

Research Article

Looking for my self: Identity-driven attention allocation☆☆☆

Nicole Verrochi Coleman^a, Patti Williams^b^a Marketing and Business Economics group, Katz GSB, University of Pittsburgh^b The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

This research builds on the motivational aspects of identity salience, finding that social identities direct the allocation of attention in identity-syntonic ways. Drawing from identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2009; Reed, et al., 2012) we suggest individuals use attention to enhance identity-fit; selectively focusing on cues and stimuli that are identity-consistent. In two studies we find that activating a social identity drives preferential attention toward identity-relevant stimuli. Using a novel paradigm, Study 1 demonstrates that individuals strategically focus attention on identity-consistent emotional stimuli, while also shifting attention away from identity-inconsistent emotional stimuli. Using a dot-probe paradigm, Study 2 extends these results to show that individuals allocate attention toward both emotional and non-emotional (semantic associates) stimuli that are identity-consistent, and away from those that are incompatible. Consistent with theories suggesting cognition and perception are constructed (James, 1890/1983) and that identities direct and influence meaning-making (Oyserman, 2009; Reed et al., 2012), we find that social identities drive attention allocation, with identity-consistent stimuli receiving greater attention; suggesting that an identity's sense-making begins with motivated attention toward perceiving an identity-consistent environment.

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"Suffice it meanwhile that each of us literally chooses, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit." James (1890/1983)

Imagine a football team, headed to a game. Along the highway they pass a billboard for a soup kitchen, with a crying child imploring their help—will the players notice that ad? What if the child is holding a football? Attention is critical to subsequent information processing (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). We explore whether aspects of a person's self—her active social identity—will prompt attention allocation to support sense-making that goes with that self-structure (Oyserman, 2009). We thus propose an

identity-based motivational account of attention allocation (Oyserman, 2009); active social identities will direct consumers' attention toward stimuli that support those identities.

Building on identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2009; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012), we suggest individuals use attention to enhance identity enactment; selectively focusing on cues and stimuli that are identity-syntonic. Activating a social identity should drive preferential attention toward identity-relevant stimuli, cues, and emotions, as the individual reinforces the active identity (Reed et al., 2012). We find social identities drive consumers' attention allocation processes, with identity-consistent stimuli receiving greater attention; suggesting that an identity's sense-making begins with motivated attention toward perceiving an identity-relevant environment.

Social Identities and Motivated Attention

Individuals possess multiple social identities, varying in salience and centrality, derived from membership in social

☆ Research Report

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E-mail addresses: ncoleman@katz.pitt.edu (N.V. Coleman), pattiw@wharton.upenn.edu (P. Williams).

groups (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Reed, 2004; Tajfel, 1978). A broad range of associations, including attitudes, values, behaviors, and brands that assist in enacting a specific identity become connected with it, subsumed into its knowledge structure, providing guidance for expressing the identity (Kleine et al., 1993). Identities potentiate a readiness to make sense of the world and behave in an identity-congruent manner (Oyserman, 2009). When a specific identity is active, an individual views the world through that knowledge structure—avoiding identity-inconsistent activities and objects (Berger & Heath, 2007), and approaching those that are consistent (Reed, 2004). Individuals rely on social identities to provide self-regulation that calibrates cognition, attitudes, values, and behaviors according to active identity standards (Mercurio & Forehand, 2011; Oyserman, 2009; Reed et al., 2012).

Identities thus contain constellations of associations, including objects and concepts imbued with corresponding meanings and evaluations (Reed et al., 2012). The salience of an identity potentiates a readiness to enact identity-relevant cognitive procedures, attitudes, and behaviors (Oyserman, 2009). Recent work has also suggested that identities contain associations to specific discrete emotions, leading consumers to seek out and manage emotional experiences to maintain identity-consistency (Coleman & Williams, 2013). Because discrete emotions imply unique action tendencies (Frijda, 1986) and identities also potentiate actions (Oyserman, 2009), certain emotions may be relevant to the goals and objectives of specific social identities, becoming linked to identity-relevant action readiness, even absent an emotion experience. Thus, the cognitive architecture of an identity contains both emotional and non-emotional associations, which create a mindset to guide identity enactment (Reed et al., 2012). The more individuals engage with content consistent with the knowledge structure of the active identity, the better the identity-fit; these associations are thus functional guides for identity enactment. Following this, we examine both semantic and emotional associations of discrete identities, and consider how attention may be selectively and strategically allocated to enhance identity-fit.

Attention is a basic cognitive process; the situational elements that receive attention define perception (Erdelyi, 1974; Posner & Peterson, 1990; Treisman, 2006). Whether invoked automatically or consciously, attention processes are the primary perceptual gatekeeper, through which information is sorted, managed, and evaluated (Erdelyi, 1974). Given limited resources and a potentially overwhelming amount of stimuli, individuals strategically allocate perceptual resources, scanning the environment to determine which receive further attention (Gray, Ambady, Lowenthal, & Deldin, 2004). While some stimuli may have an evolutionary “pull” on attention (Öhman, Flykt, & Esteves, 2001; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990), cognition is in the service of doing (James, 1890/1983); individuals selectively allocate cognitive resources, focusing attention according to their interests, needs, values, desires, and goals (Balcetis & Dunning, 2006; Bargh, 1982; Folk, Remington, & Johnston, 1992; Pieters & Wedel, 2007). Self-relevance is thus a critical determinant in what stimuli require further resources; information related to the self (e.g., one’s name), personal values, and concerns is given

preferential attention (Bargh, 1982; Moray, 1959). Though extant research has not examined the implications of an active social identity on the allocation of attention to identity-relevant stimuli, Oyserman (2009) argued that identities activate broad-based motivations to engage in identity-congruent actions and to use identity-congruent mindsets to understand the world. This procedural readiness prompts sense-making, providing a lens for attending to and interpreting the social environment, potentiating processes and actions that enhance identity-fit (Oyserman, 2009).

Consistent with the perspective that attention is allocated in self-relevant ways and that social identities are important self-structures which provide a lens for cognition, we propose that identity-based motivation will drive attention allocation, causing consumers to assign greater attention to stimuli that support their active identity, while reducing attention toward identity-inconsistent stimuli. We examine these attention processes in two studies, using two common social identities: athlete and volunteer. In the first study, we assess identity-based allocation of attention resources to negative emotional stimuli that are consistent with these social identities; anger for athletes and sadness for volunteers (Coleman & Williams, 2013). From a functional perspective, anger is likely associated with the athlete identity because its external locus of control emphasizes obstacles impeding goal pursuit, inspiring the desire to overcome barriers (Frijda, 1986). Similarly, sadness is likely associated with volunteers because it indicates a need for help (Izard, 1977) and promotes feelings of sympathy and willingness to behave prosocially (Small & Verrochi, 2009). Thus, we propose that individuals allocate attention toward stimuli to enhance enactment of their active identity; athletes attend to anger stimuli because they are linked to the athlete knowledge structure, while volunteers attend to sadness stimuli because of its association with the volunteer identity. Study one examines attention to emotional stimuli, demonstrating anticipatory attention allocation toward consistent and away from inconsistent emotional stimuli as individuals respond to cues about upcoming stimuli and deploy attention in anticipation of these identity-relevant events.

In Study 2, we extend our investigation to include attention allocated to identity-relevant semantic associations. For instance, the athlete knowledge structure includes concepts relating to competition and sports, while the volunteer’s structure emphasizes giving and charity. This provides evidence for broader identity-based attention allocation; examining both emotional and non-emotional words, we find that participants focus attention on identity-consistent stimuli, and divert attention away from identity-inconsistent ones. Across these two studies, we find that identity-potential occurs at a very basic cognitive level, with attention being directed toward perceiving an identity-relevant environment.

Study 1: Strategic Attention Allocation for Identity-Consistency

Study 1 demonstrates individuals engage in anticipatory attention shifts toward (away from) emotional stimuli that are identity-consistent (inconsistent). We find that attention allocation can be strategically selective; when participants have expectations about the identity-relevance of an upcoming event,

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