



Effects of national identity salience on responses to ads[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the effect of national identity salience on responses to ads in two contexts: national identity activated through media context, and national identity activated through advertising appeals. The results remain consistent with the idea that heightening national identity leads individuals to react more positively to representations of that identity. The salience manipulations serve to influence respondents' evaluations of ads and purchase intentions. Respondents present more favorable evaluations of ads and intentions to purchase the advertised products when the ads explicitly pair the advertised product with national identity symbols or rhetoric, as compared to when no such explicit pairing occurs. Further, the activation of individuals' national identity through media context affects the response to embedded ads, even when those ads do not explicitly pair the product with national symbols or rhetoric.

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1. Introduction

This research seeks to investigate the way national identity salience influences responses to ads in two contexts: national identity activated through media context, and national identity activated through advertising appeals. For that purpose, the paper describes a research study that adds insight to a recent stream of consumer research on the interplay of social identity and consumption (Bolton & Reed, 2004; Briley & Wyer, 2002; Forehand, Deshpande, & Reed, 2002) and to a well-developed stream of advertising research on the effect of media context on responses to embedded ads (Cauberghe, De Pelsmacker, & Janssens, 2010; Coulter & Punj, 1999; Dahlén, 2005; De Pelsmacker, Geuens, & Anckaert, 2002; Poncin, Pieters, & Ambaye, 2006; Potter, LaTour, Braun-LaTour, & Reichert, 2006).

Most consumer research on identity focuses on the activation of a specific social identity directly through advertising appeals (i.e., ads containing explicit links to a specific social identity). This stream of research still needs to investigate how prior activation of a social identity (for example, through media context) influences responses to embedded ads. At the same time, most advertising research on the impact of media context on advertising responses focuses on context-induced

involvement or context-induced emotions (Coulter & Punj, 1999), not on context-induced identity. A decided lack of research concerning the effect of media-activated national identity on responses to embedded ads remains. The current study combines the existing knowledge of those two distinct research streams with the aim of advancing the theoretical understanding and practical applicability of both areas.

Consider the following scenario: A Brazilian woman named Isabelle reads an ad about a Brazilian product in a magazine, but the fact that this item originates from Brazil fails to influence her evaluation of the product. Why? Because Isabelle's Brazilian identity remains nonactivated. If, instead, the ad displays the words *Proud to be Brazilian*, would this activation of Isabelle's Brazilianness influence her response to the ad? The consumer research literature on identity leads to the prediction that the activation of Isabelle's Brazilian identity would influence her attitude and behavior toward both the ad and the advertised product. First, the activation of Isabelle's Brazilian identity may lead to a more positive evaluation of the ad and to the advertised product through a social categorization process (Dimofte, Forehand, & Deshpande, 2003). That is, the ad's emphasis on the identity match between Isabelle and the product might lead Isabelle to categorize that ad and product as associated with her in-group (i.e., Brazil). Since the activation of an individual's in-group membership usually leads a person to feel a sense of obligation to in-group members (Briley & Wyer, 2002), Isabelle might engage in what identity theorists call *in-group favoritism behavior* (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988) by giving higher evaluations for her in-group members (in this case, the ad's explicit pairing of the advertised product to her Brazilian identity).

Now, consider another scenario: Suppose Isabelle reads a news report that explicitly mentions Brazil within the text. One can expect

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that this report will activate Isabelle's Brazilian identity. In that case, if she sees an ad for a product immediately after reading the report, even if the ad fails to explicitly link that product with Brazil, would the prior activation of her Brazilian identity influence her response to the embedded ad? Consumer research on identity salience leads to the prediction that once the news report activates Isabelle's Brazilian identity, this identity salience may have an effect on her interpretation of the embedded ad, as well as on her subsequent response to that ad (Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Turner, 1987).

The current research demonstrates that when national identity becomes salient (through advertising appeal or media context), this identity salience positively influences consumers' response to ads and to the advertised products. That is, explicitly pairing products with national symbols and/or rhetoric in advertising serves to activate consumers' national identity and consequently generates more favorable responses to the paired ads and to the advertised products. More interestingly, the research findings of this paper show that the activation of national identity through media context positively influences consumer attitudes towards ads and towards the advertised products, even when the ads lack an explicit pairing of the products with national symbols or rhetoric. This effect of national identity salience on attitude towards ads and advertised products takes place in part because consumers react positively to the media context that makes their national identity more prominent—resulting in more favorable affective response to and higher attitude toward the media context.

In providing these insights concerning the influence of national identity salience on consumers' response to ads and advertised products, this research makes three important contributions. First, findings from this research generalize the existing conceptual understanding of how consumers react to marketing strategies that activate one of their relevant social identities by documenting the fact that pairing products with consumers' national identity positively influences the way consumers react to those products. Second, and more importantly, in a simultaneous examination of the effects of the activation of national identity (through both the advertising appeal and the context surrounding the advertisement on consumers' response to ads and the advertised products), an interesting perspective emerges on the dynamics involved in using national identity in marketing strategies. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this research advances the understanding of the dynamics underlying the influence of media context on consumer reactions to embedded ads by examining the mediating roles of affective response to and attitude toward the media context when that media context activates a specific, relevant, social identity (in this case, national identity). Together, these findings represent important implications for marketing managers, which will be touched upon at the end of this article.

2. Theoretical model and hypotheses development

2.1. National identity: the sense of oneness with the nation

At a basic level, individuals recognize and accept the fact that they belong to a nation. This perception of national self-categorization often serves as a way for individuals to express themselves to the external world. Social psychologists commonly refer to this form of expression as the part of the individual's self-concept called national identity (Terhune, 1964).

As part of the self-concept, national identity serves as a form of social identity (Keane, 1994). A sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world by helping individuals gain a sense of distinctiveness in a globalized and complex setting. The set of ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic, and legal–political components of individuals' national identity helps them develop an authentic sense of self and gain a better understanding of their own beliefs, motives, values, attitudes and behavior (Smith, 1991). For Thompson (2001), the communal values of a nation serve to shape citizens'

behavior. Thompson explains that “individuals are perceived as behaving in a certain way because their belief in collective national values ensures that they do so” (2001, p.25).

Social psychologists have demonstrated that a specific social identity can be momentarily salient as a result of a variety of factors, such as stimulus cues, context or situation, and individual differences (e.g., Forehand et al., 2002). For instance, in order to activate a specific cultural orientation in bicultural respondents, Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) used a variety of cultural icons, such as cultural symbols (the American flag, the Chinese dragon and the like), folklore figures (Superman and Stone Monkey), famous people (Marilyn Monroe and a well-known Chinese opera singer), and landmarks (the Capitol Building or the Great Wall of China). The results of this study showed that Westernized Chinese students in Hong Kong behaved more as “Westerners” when first exposed to American icons and more as “Easterners” when first exposed to Chinese icons. Research on social identity salience also demonstrates that the activation of a specific identity through stimulus cues may lead people to behave in accordance with that identity (e.g., present a more favorable evaluation of stimulus linked to that identity). Lau-Gesk (2003) uses cultural cues embedded in persuasion appeals to activate culture and then influence respondents' evaluation of the targeted persuasion appeals. Lau-Gesk activates respondents' Western cultural disposition with individually focused persuasion appeals and respondents' Eastern cultural dispositions with interpersonally focused persuasion appeals. That study's findings demonstrate that the activation of the respondents' cultural disposition (Western vs. Eastern) leads to a more favorable reaction towards the targeted persuasion appeals (individually focused vs. interpersonally focused). In a similar fashion, Forehand et al. (2002) use spokesperson ethnicity in advertising in order to activate ethnic identity. Upon activation of their Asian identity, Asian participants responded most positively to Asian spokespersons and Asian-targeted advertising.

2.2. Activation of national identity through media context

Communication research indicates that national media traditionally play an important role in the development, enhancement, and activation of national identity (Anderson, 1983; Entman, 1991, 1993; Rivenburgh, 1997, 2000). The media reinforce national identity through daily broadcasts of issues directly related to the nation (national tragedies, social events, internal conflicts, and external threats) and by perpetuating national symbols, rhetoric, and rituals.

The media activate national identity by selecting particular aspects of a perceived reality that can be linked to national identity and by making these aspects more prominent in the news text (Entman, 1993). Such mentions serve not only to activate national identity but also to lead the audience to respond in a given way, both to the content of the news report and to the medium itself. In the present research, the term *affective response* refers to overall feelings in response to a news report's content (e.g., sadness, concern, sorrow), and *attitude toward the article* refers to evaluative judgments regarding the qualities of the news report (e.g., interest, usefulness).

According to identity theorists such as Tajfel and Turner (1979), when a relevant social identity becomes salient, individuals increasingly identify with the in-group that identity represents. As national identity carries some level of emotional significance for all members of the nation, the reporting of negative and positive events linked to a given country will likely affect feelings in a congruent way (affective response). Billing (1995, as cited in Thompson, 2001) proposes that reports of tragedies that occur in the home country stir sympathies more deeply than do reports of tragedies of even greater magnitude that occur in other places. Thus, consistent with the theory on identity salience, one can expect that exposing individuals to news reports about their own country will lead to a much stronger affective response to the content of those reports than would exposing them to news reports about someplace else. Further, stories linked to the audience's national identity raise more

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