

Research Report

Marketing actions that influence estimates of others also shape identity

Katherine A. Burson^{a,*}, Andrew D. Gershoff^b

^a Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, 701 Tappan Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States

^b McCombs School of Business, University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station, Austin, TX 78712, United States

Received 28 December 2013; received in revised form 19 December 2014; accepted 9 January 2015

Available online 16 January 2015

Abstract

Consumers' social identities stem from comparisons between themselves and others. These identities help determine consumption decisions. Unfortunately, perceptions of comparative traits and characteristics are frequently biased, which can lead to similarly biased consumption decisions. Five studies show that two incidental but commonplace marketing decisions can influence consumers' estimates of their relative standing and thus their social identities by influencing estimates of how other consumers are distributed.

© 2015 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Availability; Identity; Distribution estimates; Social identity; Relative standing

Identities are mental representations of how people view themselves through their traits, goals, and characteristics (Oyserman, 2009). Individuals maintain multiple identities, both personal (focusing on characteristics of the individual) and social. Social identities are linked to a social role or group that a person was, is, or may become a member of (e.g., golfer, conservative, environmentalist, trivia expert, or tall person) and therefore differ from personal identities in that they require social comparison.

Ample research shows how consumers' identities influence their attitudes and choices. For example, global versus local identities can influence preferences for products targeted to global versus local markets (Zhang & Khare, 2009). Moral and gender identities can influence charitable donations associated with in-versus out-groups (Winterich, Mittal, & Ross, 2009). Social identities can influence food choices and alcohol consumption (Berger & Rand, 2008). The desire to validate and communicate identities has even been linked to brand choices (Aaker, 1997; Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011). In addition, identities have been shown to influence self-regulation and impulsiveness in purchase behavior and consumption, especially when one's identity is

perceived as less valued compared to others (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Verplanken & Sato, 2011).

An important element in the construction and understanding of social identities is comparison with others (Berger & Rand, 2008; Festinger, 1954; Miller, Turnbull, & McFarland, 1988). Identities about intelligence, commitment to a cause, athleticism, and even body size are inherently relative (e.g. Biernat, 2003; Oyserman, 2001; Raeff, 1997). That is, people assess their own position compared to others – their relative standing – in the process of assessing their identity in these types of domains.

Identity-relevant perceptions of relative standing are important because they can affect choices such as clothing size, serving size, and sophistication level of athletic or technology products. For example, consumers prefer higher end and more advanced products if they identify themselves as above average in a given domain (e.g. Burson, 2007). Given this role of perceived relative standing in consumption decisions, it is important that researchers explore factors that may influence them as they may lead to biased consumption.

The current research explores how subtle contextual cues in shopping environments may shift consumers' estimates of relative standing, not by altering estimates of consumers' own abilities, behaviors, or traits, but instead by influencing estimates of how *others* in the population are distributed across

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kburson@umich.edu (K.A. Burson), andrew.gershoff@mcombs.utexas.edu (A.D. Gershoff).

characteristics or traits relevant to social identity. We explore two simple manipulations that are common to the marketplace: categorization schemas provided for self-identification, and targeting of consumers in distributional extremes. Five studies (examining intelligence, athletic ability, environmental concern, political conservatism, and physical characteristics) show that a) these manipulations influence estimates of how others are distributed, b) these estimates influence relative perceptions of one's self, and c) they lead to identity-congruent behaviors, all without necessarily shifting consumers' perceptions of their own *absolute* abilities, behaviors, or traits.

Theoretical background

People regularly make comparative judgments of their own traits, attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Kruglanski & Maysel, 1990). For consumers, these judgments are important for product search (Moorman, Diehl, Brinberg, & Kidwell, 2004), choice (Burson, 2007; Gershoff & Burson, 2011; Prelec, Wernerfelt, & Zettelmeyer, 1997), and intentions to seek medical treatment (Menon, Block, & Ramanathan, 2002). Unfortunately, these judgments are prone to systematic biases. Even after correctly estimating their absolute standing (e.g. own knowledge in a domain), judges overestimate the dispersion of other consumers (others' knowledge), so they imagine more people below them when their absolute standing happens to be high, and more above them when absolute standing happens to be low (Gershoff & Burson, 2011).

Nisbett and Kunda (1985) argued that overly-disperse distributions are imagined because instances at the extremes are more cognitively available than those in the middle. Manipulating availability has been shown to exacerbate this: Participants seeing pictures of tall (short) consumers believed they were relatively shorter (taller) than others because they imagined more people in the available tail of the distribution (Gershoff & Burson, 2011).

Though the impact of explicitly increasing the availability of extreme others is relevant to marketing contexts, results such as this could easily be attributed to heavy-handed manipulations: Participants must estimate a distribution for which they are provided only extreme members, so of course they incorporate that relevant data. Thus, in the present experiments, we examine the role of more subtle yet normatively irrelevant cues that may influence distributional estimates.

A large body of research has shown that relative estimates about a wide array of topics can be systematically manipulated (see Moore, 2007 for a review). In some cases, manipulations that cause participants to shift the imagined distribution of others on some target trait or characteristic and thus their placement in that distribution are also essentially shifting their social identity. Social identities are contextualized, highly sensitive to situational cues, and can be subtly cued without the consumer's awareness (Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). One such contextual cue is how we compare to others (Oyserman, 2001).

We identify two marketing conventions that can subtly influence consumers' identities by shaping comparisons with

others—marketer provided category schemas and the marketer's product mix decisions. First, marketers often provide a category schema and ask consumers to identify which category they belong to. For example, a clothing store might ask consumers to identify themselves as petite, small, medium, large, misses, x-large, etc. When presented with such schemas, consumers tend to believe that there is reason and purpose in the asking: Categories meaningfully discriminate among consumers (Grice, 1975). Indeed, it would not be useful to offer a schema in which all consumers fell into the same category. So, when consumers are given category options, they rationally assume that those options are meaningful—that the endpoints of the set of categories will contain people in the extremes of the distribution and points in the middle will contain those who are more typical (e.g., Schwarz, 1994, 1996, 1999; Schwarz, Hippler, Deutsch, & Strack, 1985; Schwarz & Scheuring, 1988).

Prior research exploring how people report their *own* behavior supports this notion. For example, respondents reported watching more television when possible responses included more categories of frequent watching, compared to when there were more possible responses of infrequent watching (Schwarz et al., 1985). And, there is some evidence that estimates of the "average citizen's" behavior are also shifted by category manipulations (see also Schwarz & Scheuring, 1988). Social identity hinges on assumptions about others, and some information about others comes from the categorization schema. In fact, the more one thinks about others, the more one is susceptible to schema manipulations (Haberstroh, Oyserman, Schwarz, Kühnen, & Ji, 2002).

While this past work assumes that changes in relative estimates also occur, we strive to document those category-driven shifts. We propose that the category schemas that group consumers influence the way in which consumers see the *full distribution of others*, even in domains in which perceptions of their own absolute behaviors, attitudes, or abilities, remain fixed. This change in the perception of others alone biases how consumers see themselves relative to others. If consumers are likely to overly distribute others across all possible categories, then providing more categories at one end or the other of the range of performances should influence their estimates of others. This will lead to biased perceptions of relative standing – higher estimates of relative standing when there are many low categories and lower estimates of relative standing when there are many high categories – and this, in turn, will influence perceptions of social identity. In Studies 1–3, we test this possibility across five identity-relevant domains.

A second potential influence on consumer identity occurs when retailers target consumers at a distributional extreme. For example, Casual Male Big and Tall sells clothing for larger men. Similarly, many online stores specialize in products geared toward those who hold strong Liberal views while others focus on those with extreme Conservative views. When retailers target consumers at the extremes they may also influence perceptions of the distribution of others and therefore where respondents fall in that distribution.

Since consumers often consider the individuals who are a brand's typical users (Aaker, 1991; McCracken, 1989), if a

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/882139>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/882139>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)