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Research Dialogue

Conservatism as a situated identity: Implications for consumer behavior

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Abstract

Insufficient attention to political ideology as an organizing axis reduces predictive power. Jost (2017 – this issue) makes a significant contribution by outlining and documenting a set of relationships among personality factors, attitudes, values, and conservatism. The value of this approach is highlighting the possibility that ideology sticks when it fits features of the individual and hence has an enduring quality. This approach needs to be balanced by consideration of the power of the immediate situation to define what an identity means and the potential universality of many features associated with conservatism. We discuss both issues using identity-based motivation theory as our organizing framework.

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“A Jeep driver is one who doesn’t give up when faced with adversity” (Shanghai husband explaining why he bought his wife a Jeep Grand Cherokee; from Barnett, 2016).

“Love, hope, happiness. Whatever your destination, there’re a million ways to get there” (“Recalculating” advertisement for Jeep <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2dnmCmTI90>).

“Yes you can go back, you just have to look in the right place.”
“It is not about hugging trees. It is not about being wasteful either. Find that balance, when taking care of yourself takes care of more than just yourself. That is the sweet spot.” (Texan actor Mathew McConaughey, promoting Ford Lincoln cars, in a series of sleekly shot commercials <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QEAA94FjHc>).

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Introduction

Are Jeeps for tough tenacious people who value personal happiness, self-direction and new experiences? Are Lincolns for quirky people who are rooted in their past, value family and personal happiness, and are benevolent and want to avoid harm? How did the Jeep and Lincoln people choose these particular descriptors? According to John Jost’s (2017 – this issue) timely and stimulating target article these descriptors are associated with political ideology. The Jeep ‘recalculating’ and the Lincoln McConaughey advertisements mix some descriptors resonating more with conservatives with other descriptors resonating more with liberals. Associates of conservatism are tough-mindedness, individualism, respect and deference to tradition and authority. Associates of liberalism are tolerance, compassion, flexibility, and openness to new experiences. The advertisements cleverly link consumption with all of these attributes (which might variously be defined as attitudes, traits, values, or moral bases; Oyserman, 2015a, 2015b). For example, in the Jeep ‘recalculating’ spot, the theme music comes from Frank Zaruba’s country western tune, providing a link to that identity, while the images and words in the ‘recalculate’ advertisement emphasize self-directed ways to get to a traditional lifestyle. “Go straight to a steady job, recalculating;

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tow the company line, recalculating; stay single until you are 34, recalculating (with an image of a diamond ring); be a vegan, recalculating (with an image of a person viscerally enjoying a large steak).” In the Lincoln advertisements, McConaughey, in a subtle southern Texan twang, talks to his dogs about dinner plans but tells them he is the boss, tells a bull in his path that he will show respect, lets the bull have the road, while he himself backs up and takes the long way around. If liberals and conservatives notice identity-relevant cues and fail to notice or process irrelevant ones, advertisements like these can feel equally compelling to both audiences.

Jost’s timely target article asks whether there is a profile of conservatism and liberalism that is relevant to understanding consumer choice and behavior, which consumer behavior theories and marketing strategies should take into account. One implication of these advertising examples is that ads target the sorts of values, attitudes, and traits that Jost (2017 – *this issue*) proposes are associated with political ideology, understood through the lens of a conservatism-liberalism continuum. A second implication is that advertising does so, it seems, by mixing and matching ideologies, perhaps assuming that consumers will only notice and process identity-relevant information, making sense of the whole by focusing on identity-relevant parts. Jost reviews the literature on associative relationships between political attitudes, personality variables, and family background, arriving at three key conclusions (see also Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009).

First, certain kinds of people hold certain political ideologies because these ideologies are good matches with their traits and characteristics. Political ideologies stick because they resonate with personal needs and motivations. Conservatives emphasize tough-mindedness and tenacity, personal happiness, family security, economic prosperity, hierarchy, obedience to authority, and individualism. These values stick more with people who have the personality trait of conscientiousness and have a low need for cognition and high need for cognitive closure. Liberals emphasize self-direction and flexibility. These values stick more with people who have the personality trait of openness to new experience, have a high need for cognition and low need for cognitive closure. Second, political ideologies come from the larger society and express themselves at the individual level in distinctive ways of thinking, kinds of motivation, and even brain structures. Third, all of this might matter for consumer choice and behavior.

A situated approach

Jost’s message is appealing, not the least because it dovetails with people’s general preference for dispositional ‘at person’ explanations over situational ‘at context’ ones (Nisbett & Ross, 1991). People believe that they know who they are and that who they are matters for what they do; that their own and other peoples’ choices and actions reflect who they are and who they might become— their current and possible future identities (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). People believe that in core and essential ways, they are the same across time and space; their friends usually share this belief about themselves. This essentialist belief is useful for several reasons. First, it allows people to make

predictions about their own and others’ future behavior given what they believe to be true of them now. Second, if “future me” and “me now” are essentially the same “me” it is less painful to refrain from smaller current rewards to accrue future larger ones. This makes long-term strategies, such as saving for one’s retirement, more palatable (Lewis & Oyserman, 2015). Third, if “future me” and “me now” are essentially the same “me,” people should be more willing to take a “no pain, no gain” approach, investing more effort when they experience difficulty working toward their goals (Smith & Oyserman, 2015).

However, the appealing message of essential dispositions comes with an important caveat that matters for those interested in shaping and predicting consumer choice and behavior. As with all dispositional accounts of attitudes and behavior, Jost’s (2017 – *this issue*) emphasis on dispositional variables needs to be balanced by a consideration of immediate contextual variables influencing motivation, identities, attitudes, and behaviors. As with all dispositional accounts, this also requires a realistic assessment of the likely amount of variance that political ideologies expressed in one context can explain in behaviors measured in another context or across contexts over time (e.g., effects of political ideology on charitable giving, Kimmelmeier et al., 2002; and performance, Kimmelmeier et al., 2006). Even though identities feel stable, identities and the content of these identities change as a function of context (for a review, see Oyserman et al., 2012). Rather than being invariant, which identities come to mind and what ‘on-the-mind’ identities seem to mean is sensitively attuned to momentary and chronic features of context. That people are sensitive to the implications of their immediate situation is a design feature, not a design flaw. This sensitivity allows people to make inferences about what people like themselves likely do, which strategies work for them, and what inferences to draw when their current activity progresses smoothly or when they run into difficulties (for reviews Fisher & Oyserman, 2017; Oyserman, 2015a, 2015b; Oyserman et al., 2017).

Identity as situated

Our organizing framework here is identity-based motivation theory, a situated social cognition theory of motivation and goal pursuit — with special focus on when and how self-regulation works (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2017). Identity-based motivation theory starts with the disjuncture between decontextualized belief and contextualized reality. People experience their own and others’ identities as fixed and always on the mind so that they can predict tomorrow’s tastes and desires from those of today. People prefer to act (action-readiness) and make sense of their experiences (procedural-readiness) in identity-congruent ways. However, contexts influence more than which identities are on the mind; people actively construct what their identities are and imply given contextual cues (dynamic construction). ‘On-the-mind’ identities influence the strategies people are willing to use and the meaning they make of their subjective experiences, especially their experiences of ease and difficulty in considering or trying to work on their self-goals.

People make culturally tuned inferences about what these experiences imply for who they are or could become and what

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