Diversity and consumer behavior

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Diversity has received more attention in psychology than it has in consumer research. Yet the role of diversity in the marketplace is of ever growing importance. In this review article, we discuss how true consumer appraisal — addressing consumers by their true, personal identity rather than their false selves — may lead to more positive marketplace experiences. Through a true consumer appraisal lens, we review work which advances our knowledge about diversity and consumer behavior. This research includes discussions of theoretical frameworks such as stereotype threat, methodology such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), and subgroups based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, appearance, and physical ability.

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'One's reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered, into one's head without doing something to one's character' [1].

In 2015, Caitlyn Jenner made the news for exposing her true self to the world. Caitlyn, while born in a man's body, does not identify with the characteristics of what society identifies as being a 'man.' Instead, Caitlyn revealed that she better identifies with being what society labels a 'woman' [2,3]. Related, Rachel Dolezal was exposed for identifying with another race rather than the one into which she was born [2,3]. These examples highlight the gray areas of gender and race, and reflect the notion that how society categorizes individuals versus the way in which people see or feel about themselves may not always be aligned. From these examples, we see that definitions of the self largely impact behavior [4••]. Thus, we propose that encouraging greater acceptance of consumers' self-definitions, rather than pure social definitions, may have a positive impact on consumers' actions and experiences in the diverse marketplace [4••].

Diversity and the true self

Diversity is the 'real or perceived differences among people in race, ethnicity, sex, age, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, religion, work and family status, weight and appearance, and other identity-based attributes that affect their interactions and relationships' [5,6••,7,8]. Thus, when speaking about diversity, the apprehended or actual differences that make groups unique often make groups imbalanced from one another with respect to power [5], vulnerability [9], or distinctiveness [10,11].

In the marketplace, consumers are often targeted, profiled, addressed [12•], or ignored based on aspects of their social identities (e.g., athlete, environmentalist, student, age, gender, race) [13•,14,15]. These social labels are developed based on characteristics that make people different or unique from other consumers and may allow marketers a convenient way to organize the marketplace or address a specific segment of consumers, as when department stores identify consumers by age or by gender [16–18]. However, recent developments suggest that the traditional marketplace landscape may be experiencing a shift. For example, in 2015, Target challenged societal norms by removing gender labels from their store departments [19]. While brands and companies like Target have traditionally built successful strategies around consumer segments, using social labels to define people in a common way does not always translate to all consumers. In fact, the new tech savvy consumer is becoming more appreciative of distinction, yet harder to define by current social labels [8,20]. We suggest that when consumers are seen for their true self by a marketer or by other consumers [21], their marketplace experience may be more positive when compared to consumers who are addressed by a social identity [14], especially when the consumer does not connect to the social label. Thus, we propose that marketers may benefit from addressing consumers by their true self, rather than a self or identity that is manufactured or crafted by society and used in the marketplace. We start with a discussion of how we define a true versus a false identity.

True and false marketplace identities

Two types of selves can be activated in the marketplace: a true self or a false self [22]. Recent research suggests, 'the true self is defined as who a person really is, regardless of

his or her outward behavior' [23]. A false self, by comparison, is created around the demand or the expectations of others [22,24]. When people reflect about their true self they feel that life is more meaningful [25]. Thus, we propose that the marketplace can produce environments that elicit consumers' true or false self [22,24,26], which may ultimately impact a consumer's experience. Specifically, we propose that by using social identity labels [14], marketers may run the risk of people conforming or consuming in agreement with a false, rather than the true, self [22,24]. Consuming in accordance with one's false self may lead to a negative marketplace experience and ultimately have a negative impact on one's overall wellbeing [27]. Indeed, research has shown that when students were asked to make choices (e.g., about one's career) and were primed with their true self, they were more satisfied with the decision they made [28].

It is important to point out that a false self is not always synonymous with a social identity. In the literature, a social identity often reflects a similarity or connection that a person has to a social role or group [15]. Although addressing a consumer's social self (or identity) could be reflective of a consumer's true self, this may not always be the case. Thus, marketers may run the risk of communicating to some consumers' false selves. For example, imagine a plus-sized consumer identifies with being a runner [29]. The runner goes to the store to purchase a pair of running pants. Yet, when the runner goes to the store, the running pants are not made in her size. In this example, the marketer is marketing to the social identity of a runner, rather than the consumer's true self. To avoid marketing to a social identity that may provoke a false self (i.e., a thin runner) for some consumers, the marketer should make athletic clothing in all sizes, to ensure they are marketing to the consumer's true self (i.e., runners of all shapes and sizes). On the other hand, in this example, if the consumer happened to be a thin runner, the social label used by the marketer (i.e., a thin runner) would be reflective of the consumer's true self and thus, the issue becomes moot.

Here, we use a consumer appraisal lens — defined as seeing, identifying, and responding to consumers in accordance with their true self, rather than by societal norms or labels [14] — to explore how consumers respond to marketers or to other consumers based on being seen as their true versus false self. Do these interactions (with one's true versus false self) shape the consumer experience, and if so, how? For instance, in the case of Target's gender-neutral departmental restructuring, would young consumers and their parents feel better about their Target experience as a result of not being compelled to choose between pink and blue product colors? To answer these questions, we first draw on extant literature in psychology and marketing to elucidate how consumer identities (i.e., true, false, or social) as well as implicit social labeling may shape consumers' marketplace experiences (see Table 1). Then, we explore how the media, advertisements, and store communication strategies impact the consumption response when they depict consumers by their true versus their false selves.

Social identities and stereotype threat
Stereotypes represent one type of social label used in the marketplace. Stereotypes can result in a negative response, as they can be perceived as a type of threat [30]. In particular, stereotype threat occurs when an individual fears he or she will display undesirable behaviors or characteristics that are often associated with a specific social group [30]. Work in marketing explores how consumers respond when stereotypes are made salient [31–33]. When consumers feel that they are negatively labeled for their in-group social association, consumers are less likely to engage in a marketplace transaction if the service provider is seen as an out-group rather than an in-group member [34]. For instance, when reminded of the importance of mathematics, women reported lower purchase intentions for financial services due to the long-running stereotype that women are not as good at math as men [34]. Moreover, when a stereotype or a behavior is perceived by the consumer as undesirable, being associated with the group or action can have a negative effect on the consumption experience [35]. When a consumer is stereotyped via a social label in the marketplace and experiences a restriction in marketplace choices, their implicit consumer wellbeing becomes

Table 1

Definitions and illustrations of social identity and true and false selves.

	Social identity	True self	False self
Definition	Part of an identity that is provoked and reflects a similarity or connection that a person has to a social role or group [15]	Part of the self that, independent of external actions, reflects a person and his or her character [23]	Part of the self that is provoked as a result of the demand or the expectations of others (i.e., marketers, consumers, society) [22,24]
Marketplace example	A runner or athlete shopping for athletic gear (e.g., running pants) in an athletic department or running store	A thin runner shopping for running pants in an athletic department store and finding clothing in her/his size	An overweight runner shopping for running pants in an athletic department store and finding no clothing in her/his size