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Research Article

The impact of identity breadth on consumer preference for advanced products

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Abstract

Prior research documents that individuals may categorize themselves along a hierarchy of social identities and that their subsequent behavior is guided by whichever identity is salient at the moment. The current research investigates how activating one's social identity at different breadth levels influences consumers' subjective knowledge and the consequences for product choice. We propose and document that consumers will perceive that they have greater knowledge and thus prefer more advanced product options when their broad identity rather than narrow identity is salient (experiment 1). We also rule out simple categorization mindset and construal level as the alternative explanations of the identity breadth effect (experiments 2A and 2B). Moreover, our findings suggest that the effect of identity breadth on subjective knowledge will lessen for consumers with high self-esteem (experiment 3) and will reverse when the product domain is highly relevant to the narrow identity (experiment 4). Both theoretical contributions and marketing implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Prior studies have stressed the role of subjective knowledge, i.e., what consumers think they know, in decision-making. For instance, Moorman (2001) finds that subjective knowledge will exert a critical impact on choice confidence. Hadar, Sood, and Fox (2013) show that consumers are more risk-seeking when

their self-rated subjective knowledge is high. Other research suggests that consumers' subjective knowledge is an important determinant of product information search (Brucks, 1985; Moorman, Diehl, Brinberg, & Kidwell, 2004; Raju, Lonial, & Mangold, 1995; Rao & Sieben, 1992) and product information processing (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Johnson & Russo, 1984).

Moreover, the existing research suggests that this metacognitive feeling of knowing is not fixed and can be shaped by contextual factors (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Park, Mothersbaugh, & Feick, 1994). It is critical to understand what will affect this metacognitive feeling of knowing. Drawing from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2009), the present research concentrates on how social identity influences subjective knowledge and affects subsequent choice making. For instance, the comparative ignorance hypothesis suggests that comparison with more knowledgeable individuals will lead people to perceive themselves as having inferior knowledge and thus avoid an

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uncertain prospect (Fox & Tversky, 1995). However, an important question unanswered in previous studies is whether a person's salient social identity per se will affect subjective knowledge and consequently influence consumer preferences. To address this research void, the current research aims to investigate whether activating one's social identity at different breadth levels would exert an impact on subjective knowledge. Specifically, we propose that making salient an individual's social identity at a broad versus narrow level can influence his or her subjective knowledge or perceived expertise, which in turn favors preferences for more advanced products. According to self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), social identities are context-dependent and can be categorized at multiple levels of abstraction. By extending the self-categorization theory, we propose that an individual's specific social identity can be activated at different breadths, from a broad level to a narrow level. As an illustration, Alice teaches microbiology at a university. A broad identity defines Alice in a superordinate group that is an overarching, inclusive social category (e.g., a professor). In contrast, a narrow identity defines Alice in a subgroup that is highly specific and exclusive (e.g., a microbiology professor of science at a specific university).

Building on the notion that the salient identity can make its corresponding category of knowledge more accessible for retrieval and usage (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008; Devine & Monteith, 1999), we propose that a broad identity, compared with a narrow identity, can increase the accessibility of a broader category of knowledge. On the contrary, a narrow identity corresponding to a limited and specific knowledge category would create the perception that a person knows little in domains beyond this narrow category.

Accordingly, we expect that individuals with a broad identity will feel more knowledgeable in general and that this heightened feeling of knowing will readily apply to the product domain of their consumer decisions. Because subjective knowledge or expertise in a product domain predicts product choice (Brucks, 1985; Burson, 2007; Raju et al., 1995; Rao & Sieben, 1992), we further propose that consumers will exhibit preference for more advanced products when they access a broad identity rather than a narrow identity. In addition, we will examine two boundary conditions for the proposed identity breadth effect: consumer self-esteem and product domain relevance.

In the remaining sections, we will review the literature about social identity and consumer knowledge. Then we will present the empirical findings from four experiments that use both student and non-student samples. In the final section of the paper, we will discuss the theoretical contributions, managerial implications of our findings, and the limitations and future research directions.

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Social identity and knowledge perception

According to Devine and Monteith (1999), individuals' knowledge perception is bundled with social identities, so that activating one specific social identity will make the

corresponding category of knowledge salient. Meanwhile, certain categories of consumer knowledge may not be accessible when the relevant social identity is not activated at a given time (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). Prior research indicates that the self consists of a set of context-specific social identities that can be organized into a hierarchy representing various levels of abstraction (Harter, 1985; Schell, Klein, & Babey, 1996). Similarly, Brewer (1991) used a series of concentric circles to represent definitions of the self at different levels of inclusiveness. Moving outward from the center circle, each consecutive circle indicates a higher level of social identity (Brewer, 1991). Turner et al.'s (1987) self-categorization theory further posits that the self can be categorized at three levels of abstraction and inclusiveness: 1) the superordinate level corresponds to human beings, as differentiated from non-humans, 2) the intermediate level of categorization focuses on similarities and differences in social groups, and 3) the subordinate level represents the personal self or personal identity, the unique "I." Accordingly, identities corresponding to the intermediate level of self-categorization relate to different types of social groups, and the self is cognitively grouped as identical and interchangeable to other people within the same social group (Turner & Oakes, 1986; Turner et al., 1987).

Hence, the current research focuses on the intermediate level of self-categorization and proposes that social identities within this intermediate level can be further differentiated along a spectrum of breadth. An individual may own multiple social identities, and each social identity can be contextually activated at either a broader level or a narrower level. Specifically, a broad identity defines a member in a more inclusive group that combines heterogeneous features and focuses on the similarities among multiple subgroups. In contrast, a narrow identity defines a member in a subgroup that is relatively more exclusive, constrains individuals to a specific domain, and directs attention to the differences among subgroups. To illustrate, a "microbiology professor of science at a state university" is a relatively narrow identity compared with the identity of "professor," which is a broader identity referring to the same person as a scholar.

According to identity-based motivation, individuals are motivated to make sense of the world in an identity-consistent manner (Oyserman, 2009) and to view the world through a knowledge structure that avoids identity-inconsistent information (Berger & Heath, 2007; Coleman & Williams, 2015). Previous studies suggest that individuals' knowledge structure includes attributes, behaviors, and information that are characteristic of specific social categories and can be activated by corresponding social identities (Cheng et al., 2008; Devine & Monteith, 1999; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). A salient identity would direct the allocation of attention such that identity-consistent information would receive greater attention (Coleman & Williams, 2015). In addition, different knowledge categories will be made accessible for use depending on which social identity is activated in the specific context (Fiske, 1998; Higgins, 1996).

Consequently, accessing a broad identity that is more inclusive than a narrow identity and combines heterogeneity from subgroups can highlight a broader category of identity-relevant

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