized a view of experimental stimuli as interchangeable and generalizable.

In the last few years, this *zeitgeist* has shifted. Instead of viewing the stimulus environment as a backdrop, representing

unbounded potential, social psychologists have increasingly focused on the limits that the environment imposes via the inherent meanings it affords. Current models of situated cognition, reviewed by Oyserman, have articulated a theoretical purpose for the study of situational constraints. Oyserman convincingly shows that such an approach is better positioned to address the dynamics of identity-based motivation.

Product and brand constraints

In the consumer domain in particular, it is important to consider how product characteristics constrain the operation of identity-based motives. Products differ in the goals that they can be used to meet and, thus, in the types of attitude functions that they afford (Shavitt, 1989). For instance, products are likely to engage identity-based motives to the extent that they are commonly considered to symbolize values (e.g., hybrid cars), represent social classifications or reference groups (e.g., wedding rings), are consumed in a socially visible way (e.g., flags), or are associated with public behavioral routines (e.g., wearing your school t-shirt on game day). Ad messages that match these functional affordances are more persuasive than those that do not (Shavitt, 1990). Product affordances also constrain social-signaling processes. Preferences among identity-relevant products (but not among identity-irrelevant products) tend to be "read" by others as cues to an owner's identity (Shavitt & Nelson, 2000), and thus used by consumers for identity signaling (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Grewal, Mehta, & Kardes, 2000).

These product-based affordances also constrain the role of other factors in determining ad effectiveness and product judgments (e.g., Adaval, 2001; Shavitt, Lowrey, & Han, 1992). For instance, identity-focused appeals are generally more persuasive for high compared to low self-monitors (Snyder & DeBono, 1985). However, this personality effect disappears with products that primarily engage a single attitude function, such as a class ring (or an air conditioner) (Shavitt et al., 1992). This is because such products almost always (or rarely) engage identity-based motives, regardless of one's personality. Similarly, although store reputation is more likely to influence product judgments for those with a salient collective versus individual identity, because store reputation conveys identity information relevant to the collective self, this effect of identity salience disappears for products that are more likely to engage identity-based motives (running shoes; Lee & Shavitt, 2006). This is because, for such products, cues that pertain to identity criteria are spontaneously considered to be relevant.

Like products, brands can also constrain the role of identity-based motives. Moreover, marketers' branding efforts can change the motives associated with brands relative to those of their broader product category (LeBoeuf & Simmons, in press). Marketers can imbue brands with distinctive symbolic meanings via brand-user imagery in advertisements or through associations with brand endorsers, among other means (Aaker, 1997). To the consumer, such brands may seem to possess a certain personality, which can be assessed using a validated brand personality scale measuring the degree to which brands