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Research Report

# R-E-S-P-E-C-T find out what my name means to me: The effects of marketplace misidentification on consumption<sup>☆</sup>

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Available online xxx**Abstract**

Little research has focused on understanding how the misuse of consumers' names in the marketplace impacts consumption. Building on the motivation and personal identity threat literatures, we explore the impact of being identified by someone else's given name in the marketplace. We find that consumers exhibit avoidance behaviors when misidentified (versus remaining unidentified or being correctly identified), which is mediated by feelings of respect. We also show that misidentification effects are moderated by ego fragility (i.e., as measured by implicit self-esteem), with the effects more pronounced among those with more fragile egos. We attenuate this effect via self-affirmation, showing that misidentified consumers who have been affirmed no longer exhibit product avoidance responses. Implications and avenues for future research are discussed.

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Consumers typically remain unidentified in the marketplace, with their name not used by service providers. At times, however, consumers are addressed by their given names: when ordering coffee at Starbucks, when receiving promotional emails, or when being called for a dentist appointment. Although consumers may like such personalization attempts, these can backfire if marketers do not get it right. Thus we ask: What happens when consumers are misidentified in the marketplace (e.g., Tom is called Jim)? We show that *marketplace misidentification* (e.g., being identified with the wrong name by a marketer) reduces consumption, as a defensive response to personal identity threat, especially among consumers with more fragile egos.

Research has demonstrated that names are strongly connected to people's personal identities (e.g., Dion, 1983), with people preferring objects and others who have labels or names similar to their own (e.g., Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005; Nuttin, 1985). For example, people exhibit greater purchase intent for products with prices that match their birthdates or name letters (Coulter & Grewal, 2014). Building on this work, we explore the effects of marketplace misidentification, which does not seem to be an uncommon occurrence in the marketplace. For example, consumers may not only be addressed by the wrong name (e.g., spelling or pronunciation errors), but they may also be addressed by the wrong gender or title (i.e., Mr. or Mrs.).

A person's personal identity is made up of multiple dimensions, including self-views (e.g., Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009), values (Hitlin, 2003), and names (Dion, 1983). Research shows that one's personal identity is threatened if the self is cheapened or put into question (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden,

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1996; Berjot, Girault-Lidvan, & Gillet, 2012). For example, research in healthcare suggests people experience personal identity threat when they are dehumanized (not treated as a human) or disempowered (feel they have little or no control; Coyle, 1999). However, the impact of *names* has not yet been adequately explored in relation to personal identity threat. In today's marketplace, companies are increasingly using names to personalize consumers' experiences: when products are purchased (e.g., Starbucks coffee) or personalized (e.g., on M&M's), or when direct mail or e-mail is received. Yet, consumers may receive items on which their name has been misrepresented. Thus, we ask: what happens when consumer personalization attempts are inaccurate — do such attempts backfire?

Since consumers have a basic need to protect and enhance the self, they may respond with defensive behaviors when their personal identities are threatened (e.g., Sherman & Cohen, 2002, 2006). Defensive behaviors such as avoidance (Park, 2010; Sherman & Cohen, 2002, 2006) and compensation (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2013; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, 1982) are often used to restore one's self-esteem after an identity threat (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). In this paper, two types of consumption-related defense mechanisms are measured — product avoidance and compensatory choice, which demonstrate how consumers protect and restore the self after instances of *marketplace misidentification*.

As marketers personalize their offers, risks associated with misidentification increase (see Barford, 2012). We explore how consumers respond to misidentification on the basis of their first names, which pose a threat to their personal identities. However, other instances of marketplace misidentification could threaten consumers' *social* identities (e.g., misidentifying consumers in terms of their occupation, hobbies and sports team affiliations; Brewer, 1991; Hitlin, 2003). Building on the motivation and personal identity threat literatures (e.g., Berjot et al., 2012; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990), we propose that when consumers are misidentified, their existence and importance are diminished or devalued (Berjot et al., 2012), resulting in lowered feelings of respect, which has “a significant blemish on our image, and we suffer accordingly” (Blincoe & Harris, 2011, p. 508; see also De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). We propose that when misidentified (vs. unidentified), consumers will exhibit avoidance behavior toward the offending product (i.e., reduced purchase intentions, decreased consumption, and efforts to physically distance oneself from the product), and if provided the opportunity, will exhibit compensatory consumption behavior (e.g., choose to have one's name appear correctly on another product).

While marketplace misidentification may be threatening to consumers, decades of research show that affirming people protects against threat and thus, can mitigate its effects (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988). Sherman, Nelson, and Steele (2000) show that when affirmed, target stimuli are no longer threatening and may even elicit approach behavior. When coffee drinkers read threatening health information about their coffee-related habits, they were more likely to accept the information, if previously affirmed (Sherman et al., 2000). We

predict that consumers who have been affirmed (versus not affirmed) will no longer avoid a product after misidentification.

We further propose that avoidance responses will be more pronounced among consumers who have more fragile egos. Here we measure ego fragility in terms of implicit self-esteem (ISE; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Self-esteem can be described as the affirmative or adverse opinion an individual has toward him or herself (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). ISE is the “automatic, unintentional, associative, unconscious and impulsive” aspect of self-esteem (Gregg & Sedikides, 2010, p. 143), and can be a better measure (than explicit measures) of how strong or fragile one's ego is, since responses cannot be consciously controlled (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Research shows that people generally tend to have high opinions of themselves, when measured explicitly (e.g., the “above average effect”; e.g., Brown, 1986). Using ISE, a non-conscious measure of self-esteem, rather than the explicit measure of self-esteem, allows us to avoid biases such as those associated with explicit self-report measures.

Individuals with low ISE suffer from lower levels of self-regard (Gregg & Sedikides, 2010), are impacted to a greater degree by outside environmental cues (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003), and are more sensitive to how others see them (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). We therefore expect that individuals with fragile egos will be more impacted by personal identity threat from marketplace misidentification, due to lower perceived respect, to which they respond with avoidant behaviors, and when given the opportunity, compensatory behaviors (e.g., Gao et al., 2009; Park, 2010; Sherman & Cohen, 2002, 2006).

We present three studies. In study 1, we show that misidentification elicits product avoidance behavior, mediated by feelings of respect. In study 2, we show that consumers with more fragile egos respond more strongly to misidentification. In study 3, we use an alternate measure of ISE and show how the misidentification effect is attenuated via self-affirmation.

### Study 1: marketplace misidentification

In study 1 we show that, compared to remaining unidentified in the marketplace, being misidentified results in product avoidance, whereas being correctly identified results in product approach, as measured by purchase intent. Moreover, we demonstrate that feelings of *respect* mediate this effect. Remaining unidentified (no name; e.g., Kogut & Ritov, 2005) is used in all of our studies as the control condition, since consumers remain anonymous in many marketplace transactions.

#### Pretest

A pretest ( $n = 39$ ; 18 males;  $M_{age} = 20.26$ ) was conducted to assess eleven gender-neutral names that could be used in misidentification conditions. Jessie ( $M = 5.03$ , used in study 1) and Pat ( $M = 4.28$ , used in studies 2 and 3; e.g., Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) were rated high in gender neutrality and chosen for the misidentification conditions (see MDA Table 1a and b).

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