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Identity-Based Motivation: Constraints and Opportunities in Consumer Research

Sharon Shavitt,

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Carlos J. Torelli, and

University of Minnesota

Jimmy Wong

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

This commentary underscores the integrative nature of the identity-based motivation model (Oyserman, 2009). 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.

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

Address correspondence to: Sharon Shavitt, Department of Business Administration, University of Illinois, 350 Wohlers Hall, Champaign, IL 61820. Email: shavitt@illinois.edu.

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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 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 ingroup 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 psychology has 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, 1999), 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 symbolize five dimensions of personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997). Consumer research supports the IBM perspective that consumers favor brands with symbolic meanings that are congruent with their personal identities (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Kassarian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982).

Although the congruity of choices with salient personal identities is well-established in consumer research, less is known about brand choices that are aligned with consumers’ social or group identities. Choosing brands with abstract meanings that are consistent with the image of the groups to which consumers belong can strengthen the psychological bond with the group (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The better a brand is at symbolizing abstract group characteristics (e.g., Lands End as a symbol of the modesty that characterizes some cultural groups), the more likely the idea will spread within the group that the brand choice is identity-syntonic. However,

as in the case of products, commonly shared meanings should constrain the likelihood that brands can be seen as symbols of a group identity.

These notions find support in recent research about the cultural symbolism of brands -- the degree to which members of a cultural group agree that a brand symbolizes abstract characteristics, such as values, that can signal group identity (Torelli, Chiu, Keh, & Amaral, 2009; Torelli, Keh, & Chiu, 2009). To the extent that such symbolic meanings are widely and consistently distributed in the culture, consumers can rely on them to communicate to others who they are. Through the sharing of these meanings in an ongoing, dynamic process of social verification, they become a shared reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Torelli, Chiu, Keh, & Amaral (2009) measured the cultural symbolism of a variety of brands in the U.S. and Venezuela. They found that people can easily discriminate among brands high or low in cultural symbolism based on their beliefs about the extent to which this symbolism is widely shared in the culture. Furthermore, brands that are high (vs. low) in cultural symbolism are distinctively associated with abstract cultural characteristics. For instance, American consumers believe that most Americans view Coke (versus Sprite) as a symbol of American culture, whereas Venezuelan consumers believe that most Venezuelans view Pan (versus Mavesa, both food products) as a symbol of Venezuelan culture. Importantly, Coke and Pan are seen as embodying individualistic (e.g., 'enjoying life') or collectivistic values (e.g., 'respect for tradition'), that characterize American and Venezuelan cultures, respectively, to a greater extent than brands that are low in cultural symbolism.

One might argue that group identity processes are not necessarily implicated in judgments of culturally symbolic brands because those judgments could simply be based on personal identity characteristics. However, there is direct evidence for the distinct impact of group identity goals on symbolic brand preferences. Torelli, Chiu, Keh, & Amaral (2009) found that consumers who are highly identified with a group, chronically or temporarily, as well as those with a heightened need for reinforcing their group identities, favor culturally symbolic brands over non-symbolic ones. For instance, in one study, American consumers favored culturally symbolic brands (e.g., Budweiser), over non-symbolic brands (e.g., Heineken), but only when their social identity had been threatened. In another study, American consumers reminded of the positive characteristics of their American identity exhibited more favorable attitudes toward brands that are culturally symbolic for Americans. These latter findings are harder to explain in terms of personal identity motives, as the brands included in the analysis were mostly for utilitarian products that are rarely used to express personal characteristics (e.g., Cheerios cereal and Campbell's soup). In sum, evidence suggests that brands that are seen as culturally symbolic afford means for reinforcing one's group identity.

Procedural Readiness and Action Readiness

The IBM model emphasizes that identity triggers action tendencies and mindsets that facilitate meeting identity goals. This emphasis offers an integration of diverse findings in the literature, and highlights the distinct mindsets activated by different identities.

In line with this reasoning, Lalwani and Shavitt (in press) showed that when an individual versus collective identity is made salient, distinct self-presentational goals are activated. This elicits a readiness to engage in tasks that afford congruent self-presentations, and enhanced performance on those tasks. Specifically, because an individual identity is associated with concerns about being skillful and capable of self-reliance (Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006), people with a salient individual (versus collective) identity were more likely to choose to participate in tasks that showcase these skills. They were also more skillful at such tasks, scoring higher on a test of trivia knowledge. In contrast, because a collective identity is associated with the motivation to maintain harmonious social relationships and to avoid social

disapproval (Kim & Markus, 1999; Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006), people with a salient collective (versus individual) identity were more likely to choose to participate in tasks that showcased their social appropriateness. They were also more effective at portraying themselves in a socially sensitive manner, for instance by scoring higher on a test of etiquette. Importantly, these effects were not observed when participants were first given the opportunity to self-affirm, allowing them to fulfill their self-presentational goals before choosing or participating in tasks. This indicates that the effects demonstrate action readiness in pursuit of identity-based goals, rather than the activation of beliefs or concepts.

Other types of cultural identity can also shape interpretation of the environment and the procedures used to respond to it. Examining finer distinctions within individual versus collective identities, we found that cognitive associations with power vary with specific cultural orientations and with ethnicity, which in turn affects the interpretive processes and mindsets triggered when power is salient (Torelli & Shavitt, 2009a, 2009b). Our studies built upon the distinction between vertical and horizontal types of individualism and collectivism (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998), which describes the emphasis placed on hierarchy versus equality values (see also Shavitt, Lalwani, Zhang, & Torelli, 2006). People high in vertical individualism (VI), tend to be concerned with improving their individual status and distinguishing themselves from others via competition and achievement. People high in horizontal collectivism (HC) tend to focus on sociability and interdependence with others within an egalitarian framework. Accordingly VI, either measured as a chronic cultural orientation or inferred from ethnic group membership, is associated with tendencies to interpret power in *personalized* terms (power is for status and personal advancement), whereas HC is associated with tendencies to interpret power in *socialized* terms (power is for benefiting and helping others). These tendencies emerged only for those specific cultural orientations, as reflected in spontaneous perceptions of power-holders as self-centered versus helpful, beliefs about appropriate ways to exercise power, evaluations of brands that embody status or helpfulness, and behaviors in situations that afford self-centered versus helpful outcomes (Torelli & Shavitt, 2009a).

Moreover, we found that cueing with power leads people of different cultural orientations to activate different mindsets when processing non-power stimuli. High VI people activate cognitive processes that facilitate defending their power, such as reasserting control by confirming prior expectations (stereotyping processes, Fiske, 1993). In contrast, high HC people activate cognitive processes that facilitate helping others, such as by forming accurate, careful impressions (individuating processes, Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000). Specifically, activating personalized power goals led consumers high (vs. low) in a VI orientation to engage in more stereotyping, focusing more on brand information that was congruent with their prior expectations. For instance, they were better able to recall information congruent with their view of McDonald's. In contrast, activating socialized power goals led consumers high (vs. low) in an HC orientation to engage in more individuating processes, improving their recall of incongruent brand information (Torelli & Shavitt, 2009b). Consistent with the IBM framework, individuals high in VI, who have an elaborated 'power-as-status' self-schema, can easily activate a status-based identity that triggers a stereotyping mindset. In contrast, individuals high in HC, who have an elaborated 'power-as-helping' self-schema, can easily activate a helpful identity that triggers individuated information processing. Individuals with other cultural orientations did not exhibit these mindsets in response to the power cues, suggesting that some socialization experience was necessary to establish the identities to be cued.

More evidence that specific cultural identities can trigger the readiness to think and act in identity-congruent terms comes from recent research on responses to power threats (Wong & Shavitt, 2009a, 2009b). These studies examined cultural identity in the context of service encounters. Participants read scenarios in which they either imagined receiving rude service

from a low-rank (e.g., hotel receptionist) or a high-rank (e.g., hotel vice president) service provider. We reasoned that being disrespected by another person should be interpreted differently depending on one's culturally based power associations, as well as the power of the other. Specifically, for people with a VI cultural orientation, power is associated with status and personal advancement. Thus, the rude receptionist's behavior should be interpreted as a threat to their sense of status and power, triggering a readiness to act to restore one's power. However, the rude vice president's behavior should not threaten one's own power, and could instead trigger deferential responses to the high-ranking individual.

Indeed, in the low-rank condition, a VI cultural orientation was associated with greater dissatisfaction and more negative emotions (Wong & Shavitt, 2009a). In other studies (Wong & Shavitt, 2009b), VI participants who read the low-rank scenario scored higher on projective measures assessing fear of power loss and hope for power gain (see Sokolowski, Schmalt, Langens, & Puca, 2000). They also indicated a higher willingness to pay for status products (but not for non-status products), presumably because status products afforded a method for restoring their sense of power (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). However, VI level did not predict responses when individuals had first engaged in self-affirmation, supporting the role of identity-based motivation in driving these responses. Finally, the high-rank condition in which a hotel vice president provided rude service was not interpreted in terms of power threat. Instead, a VI orientation was generally associated with the opposite tendency – less negativity, power concerns, or interest in acquiring status items. That is, the higher their VI orientation, the more accepting they were of rude treatment from a high-ranking person. These findings are consistent with the IBM model, indicating that one's specific cultural identity (VI) can shape interpretations and action tendencies in pursuit of identity goals related to power.

In summary, integrating recent research in terms of the IBM model provides further evidence that salient identities trigger interpretive frameworks, cognitive processes, and action tendencies that facilitate the fulfillment of identity goals. These effects emerge with broadly defined individual and collective identities, but also with more specific cultural identities, affording a more nuanced understanding of consumer behavior.

Future Directions

Where Does Identity-Relevant Meaning Come From?

Oyserman discusses the ways in which people manage identity-based meaning and make identity congruent decisions. But how do things become “imbued with identity-based meaning?” What makes product choices feel identity-congruent? Although these issues are not the subject of Oyserman's article, the IBM model may offer novel implications for understanding the antecedents of product meaning.

Consider the example of flossing teeth discussed by Oyserman. Dental floss would not normally engage identity-based motives – it does not symbolize values and is not consumed in a socially visible way (Shavitt, 1990). However, to the extent that it is perceived as part of an identity-nonsyntonic consumption pattern and “not something we do” (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007), it may come to acquire utility in identifying with ingroups by diverging from outgroups. This suggests that product constraints on identity-based motivation may be less rigid than previous functional research has shown. Perhaps even highly utilitarian products will be imbued with identity-based meaning to the extent that people perceive that the level of product usage by their ingroup differs markedly from that of key outgroup(s).

Similarly, Oyserman describes how laundry detergent can acquire identity-based meaning for consumers who are part of a minority group in their community, by virtue of association with an ingroup spokesperson (e.g., Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994). For minority group members,

whose identity is more likely to be salient (McGuire, 1984), identity-based interpretive structures will often be activated and used to derive meaning from the stimulus environment. This implies that *any* product is more likely to acquire symbolic meanings for minority consumers than for other consumers. Future research could address the implications of group-specific attitude functions for identity signaling processes, product choices, and product segmentation efforts.

What are the Implications for Health-Promoting Communications?

When would it be effective to market an identity-nonsyntonic product by linking it to one's ethnicity (e.g., a dental floss with a Latina spokesperson and a Spanish brand name)? It is common practice to promote healthful lifestyles to ethnic-minority audiences using spokespeople from their ethnic group, in an effort to build trust and foster identification. There is a sizeable literature suggesting that such targeted ads are effective (see Williams, Lee, & Henderson, 2008 for a review). In contrast, Oyserman's analysis argues for a backfire effect, such that marketers and public health advocates should avoid this marketing approach, especially for persons who see healthful lifestyles as identity-incongruent.

However, this analysis overlooks the possibility that the social meanings of products, and thus the identity signals they afford, change over time, and these changes can be discontinuous and dramatic (see Gladwell, 2000). The IBM model offers the insight that healthful lifestyles may be rejected because they conflict with an ingroup identity. Yet, if the goal is to shift broader perceptions about healthful lifestyles, it is important also to consider identity as a dependent variable. How can communicators effectively shift ingroup-identity toward healthful lifestyles? Could flossing one's teeth weaken one's identity as Latino or African American? Addressing such questions could spur communicators to develop methods to bolster positive ingroup identities when seeking to change harmful behaviors linked to those identities. Because the IBM model highlights the constructive nature of identity, it is well positioned to address the dynamic nature of meanings and identities, and develop methods to shift them in beneficial directions.

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