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Full Length Article

It's not us, it's you: How threatening self-brand association leads to brand pursuit[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates that information threatening a consumer's self-association with a brand can increase preference for the threatened brand, an effect termed brand pursuit. Summing across a field study and three experiments, the research shows that experienced anxiety mediates the effect of threat on brand pursuit, that a-priori self-brand association strength moderates the effect of threat (since those with stronger association experience more anxiety in response to threat), and that reinforcing the self on other dimensions eliminates the effect of threat on brand pursuit. In addition, this research proposes that self-concept threats are best understood if conceptualized in terms of the specific associations they target. The key implication of these findings is that threats to self-brand associations can be an effective strategy for increasing brand preference, a tactic contrary to marketing convention.

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1. Introduction

Marketers go to great lengths to cultivate consumer association with their brands. Brand personalities are carefully crafted to appeal to target consumers, advertising user imagery is developed to create aspiration, and social media is utilized to reinforce personal connection with brands. All of these tactics highlight the value of self-brand association, the direct link between a brand and a consumer's self-concept. Although tactics designed to reinforce self-brand association are common, this research proposes that doing the reverse—calling a consumer's self-brand association into question—may have a greater impact on subsequent pursuit of the brand as consumers try to re-establish their desired self-brand association. Imagine attending a game featuring your favorite sports team and being confronted by a fellow fan who says: “Hey, you call yourself a fan? Where's your jersey?” If you consider yourself a dedicated fan, this exchange could cause you to re-evaluate whether your self-association with the team was as strong as you thought it was, cause significant anxiety, and thereby prompt you to wear a team jersey to the next game you attend.

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At first glance, the prediction that threats can prompt consumers to pursue a brand runs counter to research observing that consumers shun products associated with threatened identities (White & Argo, 2009; White, Argo, & Sengupta, 2012), avoid choices that exacerbate threatening social comparisons (Argo, White, & Dahl, 2006), and distance themselves from brands threatened with negative information (Aaker, Fournier, & Adam Brasel, 2004). However, other recent investigations have found that threats to a specific identity or self-view can actually produce behaviors that strengthen the association of the self with the threatened identity or self-view (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). For example, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) found that threats to moral identity led to greater interest in cleaning products, reflecting a desire to cleanse the self. Similarly, Gao, Christian Wheeler, and Shiv (2009) observed that challenging consumers' self-view as healthy encouraged healthier decisions.

We propose that these seemingly contradictory responses make more sense if one considers the specific associations that these various threats target. Although some threats target the association of an identity with positive valence (e.g. White & Argo, 2009; your gender is bad), other threats target the association of the self with a particular identity or self-view (e.g. Gao, Christian Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; you are not healthy). The threat to self-brand association described in the opening example is more akin to the latter than the former, but rather than targeting a specific self-view, the threat is aimed at the association of the self with a specific brand (i.e. the focal sports team). The distinction between self-views and self-brand associations largely comes down to level of analysis. Whereas a self-view is a belief about a trait or characteristic that is internally possessed, a self-brand association is a link between the self and an external entity, in this case a brand. Within the marketing domain, self-brand association strength has been studied extensively and given many names—brand affiliation, brand identification, self-brand connection, brand relationship, etc. (Schmitt, 2012). All capture the simple idea that consumers often associate external entities like brands to the self with a host of consequences for the consumer and brand.

Using a field study and three lab experiments, we investigate the process by which threats to self-brand association can cause consumers to subsequently and automatically engage in brand-consistent behavior, an effect heretofore termed *brand pursuit*. The following investigation makes three contributions to the threat literature. First, it creates a typology of threat based on the specific associations a threat targets, adding clarity to existing inconsistencies in the literature. Second, it demonstrates that threatening self-brand association produces a measurable change in the strength of that association (as measured by Brief Implicit Association Tests—BIATs). Third, it fully delineates the anxiety-driven process that leads to brand pursuit, a process that has not been previously demonstrated. At a practical level, this inquiry also adds value to marketing practice as the self-brand association threats we present can actually increase subsequent interest in the brand, a proposition counter to conventional marketing wisdom. However, it should be noted that calling into question a consumer's self-brand association is inherently risky as it could cause consumers to feel spurned by the brand and therefore avoid it. To address this possibility, the final experiment investigates when such avoidance is possible and identifies some factors that can moderate the core brand pursuit response to self-brand association threats.

2. Conceptual development

2.1. Consumer response to threat

Since consumers often choose products that express aspects of the self (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 1999; Dolich, 1969; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Sirgy, 1982), threats to the self can dramatically shape consumer preference. Across extant research, an identity or self-threat is loosely defined as anything with negative implications for the self. Under this rather broad umbrella, consumer research has investigated a wide variety of self-threats, including negative feedback about a particular identity, negative feedback about personal performance and indirect manipulations of self-view confidence. Though these threats are clearly different, they are all commonly referred to as identity threats. To add clarity to these diverse conceptions of self-threat, we build from the tradition of associative network models of memory, which conceptualize memory as a system of associated links and nodes (e.g. Anderson & Bower, 1973), and propose that self-threats are best understood in terms of the specific associations they target. Such a model of self-threat is useful because it illuminates predictions for downstream consumer responses. In the case of new information challenging the association of an identity concept with positive valence, the dominant response was avoidance of products associated with the threatened identity (White & Argo, 2009; White, Argo, & Sengupta, 2012; White & Dahl, 2007; White & Dahl, 2006). For example, women confronted with negative information about female intelligence avoided low-intellect female products such as biographies of Britney Spears and Whitney Houston (White & Argo, 2009). This tendency to avoid products associated with a threatened identity is particularly prevalent in those who least value that particular association (White & Argo, 2009).

Threats to the association between an identity concept and positive valence can be conceptualized as a specific example of general attitude change in response to negative information (Tormala & Petty, 2004; Tormala & Petty, 2002). Like White and Argo, Tormala and Petty (2002, 2004) presented participants with information targeting the association of an attitude concept, such as a brand, with positive valence. When instructed to resist the new information through counter-argument, participants became more certain of their initial attitudes (Tormala & Petty, 2004), though their actual attitudes did not change. It is unclear how participants in the White and Argo threat paradigm would respond if given the opportunity to counter-argue the threat, but the key similarity between these research streams is the fact that the manipulations involved presenting information that specifically targets the link between a concept and its positive valence, be that concept a brand or a nationality. A second similarity is that consumers were less affected by the new negative information when they more strongly valued the identity (White & Argo, 2009) or

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