



# When social identity threat leads to the selection of identity-reinforcing options: The role of public self-awareness

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Social identity  
Self-consistency  
Identity threat  
Public self-awareness  
Public self-consciousness

## ABSTRACT

This research shows that activating public self-awareness leads individuals to increase their association with symbolic representations of their identity. When a social identity was threatened, participants high rather than low in public self-awareness were more likely to select options that reinforced their association with the identity (Studies 1a, 1b, and 2). This response was mediated by the desire to convey a consistent self to others (Study 2). In line with the view that the effects are driven by public self-consistency motives, the effects emerge only among those motivated to convey a consistent public self-image (Study 3) and when product choices can be viewed by others (Study 4). Finally, when identity threat occurred in the presence of an ingroup audience, those high (but not low) in ingroup identification were more likely to select identity-reinforcing options when public self-awareness was heightened (Study 5). The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Imagine that while having your morning coffee at a local coffee shop, another patron mentions that she read in the news that your profession has been ranked poorly compared to other comparable professions. How would you react to this negative information that threatens an aspect of your social identity (i.e., your identity linked to your occupation)? One possible response is to engage in behavior that allows you to distance yourself from your identity as a member of the profession (e.g., you might conceal your notebook with an industry-related logo on it). Alternatively, you might respond by engaging in a behavior that reinforces your association with your professional or industry identity in light of this negative information (e.g., you might choose to hold your notebook in a way that displays your industry logo to others). The current research examines threats linked to one's identity as part of an organizational community (e.g., a university, a city, or an occupation) and examines the conditions under which individuals will reinforce their association with a social identity when it is threatened in some way.

The question of how people respond under conditions of social identity threat has received considerable research interest (e.g., Lewis & Sherman, 2003; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). Past research commonly finds evidence of

individuals protecting the self by avoiding an identity when it is threatened (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; White & Argo, 2009; White, Argo, & Sengupta, 2012). However, research also suggests that sometimes an associative response can occur, wherein individuals engage in behaviors that symbolically allow them to reinforce their connection with the threatened aspect of identity (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; White et al., 2012). The present work merges two streams of research on social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-consistency strivings (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1989; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992) to provide a novel account of when social identity threat can lead to an associative, identity-reinforcing response. We propose that under conditions where individuals become motivated to present a consistent view of the self to others, individuals will display a response that allows them to reinforce and associate with the threatened identity. In particular, the present research looks at the impact of social identity threat on the tendency to choose options that are symbolically linked to one's identity and proposes a novel moderator that determines individuals' responses to social identity threat: public self-awareness. We suggest that when public self-awareness is high (as opposed to low), a social identity threat will lead to the desire to display a consistent view of the self to others, resulting in the selection of products that symbolically allow individuals to reinforce their association with the aspect of their identity that has been threatened. In our earlier

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example, if the negative information about one's occupation is delivered in a manner that increases public self-awareness (e.g., is given in a highly public manner), this would lead to identity-reinforcing choices and behaviors (such as selecting a product that reflects the occupational identity).

We contribute to the existing literature in three noteworthy ways. First, this work provides insight into a novel factor that influences reactions to social identity threat and highlights when individuals will reinforce their connection to a threatened aspect of identity. In particular, we demonstrate that variations in public self-awareness moderate responses to a social identity threat. Second, we go beyond looking at responses to social identity threats by examining a mechanism that explains the observed identity-reinforcing behaviors: public self-consistency. Third, we build on work on self-consistency and self-verification to show that public self-consistency motivations are heightened under conditions where public self-awareness is high, when the individual is high in ingroup identification, and when observers are ingroup members.

## 2. Responses to social identity threat

Classic social identity theorizing (e.g., [Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#); [Turner, 1985](#)) proposes that identity is composed of two levels: personal identity (i.e., identity related to a person's individual sense of self) and social identity (i.e., the various identities that are related to social groups to which a person belongs or is affiliated). Importantly, identity is composed of multiple co-existing aspects of self-identity that can become differentially activated based on situational factors (e.g., [Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986](#)). Thus, an individual can respond to situational demands in ways that are congruent with one's individual level of identity or one of many possible aspects of social identity (e.g., mother, teacher, Canadian; [Brewer, 1991](#); [Deaux, 1996](#)).

One key tenet of social identity theory is that not only are individuals motivated to view the individual self in a positive light, they also strive to maintain positive views of the self at the level of their social identity ([Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)). Research drawing on this theorizing shows that when an aspect of social identity becomes threatened in some way, individuals are motivated to reconcile the threat to maintain and restore a positive social identity (e.g., [Aquino & Douglas, 2003](#); [Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999](#); [Ellemers et al., 2002](#); [Lewis & Sherman, 2003](#); [White & Argo, 2009](#); [White et al., 2012](#)). Although there are numerous sub-strategies people can employ to resolve a social identity threat (e.g., [Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke, & Klink, 1998](#), report twelve strategies; [Branscombe, Ellemers et al., 1999](#); [Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999](#), report nine strategies; [Ellemers et al., 2002](#), report twelve strategies), these strategies generally fall into two broad categories. The first category involves dissociating the self from the threatened aspect of identity—for example, by actually leaving or psychologically distancing the self from the ingroup ([Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996](#)) or by seeing the self as an individual rather than a group member ([Branscombe, Ellemers et al., 1999](#); [Branscombe, Schmitt et al., 1999](#)). The second category of responses involves associating or reinforcing the self with the threatened identity—for example, by disparaging the outgroup ([Branscombe & Wann, 1994](#)) or by viewing the ingroup as being more favourable ([Brewer, 1991](#); [Voci, 2006](#)). Notably, research has posited that the tendencies to both distance the self from and associate the self with a threatened identity are driven by a desire to have positive feelings about the self, but they do so via different avenues. In particular, the tendency to dissociate or distance the self from the identity under threat has been characterized as being driven by an individual-level response to enhance the individual self, while the tendency to associate with a threatened identity has been viewed as a group-level response that enhances the group level of identity (e.g., [Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997](#); [Pagliaro, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2011](#); [Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997](#)).

Previous research finds that people's responses to identity threat are often exhibited in their choices of symbolic representations of their identities, such as the material products that they use and display to others (e.g., [Belk, 1988](#); [Berger & Heath, 2008](#); [White & Dahl, 2006, 2007](#)). The existing work examining identity threat and responses to products that symbolically reflect that identity largely suggests that when under threat, people avoid identity-reinforcing products to enhance the individual self (e.g., [Cialdini et al., 1976](#); [White & Argo, 2009](#); [White et al., 2012](#)). For instance, classic research by [Cialdini et al. \(1976\)](#) found that university students were less likely to wear home university-identifying apparel after the school's football team had lost as opposed to when the team won. Further, [White and Argo \(2009\)](#) found that when individuals experienced a threat to an aspect of their social identity (e.g., they received negative information about their gender identity), they avoided products that are symbolically associated with that identity (e.g., gender-linked magazines). One question that arises is when might individuals be more inclined to show the reverse pattern, reinforcing their connection to the social identity via their selections of identity-linked options when that identity is threatened?

## 3. When do people increase association with a threatened social identity?

Past work demonstrates that one factor that leads individuals to increase their association with an ingroup after experiencing social identity threat is the ability to identify with the ingroup in some way (e.g., [Branscombe & Wann, 1994](#); [Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992](#); [Spears et al., 1997](#); [Wann & Branscombe, 1990](#); [Voci, 2006](#)). For example, those who more strongly identify with the ingroup have been shown to respond to social identity threat by displaying greater ingroup bias ([Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992](#)), categorizing the self as a prototypical group member ([Spears et al., 1997](#)), accentuating intragroup heterogeneity ([Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995](#)), as well as seeing the ingroup as homogeneous, feeling committed to the ingroup, and expressing a decreased desire to leave the group ([Ellemers et al., 1997](#)). In our work, we view ingroup identification as being distinct from another factor that moderates reactions to social identity threat: public self-awareness.<sup>1</sup>

Public self-awareness refers to a state in which an individual becomes aware of publicly displayed aspects of the self ([Crisp & Turner, 2007](#); see also [Buss, 1980](#); [Carver & Scheier, 1981](#); [Scheier & Carver, 1980, 1985](#); [White, Simpson, & Argo, 2014](#)). We predict that the degree to which one's focus of attention is on public aspects of the self will play a role in determining reactions to social identity threat. Specifically, we propose that when an individual is high as opposed to low in public self-awareness, the desire to convey a consistent and stable image of the self to others (i.e., in our context the image of a self that does not avoid an aspect of one's own identity) will be increased, which will in turn lead to more identity-reinforcing choices. This response is expected to occur because, foremost, a social identity threat conveys inconsistent information about the self in that it communicates negative information about an aspect of the self that is viewed positively ([Taylor, 1989](#);

<sup>1</sup> We view ingroup identification and public self-awareness as conceptually and empirically distinct constructs. Past work suggests that ingroup identification can be measured as both an individual difference ([Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992](#); [Ashforth & Mael, 1989](#); [Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006](#)) and as a state that can be activated by contextual factors ([Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, 2003](#)). We see ingroup identification as reflecting the degree to which the person construes the group as being part of the self-concept ([Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992](#)) and has a perception of oneness with the group ([Ashforth & Mael, 1989](#)). Public self-awareness, in contrast, involves awareness of the publicly displayed aspects of the self. Our view is consistent with past research that has found that the publicness of a situation and ingroup identification are orthogonal constructs ([Barreto & Ellemers, 2000](#); [Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995](#)). While we view these as distinct constructs, we also see these factors as having interactive effects, which we outline and test in more detail in study 5.

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