When Identity Marketing Backfires: Consumer Agency in Identity Expression

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Consumers prefer brands positioned around identities they possess. Accordingly, the consumer identity literature emphasizes the importance of a clear fit between brands and target identities, suggesting that identity marketing that explicitly links brands to consumer identity should be most effective. In contrast, five studies demonstrate that explicit identity-marketing messages can backfire. Messages that explicitly connect a particular brand to consumer identity increase the salience of external determinants of behavior, reducing consumers' perceptions of agency in identity expression. Hence, compared to messages that merely reference consumer identity, messages that explicitly define identity expression reduce purchase likelihood, despite more clearly conveying identity relevance. These findings highlight the need to consider consumers' need for agency in addition to their drive for self-definition and expression through consumption, offering a foundation to examine both the risks and the rewards of identity marketing.

Marketing messages often appeal to consumers based on their identities. Jif peanut butter targets mothers by noting that "Choosy moms choose Jif." DirecTV advertises, "If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!" Gamefly.com urges video gamers, "You call yourself a gamer? You have to have it!" And Chevrolet asserts that real Americans drive Chevys.

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Such approaches are backed by a broad literature showing that consumers prefer brands positioned around identities they possess (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2005). The foundations of the literature emphasize fit: consumers seek brands that clearly fit their identity and respond favorably to messages that best communicate fit (Reed et al. 2012).

In contrast, we propose that even when a sense of fit is clearly conveyed, identity marketing can backfire. Identity-marketing messages that explicitly connect consumer identity expression to a particular brand may highlight the role of external forces in determining consumers' purchase behavior. In doing so, explicit identity marketing may inadvertently reduce consumers' perceptions of personal agency in identity expression, undermining the value of brand purchase as a meaningful expression of identity. Five studies support this theorizing and demonstrate that explicit identity-marketing messages may reduce purchase likelihood. Consumers perceive such explicit identity marketing as a threat to free identity expression and avoid brands they would otherwise prefer in order to restore their sense of agency.

This research makes several key theoretical contributions. First, despite the tight linkage between identity and agency (Baumeister 1998), consumers' need for agency in identity expression has not yet been considered in the consumer identity literature. Second, while the consumer research literature has focused mostly on the benefits of a fit between brand and consumer identity and the potential rewards of

identity marketing (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen 2012), this research offers a basis for how drives for self-expression and agency are balanced, and thus considers risks as well as rewards. Third, our findings suggest that a sense of agency in identity expression is distinct from having more choices (cf. Botti and McGill 2011), connecting the literatures on consumer identity and choice freedom.

Beyond these contributions, our findings have clear substantive implications. We show that managers favor explicit messages that backfire, illustrating the importance of considering agency in identity expression and the unique risks of targeting consumers on the basis of identity.

IDENTITY MARKETING

Consumer *identity* has received increasing attention in recent years as a means of targeting consumers (Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal 2011). Identities represent different facets of the self, varying across time and context, that consumers use to socially categorize themselves and express who they are (Reed, Cohen, and Bhattacharjee 2009).

Identity is a fundamental and powerful motivator of behavior (Akerlof and Kranton 2000; Oyserman 2009). Consumption choices help to define, reinforce, and communicate the identities that consumers hold (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005). For instance, a serious athlete may prefer identity-relevant Gatorade over an otherwise similar brand like Vitaminwater, and an MBA student may subscribe to the *Economist* to feel more like a savvy businessperson. In situations in which an identity is made salient, or activated, it is especially likely to guide attitudes and behaviors (LeBoeuf, Shafir, and Bayuk 2010; Reed 2004).

Accordingly, consumers are thought to respond more favorably to messages that invoke their identity and show how it fits with a given brand (Reed et al. 2012). For instance, those with a salient ethnic identity are more persuaded by messages linking their ethnicity with brands of shampoo, detergent, and airlines (Deshpandé and Stayman 1994; Forehand, Deshpandé, and Reed 2002), and those with a salient student identity increase their evaluations of a publication after viewing messages describing its relevance to students (Reed 2004). The literature has focused primarily on the benefits of establishing a fit between brand and consumer identity (Chernev et al. 2011; Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012) and the iconic brands that have done so successfully (e.g., Nike, Harley Davidson, Jeep, Starbucks, Apple, Marlboro, NASCAR; Reed et al. 2009).

Given this scholarly consensus, what sorts of identity-marketing messages will consumers respond to best? For instance, will sports fans be more likely to order DirecTV after seeing a straightforward statement referencing their identity (e.g., "DirecTV. All the sports you love, all in one place.") or a more explicit message that clearly defines its identity relevance ("If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!")?

Prior research suggests consumers will favor the more explicit identity message, which offers a clearer description of brand identity (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), more specific guidance for consumer behavior (Reed et al. 2012), and less potential to signal undesired identities (Berger and Heath 2007). We suggest, however, that this prediction emphasizes one fundamental drive of the self while not considering another that is equally crucial.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH: IDENTITY EXPRESSION AND AGENCY

Given the focus on fit between brand and consumer identity, which is theoretically founded in drives to define and express the self (Belk 1988; Chernev et al. 2011), there has been less attention to another equally fundamental drive: consumers' need for agency (Baumeister 1998). Whether described in terms of agency, autonomy, choice freedom, locus of control, or self-determination, a consensus across research traditions emphasizes the need for agency in self-expression (e.g., Botti and McGill 2011; Brehm 1966; Deci and Ryan 1985). While agency is often defined in terms of the presence or absence of choice, many other factors contribute to the satisfaction of consumers' need for agency (Inesi et al. 2011). Moreover, the extent to which agency matters to consumers may vary across choice contexts (Botti and McGill 2011).

We propose that in the context of identity expression, marketing messages may influence consumers' perceptions of agency (cf. Kivetz 2005) and generate an unexpected response. By their very nature, such messages may inadvertently indicate that forces external to the self play a role in determining consumption behavior, thus reducing the extent to which that behavior is seen as determined by the self (Deci and Ryan 1985; Moller, Ryan, and Deci 2006).

In particular, we argue that identity marketing that provides explicit direction regarding identity-expressive behavior may directly reduce the extent to which consumers actually perceive that behavior as identity expressive. In other words, independent of the degree of choice, explicit identity marketing may reduce agency by undermining the signal value of behavior as a meaningful expression of consumer identity (cf. Berger and Heath 2007).

Identity-Referencing and Identity-Defining Messages

To assess the nature of consumer agency in this context, we propose a testable distinction between identity-referencing and identity-defining messages. Identity-referencing messages are those that simply mention the target identity and suggest how the brand meets these needs (e.g., "DirecTV. All the sports you love, all in one place."). Identity-defining messages, on the other hand, define the terms of identity expression, suggesting that expressing a certain identity or identity-relevant trait depends on purchasing a particular brand. For example, "If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!" asserts that choosing this

brand demonstrates that one loves sports enough to warrant being called a sports fan.

Since identity-defining messages explicitly link identity expression to a particular behavior, they should better serve consumers' drive to define and express their identity, relative to identity-referencing messages. More clearly indicating a fit between brand and consumer identity should drive consumers' response to identity marketing (Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012). Hence, prior consumer identity research would predict that consumers will respond more favorably to identity-defining messages than to identity-referencing messages.

On the contrary, because identity-defining messages explicitly link identity expression to a particular behavior, we predict that they will reduce consumers' perceptions of agency in identity expression. When people perceive threats to their freedom, a large body of research demonstrates that they are strongly motivated to engage in behaviors to reassert that freedom (Brehm 1966; Clee and Wicklund 1980), even when doing so entails acting in ways that contradict their typical preferences (Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004; Kivetz 2005). Accordingly, in situations in which consumers value agency, we predict that they will respond less favorably to identity-defining messages than to identity-referencing messages. Since this threat to agency is specific to identity expression, it should hold only for those with a salient target identity.

Pilot Study: Distinguishing Message Types

To test the clarity of this distinction, we gave 64 undergraduate participants a description of identity marketing and the following definitions: "*Identity-referencing messages . . .* simply mention the target identity and suggest how the brand meets these needs"; "*Identity-defining messages . . .* explicitly communicate that being a certain type of person, or having a desirable trait associated with an identity, depends on buying one particular brand."

Participants rated eight randomly ordered pairs of identity referencing (e.g., "Gamefly: The best way to rent video games!") and identity-defining messages ("Gamefly. You call yourself a gamer? You have to have it!"), matched on brand and consumer identity (1 = identity-referencing message, 5 = neutral, 9 = identity-defining message). Relative to the scale midpoint, they reliably categorized both identity-referencing ($M = 3.97$; SD = 1.01, $t(63) = -8.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$) and identity-defining messages ($M = 6.71$; SD = 1.55, $t(63) = 8.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.10$). Participants successfully distinguished each message pair as predicted (all $t > 3.12$, all $p < .003$; $t(63) = 10.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.14$ overall). This distinction between message types enables us to assess the role of consumer agency in identity expression in the context of identity marketing.

Empirical Overview

In sum, we propose that the strength of consumers' need for agency relative to their drive for identity expression predicts their response to identity-marketing messages. If our theorizing is supported, then among consumers who value agency, explicit identity-marketing messages will backfire by reducing their perceptions of agency in identity expression.

We report the results of five studies testing this theorizing. Study 1 tests managerial intuitions regarding identity-marketing messages. Study 2 manipulates identity salience and investigates consumer response to the same identity-marketing messages, including the potential mediating role of perceived agency in identity expression. Study 3 extends our theorizing about identity by examining consumer response in a context in which consumers' need to define and express their identity is expected to be more important than their need for agency. Study 4 uses actual identity-marketing messages and seeks convergent evidence by measuring how responses to identity marketing change with individual differences in the drive for agency. Finally, study 5 tests whether allowing consumers to self-design brand offerings can reinstate the identity-expressive meaning of purchase, thus restoring consumers' sense of agency and changing their response to identity marketing.

STUDY 1: DO MANAGERS PREFER EXPLICIT IDENTITY MARKETING?

Do managers anticipate that identity-marketing messages can affect consumers' perceptions of agency in identity expression? Though the presence of some explicit identity-defining messages in the marketplace suggests otherwise, we examined managerial intuition to further address the substantive importance of our theorizing. Consistent with the conventional wisdom of the consumer identity literature, we expected that managers would prefer more explicit messages and thus predict identity-defining messages to be more effective.

Method

Fifty-nine currently practicing marketing executives, ranging from lower level managers to C-suite executives across various industries, participated voluntarily through an executive advisory panel maintained by the University of Pennsylvania. They completed an "advertising strategy case" in which they evaluated potential marketing messages for an unfamiliar actual product: Charlie's All Purpose Soap, a biodegradable, environmentally friendly cleaner. Participants were to market the product to a segment of "green" consumers who care about environmental issues, and viewed a prospective advertisement containing a picture and description of the product (which were both real for the sake of external validity).

Next, participants viewed three potential messages in a within-subjects design: an explicit identity-defining message ("Charlie's: The only good choice for green consumers!"), an identity-referencing message ("Charlie's: A good choice for green consumers"), and a control message that did not invoke consumer identity ("Charlie's: A good choice for

consumers"; see appendix). The pilot study confirmed that relative to the scale midpoint (5), the first message was perceived as an identity-defining message ($M = 6.11$; SD $= 2.79$, $t(63) = 3.18$, $p < .01$) and the second as an identity-referencing message ($M = 4.27$; SD $= 2.59$, $t(63) = -2.27$, $p < .03$).

Participants chose their preferred message as the advertisement headline. They then predicted how each message would affect purchase: "How likely will green consumers be to purchase Charlie's Soap after seeing an advertisement using the following title?" (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely). We also assessed how clearly each message was thought to communicate the target identity relevance of the brand (1 = not at all explicit, 7 = very explicit).

Results

Choice. Managers preferred the identity-defining message (47.5%) to the identity-referencing (33.9%) and the nonidentity messages (18.6%, $\chi^2(2) = 7.36$, $p < .03$).

Purchase Likelihood. Message type also affected predicted purchase likelihood ($F(2, 114) = 36.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$). Consistent with prior literature, participants thought the identity-referencing message would lead to higher purchase ($M = 4.67$; SD $= 1.53$) than the nonidentity message ($M = 3.22$; SD $= 1.63$, $t(57) = 7.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .50$). More importantly, however, they predicted that the identity-defining message would increase purchase ($M = 5.12$; SD $= 1.57$) relative to the identity-referencing message ($t(57) = 2.06$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$). Moreover, purchase likelihood was positively correlated with ratings of message explicitness ($r(58) = .70$, $p < .001$): managers expected that the more a message explicitly linked consumer identity to purchase, the more it would encourage consumer purchase.

Discussion

Consistent with our theorizing, managers thought that explicit identity-marketing messages would be most effective. They were most likely to choose identity-defining messages and predicted that these messages were most likely to lead green consumers to purchase. We find the same results using a between-subjects replication, supporting the robustness of these results.

STUDY 2: EXPLICIT IDENTITY MARKETING BACKFIRES WITH CONSUMERS

In study 1, managers predicted that explicit identity-marketing messages are more effective, but are they correct? Study 2 tested this intuition by examining how the messages from study 1 actually affect consumer behavior. Consistent with prior work (Reed et al. 2012), we expected that the identity-referencing message would increase purchase likelihood above the nonidentity control message because it invokes consumer identity.

But contrary to prior literature, we predicted that more explicit identity-defining messages would reduce purchase. Despite more clearly conveying a sense of fit, these messages were expected to reduce agency in identity expression.

We tested whether this mechanism drives consumer purchase in two important ways. First, we tested whether perceived agency in identity expression mediates these effects (cf. Clee and Wicklund 1980). Second, if agency affects the identity-expressive value of purchase, as we suggest, then we should observe the predicted effects only among consumers for whom the target identity is currently salient (Reed 2004). Otherwise, explicit messages should produce no reduced agency and no consumer backlash. Accordingly, we primed participants with either the target or a neutral identity and predicted a moderated mediation: agency in identity expression should mediate effects on purchase only when the target identity is salient. Importantly, if any observed threats to agency reflect reduced choice rather than reduced identity-expressive value, they should produce similar effects across identity salience conditions.

Method

Two hundred and forty-three University of Pennsylvania undergraduates, staff, and area residents participated for financial payment. They were randomly assigned to condition within a 3 (message type: nonidentity vs. identity-referencing vs. identity-defining) × 2 (identity salience: target vs. neutral) between-subjects design. First, we temporarily activated the target (environmentally conscious) or a neutral identity (Reed 2004). In the target (neutral) condition, participants were asked to visualize their role as a friend to the environment (a friend to their peers). They also listed two reasons why that particular identity is important and wrote about a personal event involving that identity.

Next, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated task in which they viewed an advertisement for Charlie's Soap, the environmentally friendly cleaning product. The only difference between the three conditions was which of the messages from study 1 was used ("Charlie's: The only good choice for green consumers!" vs. "Charlie's: A good choice for green consumers" vs. "Charlie's: A good choice for consumers").

Participants then indicated their purchase likelihood ("How likely are you to purchase this product?" 1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely). Following past theorizing on perceived agency (Clee and Wicklund 1980), we also assessed participants' subjective sense of agency in expressing the target identity ("This product allows me to freely express who I am," 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This phrasing can convey either perceived ability or inability to express the target identity, allowing for meaningful responses in each condition.

Results

Purchase Likelihood. A 3 (message type) × 2 (identity salience) ANOVA on purchase likelihood found a main effect of message type ($F(2, 237) = 6.40$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .051$), qualified by the predicted message type × identity salience interaction ($F(2, 237) = 6.44$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .052$; fig. 1). We examined the data separately by identity salience to clarify the results.

As predicted, among participants with the target (green) identity salient, message type had a significant effect ($F(2, 237) = 15.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .118$). Compared to the nonidentity message ($M = 3.45$; SD = 1.39), the identity-referencing message increased purchase likelihood ($M = 4.36$; SD = 1.36, $p = .001$, $d = 0.66$), consistent with prior research. However, compared to the identity-referencing message, the identity-defining message reduced purchase likelihood ($M = 2.74$; SD = 1.29, $p < .001$, $d = 1.22$). In fact, the identity-defining message reduced purchase relative to even the nonidentity baseline ($p < .02$, $d = 0.53$), reflecting a true backfire effect. As expected, there was no corresponding effect of message type among participants primed with the neutral identity ($F(2, 237) = 1.02$, $p > .36$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$).

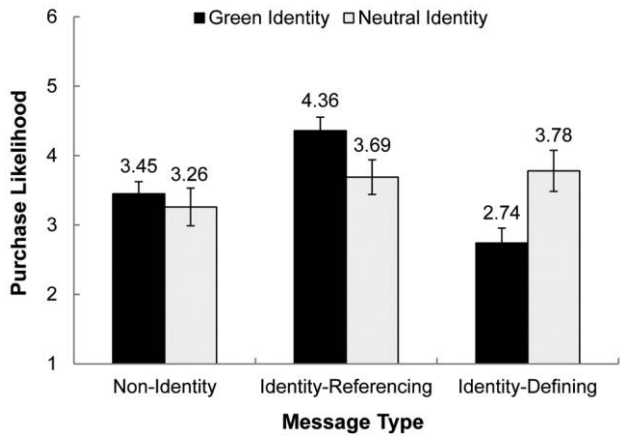
The opposite set of contrasts further suggests that while identity marketing is most effective among people with the target identity salient, it is among these same individuals that identity-defining messages are particularly detrimental. While the identity-referencing message increased purchase likelihood for participants with the target identity (vs. neutral identity) salient ($M = 4.36$ vs. 3.69; $F(1, 237) = 4.49$, $p < .04$, $d = 0.46$), the identity-defining message had the opposite effect. Compared to neutral identity participants, those primed with the target identity were less likely to purchase ($M = 2.74$ vs. 3.78; $F(1, 237) = 8.07$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.84$).

Agency. We then examined our theorized mechanism. A two-way ANOVA on perceived agency found the predicted interaction ($F(2, 237) = 3.39$, $p < .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .028$). As before, message type had no effect for those primed with the neutral identity ($F < 1$, $p > .45$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$). However, among participants primed with the target identity, message type had a significant effect on agency ($F(2, 237) = 6.22$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .050$). The identity-referencing message allowed greater perceived agency to express the target identity ($M = 4.06$; SD = 1.15) than the nonidentity message ($M = 3.55$; SD = 1.30, $p < .05$, $d = 0.42$). More importantly, as predicted, the identity-defining message significantly reduced perceived agency to express the target identity ($M = 3.07$; SD = 1.29) compared to the identity-referencing message ($p = .001$, $d = 0.81$), and marginally compared to the nonidentity baseline ($p < .08$, $d = 0.37$).

Mediation by Agency. A moderated mediation analysis tested the role of perceived agency in identity expression. The bootstrapping technique for conditional indirect effects (Preacher and Hayes 2008; Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007) estimated a significant indirect effect among target identity participants: the identity-defining message reduced purchase likelihood through diminished perceptions of agency in expressing the target identity ($b = -0.24$, $z = -3.31$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.397, −0.119]; see fig. 2). There was no corresponding indirect effect among those with a salient neutral identity ($b = 0.03$, $z = 0.31$, $p > .75$, 95% CI [−0.173, 0.277]), supporting our mechanism predictions.

FIGURE 1

GREEN CONSUMERS REACT AGAINST IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGE (STUDY 2)



NOTE.—Error bars denote standard errors.

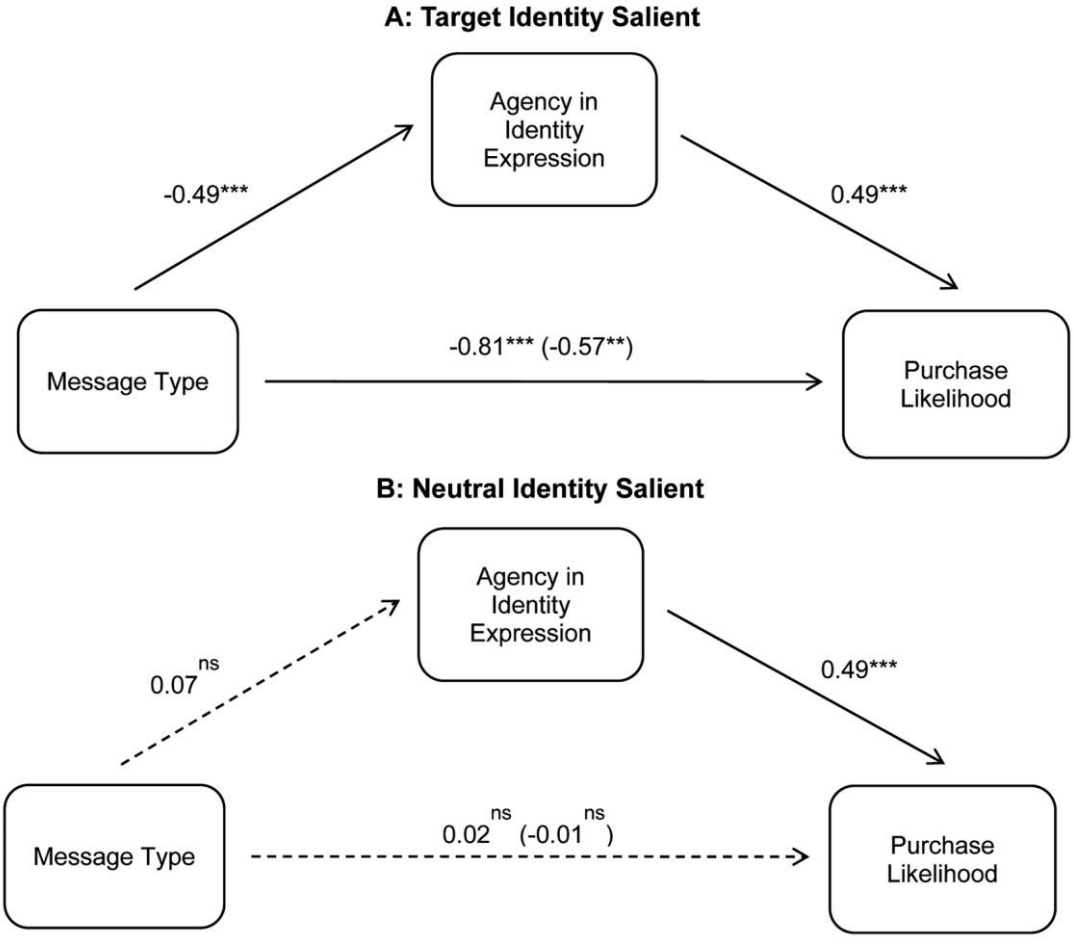
Discussion

Consistent with the consumer identity literature (Reed et al. 2012) as well as managers' predictions, participants with a salient target identity were especially receptive to marketing messages that referenced that identity. But identity-defining messages, which managers and prior work predicted to be even more effective, actually had a detrimental effect. Participants with a salient target identity were averse to messages that defined the terms of identity expression and thus avoided a brand even though it naturally appealed to them and fit their identity. Not only was the identity-defining message ineffective, but it was actually counterproductive: these consumers perceived less ability to freely express their identity than even those viewing the nonidentity control message.

Alternative Mechanisms. Mediational evidence indicates that these effects were driven by perceived agency in identity expression. Moreover, though one could argue that explicit message language increases persuasive salience (Friestad and Wright 1994) or threatens free choice independent of identity (Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004), these alternative accounts would predict main effects of message type rather

FIGURE 2

MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS: MEDIATION VIA PERCEIVED AGENCY AS A FUNCTION OF IDENTITY SALIENCE (STUDY 2)



NOTE.—$p > .10$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

than the observed interaction. A follow-up study further supported our theorizing about identity expression, finding that explicit messages backfire more with increasing identity centrality (please contact the authors for details).

Confirming the role of identity does not address another potential alternative explanation: that rather than restricting agency in identity expression, the identity-defining message invoked a narrower identity category that excluded more participants. While our mediational evidence is inconsistent with this idea, it is conceivable that responses to our agency measure actually reflected perceived exclusion from the identity category. To assess this possibility, a follow-up study tested the original message manipulation (in square brackets) and orthogonally manipulated identity category breadth (in braces) in a 2 × 2 design: "Charlie's: A good choice [The only good choice] for green consumers {for the true green consumer}!"

As expected, the category breadth manipulation affected the perceived breadth of the identity category ($F(1, 131) = 7.18$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .052$), but not perceived agency in identity expression ($F < 1$). Conversely, the study 2 message manipulation affected perceived agency ($F(1, 131) = 11.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .080$) but not category breadth ($F(1, 131) = 2.69$, $p > .11$, $\eta_p^2 = .020$). These findings support our interpretation of the results of study 2.

STUDY 3: UNCERTAIN CONSUMERS SEEK IDENTITY DEFINITION

The findings of study 2 demonstrate the importance of agency in contexts involving consumer identity expression.

Our theorizing suggests that any effects on consumer behavior should depend on the strength of consumers' need for agency relative to their need to define and express their identity. Study 3 further tests our theory by highlighting an instance in which maintaining a sense of agency should be less important than seeking identity definition.

One such instance is when the status of people's identity is threatened. When people feel highly uncertain about what an identity means to them, they are motivated to seek greater definition to verify that identity (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009; Swann 1983). Accordingly, we propose that uncertain consumers seeking greater identity definition will actually be *more* receptive to identity-defining messages, an interesting potential boundary condition.

To test this prediction, we primed identity uncertainty versus identity certainty (Gao et al. 2009) and examined consumers' response to identity marketing. While we expected participants certain in their target identity to replicate the effects in study 2, we expected this pattern to reverse among those primed with identity uncertainty, for whom identity-defining messages could better satisfy their need to define and express their identity. We tested these predictions in a parent identity context in which identity certainty is unlikely to affect identity centrality.

Method

One hundred and sixty-two parents living in the United States participated through Amazon Mechanical Turk for financial payment. We used a 2 (identity certainty: uncertain vs. certain) × 2 (message type: identity-referencing vs. identity-defining) between-subjects design.

First, participants completed a task that manipulated identity certainty. In the *uncertain* (*certain*) condition, participants recalled and described two personal experiences in which they felt uncertain (certain). They then answered questions about their children in order to activate their parent identity. Prior work establishes that this procedure leads participants to attribute uncertainty (certainty) to the subsequently activated aspect of self (Gao et al. 2009). As expected, manipulation checks (e.g., "How certain are you in your ability as a parent?" 1 = not at all certain, 7 = extremely certain; $r = .82$) found that participants were significantly less certain in their parent identity in the *uncertain* condition ($M = 5.64$; SD = 1.12) than the *certain* condition ($M = 6.15$; SD = 0.82, $t(160) = 3.29$, $p = .001$). Ease of recall did not vary ($t < 1$).

Next, participants viewed an advertisement for an unfamiliar actual sunscreen called California Baby. The identity-defining message read, "If you are a responsible parent, this is the only sunscreen for you and your kids!" while the identity-referencing message read, "If you are a parent, this is a great sunscreen for you and your kids!" A pretest confirmed that relative to the scale midpoint (5), the first message was perceived as an identity-defining message ($M = 6.80$; SD = 2.32, $t(63) = 6.19$, $p < .001$) and the second as an identity-referencing message ($M = 4.11$; SD = 2.50, $t(63) = -2.85$, $p < .01$).

After viewing the stimuli, participants reported their likelihood of purchasing the sunscreen (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). As in study 2, we also assessed participants' sense of agency in expressing the target identity (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Results

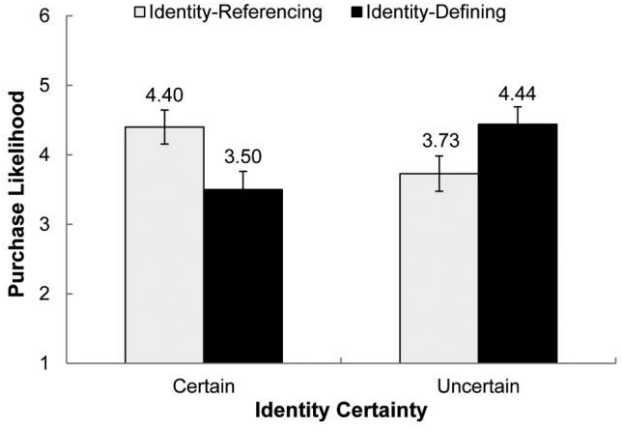
Purchase Likelihood. A 2 (certainty) × 2 (message type) ANOVA found only the predicted certainty × message type interaction ($F(1, 158) = 10.14$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .060$; fig. 3). Consistent with prior results, participants who felt certain in their parent identity reported lower purchase likelihood when they had viewed the identity-defining message ($M = 3.50$; SD = 1.93), compared to the identity-referencing message ($M = 4.40$; SD = 1.50, $p < .02$, $d = 0.52$). Participants who were uncertain in their parent identity, however, exhibited the opposite pattern: they were more likely to purchase after seeing the identity-defining message ($M = 4.44$; SD = 1.47) than the identity-referencing message ($M = 3.73$; SD = 1.52, $p < .05$, $d = 0.47$).

Looked at another way, the identity-referencing message was more effective in increasing purchase among certain parents than uncertain parents ($M = 4.40$ vs. 3.73; $F(1, 158) = 3.61$, $p < .06$, $d = 0.44$). Conversely, the identity-defining message was more effective among uncertain parents than certain parents ($M = 4.44$ vs. 3.50; $F(1, 158) = 6.74$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.55$), as predicted.

Mediation by Agency. A moderated mediation analysis (Preacher and Hayes 2008) again demonstrated the role of perceived agency. We found significant indirect effects among participants certain in their identity: the identity-defining message reduced purchase through perceptions of

FIGURE 3

UNCERTAIN PARENTS SEEK IDENTITY DEFINITION (STUDY 3)



NOTE.—Error bars denote standard errors.

reduced agency in identity expression ($b = -0.44$, $z = -2.12$, $p = .03$, 95% CI [−0.951, −0.111]). There was no such indirect effect among those uncertain in their identity ($b = -0.11$, $z = -0.95$, $p > .34$, 95% CI [−0.352, 0.092]), supporting the predicted moderated mediation.

Discussion

The results of study 3 provide further support for the role of perceived agency in driving consumers' responses to identity marketing. Consistent with the notion that doubt about an identity produces more identity-consistent behaviors (Gao et al. 2009; Swann 1983), consumers uncertain about an identity cared more about gaining identity definition than their sense of agency in identity expression. Hence, uncertain consumers were more receptive to identity-defining messages that reduced their uncertainty, and their purchase likelihood was not affected by perceived agency. These findings establish a boundary condition and support our theorizing that the relative strength of consumers' drives for agency versus identity definition determines their response to identity marketing. As in study 2, this interaction effect also casts doubt on other explanations that cannot easily explain this reversal among uncertain consumers.

STUDY 4: INDIVIDUAL NEED FOR AGENCY MODERATES RESPONSE

Studies 2 and 3 demonstrate the mediating role of agency in identity expression. Another way to establish this mechanism is to examine individual differences in the need for agency (Clee and Wicklund 1980). Thus, study 4 measured individuals' propensity for reactance (i.e., sensitivity to restrictions on agency; Hong and Faedda 1996) to provide convergent evidence. Relative to weakly reactant people, highly reactant people strongly seek agency and resist restrictions on their behavior. Though our theory is particular to identity expression, we expect that negative responses to identity-defining messages will be especially pronounced among individuals possessing the target identity who are highly reactant.

A second goal of this study was to more carefully test the potential alternative explanations noted earlier. Salient persuasive intentions may activate persuasion knowledge and trigger consumer resistance (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad and Wright 1994). Similarly, consumers tend to scrutinize and process identity-relevant messages more deeply (Wheeler, Petty, and Bizer 2005). If our proposed message types differentially activate persuasion knowledge or increase depth of processing, these mechanisms could also account for our findings. While the interaction effects and mediation results in our prior studies suggest otherwise, we directly measured both constructs to better assess these possibilities. A third objective of study 4 was to test actual identity-marketing messages to enhance the generalizability of the results.

Method

One hundred and four participants living in the United States responded to a survey for sports fans on Mechanical Turk in exchange for financial payment. To ensure that the target identity was salient, participants wrote a paragraph reflecting on their experience as a sports fan and listed their favorite teams. We used a two-group (message type: identity-referencing vs. identity-defining) × individual reactance (measured) between-subjects design.

First, we manipulated message type. Participants viewed one of two actual DirecTV messages advertising sports packages to sports fans: one defined consumer identity expression ("If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!") while one referenced consumer identity ("DirecTV. All the sports you love, all in one place."). A pretest confirmed that relative to the scale midpoint (5), the first message was perceived as identity-defining ($M = 7.05$; SD = 2.05, $t(63) = 3.18$, $p < .01$) and the second message as identity-referencing ($M = 3.36$; SD = 1.99, $t(63) = -6.61$, $p < .001$). Second, participants rated their likelihood of purchasing DirecTV (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). Third, participants completed a trait reactance scale to measure individual differences in the need for agency (e.g., "I become angry when my freedom of choice is restricted," 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .75$; Hong and Faedda 1996). Responses to this measure were not affected by the message manipulation ($t < 1$).

Finally, to assess potential competing explanations, participants completed three measures of persuasion knowledge (e.g., "How much was DirecTV trying to persuade you by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means?"; Kirmani and Zhu 2007; Williams, Fitzsimons, and Block 2004) and two measures of message familiarity ("How aware of the DirecTV slogan were you before?"). As a proxy for depth of processing, we recorded the amount of time participants spent viewing the advertisement.

Results

Purchase Likelihood. First, we regressed purchase likelihood on message type, participants' reactance scores, and the interaction of these variables. Results showed a main effect of message type ($\beta = -.50$; $t(100) = -3.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.73$), qualified by the predicted interaction of message type and reactance ($\beta = -.38$; $t(100) = -2.27$, $p < .03$, $d = 0.45$). We used a spotlight analysis (Aiken and West 1991) to probe this interaction.

For high-reactance participants, message type significantly affected purchase likelihood ($t(100) = -4.20$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$), as predicted. Compared to those who viewed the identity-referencing message ($M = 3.90$; SD = 1.94), participants who saw the identity-defining message reported lower likelihood to purchase the target brand ($M = 2.25$; SD = 1.98). There was no effect for low-reactance participants ($M = 3.59$ vs. 3.22; $t < 1$, $p > .35$, $d = 0.19$).

Looked at another way, among participants who received the identity-defining message, purchase likelihood declined

significantly as their reported need for agency increased ($r(52) = -.37$, $p < .01$). In contrast, there was no effect for participants who received the identity-referencing message ($r(52) = .10$, $p > .49$), a significant difference ($z = 2.42$, $p < .02$). This suggests that only identity-defining messages affected concerns about consumer agency.

Alternative Mechanisms. Finally, we tested several potential alternative explanations. Persuasion knowledge ($t < 1$), depth of processing ($t < 1$), and message familiarity ($t < 1$) did not vary with message type, casting doubt on these explanations.

Discussion

Using actual identity-marketing messages, these results underscore how consumer response to identity marketing varies with consumers' need for agency. Compared to an identity-referencing message, an identity-defining message reduced purchase likelihood significantly more among highly reactant sports fans who most value agency, supporting our theorizing. These effects on consumer purchase cannot be explained by persuasion knowledge or depth of processing, since these measures were unaffected by message type.

STUDY 5: AGENCY IN IDENTITY EXPRESSION IS DISTINCT FROM CHOICE

Studies 2–4 consistently show that identity-defining messages reduce perceived agency in identity expression and thus reduce purchase. While these results support the argument that reducing agency by undermining the identity-expressive value of purchase is distinct from reducing agency by limiting choice, they do not directly compare these possibilities. Study 5 sought to do so. If our theorizing is correct, then restoring consumers' sense of agency in identity expression through an external means should attenuate their aversion to identity-defining messages, while offering consumers a greater number of choices should not help.

We tested this idea through an intervention to restore consumer agency: presenting consumers' choice process as a self-design process (i.e., customization) rather than as a standard choice. Consumer self-design is an avenue for self-expression (Chernev et al. 2011) that gives consumers control and affects their identity (Mochon, Norton, and Ariely 2012; Moreau and Herd 2010). Hence, we predicted that self-design might offer consumers the sense that they are redefining identity expression, directly "undoing" the effects of identity-defining messages and restoring the identity-expressive value of brand purchase.

To clarify our construct, we compared the presence of self-design (i.e., standard choice vs. self-design) with the degree of choice (i.e., smaller vs. larger choice set), following the approach of Inesi et al. (2011) and orthogonally manipulating these factors. Hence, the array of choices did not vary between the standard choice and the self-design. For external validity, we used stimuli from an actual customizable streetwear company. To ensure that clothing self-design was not itself expressive of the target identity (e.g., as with a fashion-related identity), we again used a green consumer identity as our operationalization. We expected an interaction between message type and choice process on purchase likelihood, but not necessarily any effects of choice set size. We separately measured agency from the choice process to compare with our existing process measure and again measured potential alternative mechanisms.

Method

Three hundred and eight male participants living in the United States responded to a survey for green consumers on Mechanical Turk in return for financial payment. We used a 2 (message type: identity-referencing vs. identity-defining) × 2 (choice process: standard choice vs. self-design) × 2 (choice set size: small vs. large) between-subjects design.

First, participants completed the identity-priming procedure used in study 2 to activate the target (i.e., green consumer) identity. Second, we manipulated message type. Participants read about a new sustainable streetwear company named Sustain that modifies casual streetwear with reclaimed fabric patches and used natural, renewable materials. After this description, participants viewed a Sustain advertisement with either an identity-defining message ("Sustain. The only name in authentic sustainable style. Live fresh. Live green.") or an identity-referencing message ("Sustain. For authentic sustainable style. Live fresh. Live green."; see appendix). Third, we manipulated choice set size, following Inesi et al. (2011). Participants selected a hooded sweatshirt from a choice set that varied on three attributes: the base sweatshirt color, the type of fabric patch, and the color of the drawstring. In the *small choice set* condition, participants saw a photographic array of four sweatshirt options (1 base color × 2 patch fabrics × 2 drawstrings), while in the *large choice set* condition, they saw an array of 16 options (2 base colors × 4 patch fabrics × 2 drawstrings).

Fourth, we manipulated the way the choice process was presented. Participants chose a sweatshirt from a set of descriptions of each combination below the photographic array. In the *standard* choice condition, they were instructed to "Choose the product you prefer" and selected a description of their preferred sweatshirt (e.g., heather base + forest fabric + red drawstring). In the *self-design* condition, participants were instructed to "Design the product you prefer" and first selected a base color, then a fabric, and then a drawstring in separate choice items.

After this choice process, participants rated their likelihood of purchasing the sweatshirt they chose (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). On the next page, participants completed three measures to assess our proposed mechanism, agency in identity expression. Two items assessed agency felt during the choice process (e.g., "The process of choosing this product offered me freedom to express my-

self," 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), while the third was the measure used in studies 2–3. The three measures were highly correlated ($\alpha = .88$), suggesting they assess the same dimension, and were thus combined to create a perceived agency index.

The last set of measures tested potential alternative explanations. Four items that assessed engagement in the choice process (i.e., engaging, fun, left me in a positive mood, effortful; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much so) loaded together and were combined ($\alpha = .77$). Two items measured depth of processing (e.g., "I examined this advertisement very closely," 1 = not at all, 7 = very much so; $r = .77$). Finally, participants again completed the three persuasion knowledge items used in study 4 ($\alpha = .60$; Kirmani and Zhu 2007; Williams et al. 2004).

Results

Purchase Likelihood. A 2 (message type) × 2 (choice process) × 2 (choice set size) ANOVA on purchase revealed main effects of message type ($F(1, 300) = 7.67$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .025$) and choice process ($F(1, 300) = 4.14$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$), qualified by the predicted message type × choice process interaction ($F(1, 300) = 10.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .039$; see fig. 4). As predicted, choice set size had no main ($p > .16$) or higher order effects (all $p > .84$).

Consistent with the prior studies, among participants that engaged in the standard choice process, planned contrasts found that the identity-defining message reduced purchase likelihood ($M = 3.17$; SD = 1.59) relative to the identity-referencing message ($M = 4.28$; SD = 1.55, $p < .001$, $d = 0.71$). This effect disappeared, however, among participants that completed the self-design process ($M = 4.15$ vs. 4.02; $p > .61$).

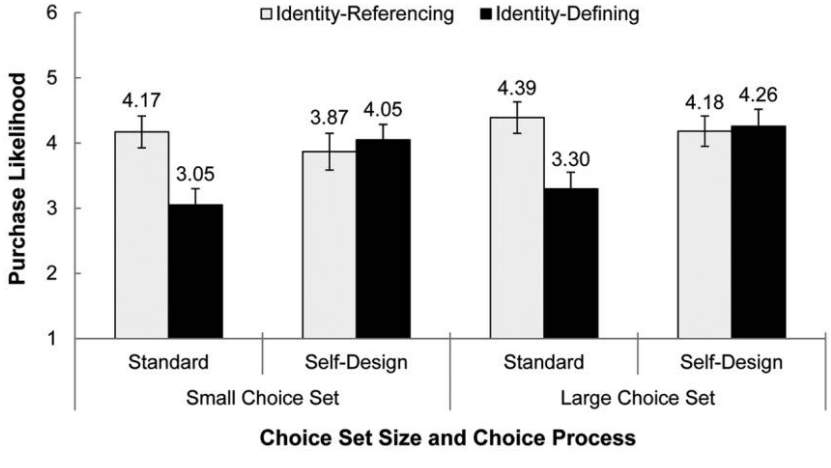
Looked at another way, choice process had no effect on those exposed to the identity-referencing message ($M = 4.02$ vs. 4.28; $p > .30$). However, for participants exposed to the identity-defining message, an opportunity to redefine identity expression via self-design ($M = 4.15$; SD = 1.54) eliminated the decrease in purchase observed in the standard choice condition ($M = 3.17$; SD = 1.59, $p < .001$, $d = 0.63$).

Agency. A three-way ANOVA on our index of agency in identity expression found a main effect of choice process ($F(1, 300) = 8.16$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$), whereby the self-design process led to higher ratings of agency in identity expression ($M = 4.54$; SD = 1.34) than the standard choice ($M = 4.09$; SD = 1.42). Though the message type × choice process interaction did not reach significance ($F(1, 300) = 1.74$, $p = .18$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$), the contrasts mirrored the effects on purchase likelihood: among participants viewing the identity-defining message, self-design led to significantly greater reported agency than the standard choice ($M = 4.49$ vs. 3.87; $p < .01$, $d = 0.43$), while for those viewing the identity-referencing message, choice process had no effect ($M = 4.59$ vs. 4.32; $p > .21$, $d = 0.20$).

Mediation by Agency. As predicted, consumer agency in identity expression mediated the interaction effect of message type and choice process on purchase likelihood. Using the bootstrapping technique for estimating indirect effects (Preacher and Hayes 2008), we found a significant indirect effect through agency in identity expression ($b = -0.074$,

FIGURE 4

BRAND SELF-DESIGN REDUCES THE EFFECTS OF IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGES (STUDY 5)



NOTE.—Error bars denote standard errors.

$t = -18.45$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.132, −.020]), supporting our theorizing.

Alternative Mechanisms. Finally, we tested alternative explanations. ANCOVA results found that controlling for engagement, persuasion knowledge, and depth of processing, either individually or collectively, did not change the observed effects.

Mediation results were consistent. In a competitive mediation that simultaneously tested agency in identity expression, persuasion knowledge, depth of processing, and engagement (Preacher and Hayes 2008), the indirect effect through agency in identity expression remained significant and unchanged ($b = -0.057$, $t = -9.63$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.102, −.017]).

There was also a significant indirect effect for choice process engagement ($b = -0.023$, $t = -4.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.050, −.07]). No indirect effects were found for persuasion knowledge ($p > .14$) or depth of processing ($p > .96$). Entering these measures individually, or as control measures, had no effect on the indirect effect through perceived agency in identity expression, further supporting our theorizing.

Discussion

These results confirm the role of agency in identity expression in driving consumer response to identity marketing. First, a self-design process eliminated the reduction in purchase likelihood from viewing identity-defining (vs. identity-referencing) messages. Note that response to the identity-referencing message did not vary across conditions, suggesting that self-design did not simply change brand perceptions in general.

Second, self-design restored consumers' sense of agency in identity expression as predicted. The presence of greater choice did not affect perceived agency, consistent with the notion of different sources of agency (Inesi et al. 2011) but suggesting some limits to their substitutability in this context. These findings support the theorized distinction between agency in choice and agency as the basis for identity expression through brand purchase.

Third, our mediational evidence confirms that the effects on purchase were driven by the reinstatement of consumers' perceived agency in identity expression. This effect remained robust to various specifications and persisted when controlling for alternative explanations. The indirect effects on purchase likelihood through engagement also suggest other benefits of self-design, further highlighting its potential benefits to consumers (cf. Mochon et al. 2012).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The success stories of identity marketing are easy to recognize. Iconic brands like Harley Davidson and Apple are synonymous with the identity-oriented lifestyles of their consumers (Reed et al. 2009). In some cases, consumer brand communities live their lives around a brand and imbue it with virtual religious significance (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Accordingly, consumer identity research has focused on the vast potential of achieving a fit between brand and consumer identity (Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012). Consistent with this prior research (Reed et al. 2012), we find that messages that invoke consumer identity and brand fit can increase purchase.

However, in contrast with this literature, our findings demonstrate that even when this fit between brand and consumer identity is clearly conveyed, identity marketing can backfire. Across multiple identities (environmentalist, parent, sports fan) and product domains (cleaning product, sunscreen, satellite television, sustainable clothing), we show that messages that explicitly define consumer identity expression are counterproductive, reducing purchase likelihood even below a baseline message that does not invoke consumer identity.

These effects are driven by perceived agency in identity expression. Mediational evidence demonstrates that identity-defining messages reduce consumers' perceived ability to freely express the identity, which in turn reduces purchase likelihood (studies 2, 3, 5). Importantly, these effects hold only when the target identity is salient (study 2), confirming that they are specific to consumer identity expression. Consumer response depends on the relative importance of agency (vs. the drive for identity expression) across individuals and situations, which can attenuate (study 4) or reverse (study 3) the effects on purchase. Similarly, brand self-design can eliminate the backlash from identity-defining messages by restoring consumers' sense of agency in identity expression (study 5).

Theoretical and Substantive Implications

Beyond the traditional focus on consumers' drive to define and express themselves through brands that fit them (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005), our findings illustrate the need to consider agency, another fundamental motive of the self (Baumeister 1998; Deci and Ryan 1985). If fit were the only important consideration in this context, then identity-defining messages would be universally more effective than identity-referencing messages. Instead, our findings suggest that consumer agency is an important basis for identity-expressive purchase.

These findings are of particular substantive concern because managers do not account for consumer agency and prefer explicit messages. More generally, though the notion that targeting one segment may alienate other consumers is well understood (Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier 2000), limited work demonstrates the potential for consumer backlash against a clearly relevant brand even among the target segment. Our results suggest that targeting consumers on the basis of identity entails special considerations. These findings validate the explanatory power of the identity construct, which can explain behaviors that appear harmful, suboptimal, or counter to established preferences (Akerlof and Kranton 2000; Oyserman 2009). Our work is among the first to propose a framework that integrates consumers' need for self-definition with another potentially conflicting self-

motive (cf. Chan, Berger, and Van Boven 2012; Wu, Cutright, and Fitzsimons 2011). Hence, our perspective offers a more complete picture of identity marketing that highlights its inherent risks as well as its rewards (cf. Chernev et al. 2011).

This work unites the literatures in consumer identity and freedom of choice. While larger assortment sizes are traditionally associated with greater perceptions of agency (Brehm 1966; Reibstein, Youngblood, and Fromkin 1975), our results support the notion that there are multiple routes to fulfilling consumers' need for agency (Averill 1973; Inesi et al. 2011). We show that explicit identity marketing can reduce perceptions of agency in identity expression itself, independent of choice. Just as a sense of agency is fundamental to meaningful self-signals of virtue (e.g., Berman and Small 2012; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2012), our results indicate that perceived agency is a key factor in enabling consumers to view their behavior as meaningful expressions of their identity. Consistent with prior findings about marketing promotions (Kivetz 2005), identity-marketing messages carry the inherent potential to reduce perceived agency by increasing the salience of external factors (Moller et al. 2006), undermining the expression of the identities they seek to invoke.

Limitations and Future Directions

These findings are interesting in light of recent work by Botti and McGill (2011) showing that personal agency increases satisfaction when consumers have hedonic goals (in which the outcome is a goal in itself) but does not influence satisfaction when they have utilitarian goals (in which the outcome fulfills a higher level goal). Though Botti and McGill (2011, 1067) regard improving self-image as a utilitarian goal, our work suggests that the expression of a consumer identity (at least one held with certainty) does depend on perceived agency and may not be a utilitarian goal in the same sense. One possibility that merits exploration is that seeking to improve self-image, or pursuing an unrealized aspirational identity (Higgins 1987; Oyserman 2009), reflects identity uncertainty and leads consumers to value explicit identity definition more than agency in identity expression (cf. Gao et al. 2009).

While it may seem surprising that choice set size did not affect consumer purchase likelihood in our final study, these findings broadly support the notion that when one source of agency is present, adding others yields diminishing returns (Inesi et al. 2011). Nonetheless, our findings do suggest some limits to the substitutability of sources of agency. While adding choices directly increases agency across many contexts, the negative effects of explicit identity marketing seem specific to the role of agency as a basis for meaningful consumer identity expression. Though these findings are informative, they also reflect consequences for a single target brand. Our results suggest that adding other identity-relevant brands to the choice set could indeed restore consumer agency, consistent with past research demonstrating greater variety seeking in response to perceived constraints (Levav and Zhu 2009).

Though our research focuses on identity-marketing communications, triggers such as hard-sell tactics or promotional incentives (Kivetz 2005) in identity-relevant contexts might also undermine consumers' sense of agency in identity expression. Similarly, while our final study examines consumer self-design, brands may also have other means of reinstating perceived agency in identity expression, such as giving consumers more control in the consumption process (Hagen and Burson 2014) or granting consumers a greater sense of power (Inesi et al. 2011). Our findings reinforce the importance of ceding control to consumers in shaping brand meaning. Over time, doing so may be essential to maintaining perceived brand authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Holt 2002) and identity-expressive value (Berger and Heath 2007).

Moreover, though we examine several different contexts, these effects may vary based on the particular content of brand and consumer identities. For instance, certain identities are naturally more consistent with a strong drive for agency (Hong and Faedda 1996). Relative to an explicit Jif peanut butter message advising mothers that "Choosy Moms Choose Jif," an explicit De Beers message urging feminist women to "Raise Your Right Hand" and buy a diamond to demonstrate their empowered womanhood may engender greater backlash among more identity group members. Notably, the existence of a backlash among some consumers does not preclude a message from being effective or resonating with others.

Following Kivetz (2005), we believe that the drive to maintain agency is a pervasive and understudied feature of consumer decisions. Hence, though we highlight potential reductions in consumer agency, our work also bears on recent research exploring the positive and negative consequences of enabling greater consumer agency in self-relevant prosocial contexts (e.g., Gneezy et al. 2012; Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014). Moreover, many consumer decisions unfold in contexts in which persuasive intent is salient. As such, while our mechanism is distinct, our work also aligns with research detailing tactics that consumers use to resist persuasion and marketing influence (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad and Wright 1994; Laran, Dalton, and Andrade 2011). In fact, one interesting possibility is that the pursuit of consumer agency provides the motivational impetus for cognitive resistance to marketing influence. For instance, counterargument against conditional marketing messages (e.g., "If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!"; Chandon and Janiszewski 2009) may be an expression of consumers' drive for agency, particularly in identity-relevant contexts. The interplay of these factors may better illuminate how consumers act to embrace versus escape the crosshairs of marketers.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author managed data collection and analyzed the data for all of the studies, under the guidance of the second and third authors. The pilot study, studies 1 and 2, and the follow-up study reported after study 2 were conducted by research assistants at the Wharton Behavioral Lab. The pilot study was run in the winter of 2012, study 1 was run in the summer of 2011 with an online executive advisory panel, and study 2 and the follow-up study were run in the spring of 2011. Studies 3, 4, and 5 were conducted online using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Study 3 was run in the summer of 2011, and studies 4 and 5 were run in the spring of 2013.

APPENDIX

STUDY STIMULI

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