

# THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO IDENTITY AND CONSUMPTION

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# SELF-THREATS AND CONSUMPTION

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The self-concept – how we view ourselves – is multifaceted and complex. We view ourselves the way we think others view us, what Cooley termed the looking-glass self (Cooley 1902). We have multiple selves (e.g. parent, scientist, woman) that may be activated by situational cues or social roles (Mead 1934; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Moreover, each of these selves may consist of actual ones and ideal ones, and discrepancies between the two can lead to significant discomfort (Higgins 1987). It is thus unsurprising that we spend a significant amount of time and energy constructing and maintaining our sense of self.

One way in which we manage our self-concept is through self-presentation. Because our self-concept is a function of how we think other people see us, good construction and maintenance of the self requires constant attention to managing our appearance to others. We do this by managing the myriad signals that indicate who we are: how we look, where we eat, who we hang out with, what groups we belong to, and what we own – what Belk (1988) refers to as the extended self (see Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, this volume). People are attracted to products and brands that are consistent with their identity, form impressions of those who use those products and services (Kleine *et al.* 1993; Shavitt and Nelson 1999), construct their identity by associating themselves with signs, symbols, material objects, and places (Schau and Gilly 2003), and seek identity-relevant possessions to signal their identity to others (Schouten 1991; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981). Thus, in a consumer context, people strive to achieve or maintain their identity through symbolic products and brands. Put simply, a significant portion of self-concept management occurs through the consumption of goods and services (Shrum *et al.* 2012).

A considerable literature thus exists documenting how people use possessions and other related concepts to manage their self-concepts. In this chapter we explore a particular aspect of self-concept maintenance: self-concept repair. We investigate what happens when our self-concepts are threatened, what aspects of the self are threatened under particular situations, and how consumption is used to compensate for these threats and repair the self-concept (compensatory consumption) (for a detailed discussion, see Chapter 21, this volume).

## Sources of self-threats and responses to self-threats

### *Identity threat*

In forming identity, there are two central dimensions: social and personal (Harré 1983). The social dimension is based on the groups to which people belong. People generally have several



social identities that are a function of the groups to which they belong, and any of these identities can be activated by situational cues (Deaux 1991). In contrast, personal identity refers to intra-personal traits, characteristics, and goals that the person finds self-descriptive (Deaux 1993) and which are not formulated as connected to membership in a social group or relationship (Oyserman 2009).

However, what happens when social or personal identities are threatened? In such instances, people will attempt to bolster their self-concepts by thinking and acting in identity-consistent ways and defend important group or personal core values in response to the identity threats. In the following sections we review research on social and personal identity threats and their consequences in a consumer context.

### Social identity threat

People tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Social identities are depersonalized representations of the self and are derived primarily from group membership (Brown 2000). People achieve a positive social identity by making favorable distinctions between their own group and some other group (Deaux 1993).

However, social identity can be threatened when people are aware that they have the potential to be stereotyped negatively or devalued because of their membership in a particular social group, a phenomenon termed stereotype threat (Steele *et al.* 2002; see Chapter 11, this volume). It is important to note that the same group membership may be seen either as identity-enhancing or identity-jeopardizing, depending on whether it compares favorably or unfavorably to other groups. Thus, it is the social context, rather than specific group features, that determines the evaluative flavor of any given group membership (Ellemers *et al.* 2002). For example, women, relative to men, are often judged as less competent in quantitative domains, leading them to feel identity-threatened, whereas they are often judged as more competent in qualitative domains, leading them to feel identity-safe. Social identity threat generates various psychological and behavioral consequences such as powerlessness and inhibition (Cook *et al.* 2011), cognitive vigilance (Pinel 1999), depleted working memory (Schmader and Johns 2003), and poor task performance (Spencer *et al.* 1999).

In a consumer context, social identity threat can occur in diverse marketplace settings. For example, Baker *et al.* (2008) investigated the effects of race on perceptions of a service failure (e.g. slow service). They asked both Black and White participants to read a scenario of a service failure, and manipulated social cues (e.g. race of service provider, race of other customers) that might be expected to activate stereotype threat, and then asked the participants to indicate what they would expect in terms of service recovery (e.g. apology, refund). The researchers found that Black participants perceived more discrimination and required more in service recovery than White participants when the service provider and all the other customers were White. However, when the racial composition of the other customers was mixed, Black and White participants showed no differences in perceptions or expectations. Presumably, the all-White composition condition primed stereotype threat and led to greater perceptions that race was a factor in the service failure and greater requirements for service recovery.

Recent research has also demonstrated negative effects of gender stereotype threat. Lee *et al.* (2011) primed male and female participants with subtle cues expected to activate the stereotype that women are bad at math or know nothing about cars. They then asked participants to view an advertisement for a service provider (e.g. financial advisor, car salesperson), but manipulated the gender of the service provider. As they expected, under stereotype-threat conditions,



women (but not men) showed lower purchase intentions when the service providers were male than when they were female. However, when no stereotype cues were present, women showed no preference between the male and female service providers.

The previous two examples of social identity threat were externally induced. That is, the threats to self came from situational cues in the environment. However, ironically, people can in fact threaten themselves! Research has shown that people purchase products that are consistent with their own identity (Reed 2004). However, imagine a situation in which you must purchase a gift for a close friend who has quite a different social identity? Do you purchase a product consistent with the friend's identity, or consistent with your own, and does the choice have implications for self-concept (identity) repair? Ward and Broniarczyk (2011) examined this question. They asked participants to consider a situation in which they were buying a gift for either a close or distant friend, and they manipulated whether the friend was part of the participants' in-group (attends the same university) or out-group (attends a rival university). They then gave participants a choice of choosing either an identity-verifying or identity-contrary product. When participants chose an identity-contrary gift for a close (but not distant) friend, they were more likely to subsequently engage in identity-verifying behaviors than when they chose an identity-verifying gift.

### Personal identity threat

Personal identity is characterized as inner identity or the inside self, and is often described in terms such as intelligent, kind, compassionate, and independent (Jones and McEwen 2000). Although conceptually distinct from social identity, personal and social identities are interrelated in that personal identity can derive from group memberships, and social categories can be infused with personal meaning (Deaux 1993).

Recent research indicates that when certain aspects of personal self-identity are threatened, people attempt to repair the threatened identity through various means. For example, Tetlock and colleagues (Tetlock *et al.* 2000) showed that when people's moral values are threatened, they quite understandably express moral indignation, but they also respond in ways that bolster those moral values. When participants read a scenario in which they were confronted with a tradeoff of advocating that a hospital save a life through an expensive organ transplant versus save the money for other purposes, participants were more likely to volunteer their time to campaign for organ donation, compared to participants who did not have their moral values threatened.

In a study that explored product purchase effects resulting from threatened self-views, Gao *et al.* (2009) temporarily "shook" self-views and observed how participants behaved. In one experiment they asked participants to write down examples of three personal characteristics that indicate they are intelligent individuals. They manipulated participants' confidence in their intelligence by having some participants write with their dominant hand, but others with their nondominant hand (Briñol and Petty 2003). They found that people who had their confidence in their intelligence shaken (writing with their nondominant hand) were more likely to choose a pen (intelligence-affirming) over candy, whereas there was no difference in preference for pen or candy when their self-confidence was not shaken. Thus, when identities are threatened, people will seek out products that reaffirm their self-image. However, some research suggests that these effects may be confined to people who consider personal (as opposed to social) characteristics as self-defining. For example, when induced to feel uncertain about themselves, individualists (but not collectivists) rated their favorite possessions (e.g. jeans, cars) as more self-expressive than when self-uncertainty was not induced (Morrison and Johnson 2011).



### ***Threats to fundamental identity needs***

Although there are numerous perspectives on fundamental human needs (Maslow 1954; Max-Neef *et al.* 1991), we focus on four needs in particular that are identity-related: the need to belong; to have power and control over one's environment; to maintain high self-esteem; and to feel one's existence is meaningful (see Williams 2009, for a review). As with identity in general, when these specific identity-related needs are threatened, people will attempt to bolster those need (e.g. enhance feelings of power, self-esteem, belonging, and meaningfulness), and this often occurs through consumption-related activities. In the following sections, we discuss needs threat in the context of situations that may threaten particular needs. These include threats that are activated indirectly through particular fears (physical death, social death), and threats that are activated directly by situations.

#### **Fear of physical death: mortality salience**

People are often confronted with reminders of their own mortality. One need look no further than the news, which seems to be dominated by tragic reports of terror, wars, natural disasters, car accidents, and terminal illnesses. As a result, the salience of the inevitability of death may often be high. Terror management theory (Greenberg *et al.* 1997) suggests that when people are reminded of their own inevitable death, they are motivated to maintain self-esteem and faith in their cultural worldviews, and to defend both of these mechanisms against threats.

The theory thus posits that self-esteem and cultural worldviews function to protect an individual from the potential for existential anxiety that is engendered by awareness of the inevitability of death (see Chapter 20, this volume). Consequently, when mortality salience is increased, people express stronger beliefs in their cultural worldviews and increase the desire for self-esteem. In support of these propositions, making mortality salient led participants to bolster their cultural worldview and produce more aggressive responses to those who had different political beliefs by allocating more hot sauce for a person whom they thought did not like spicy foods (McGregor *et al.* 1998), to give more negative evaluations to those who criticized their country and more positive evaluations to those who praised it (Greenberg *et al.* 1990), and to place more blame on a car manufacturer for an accident when it was a foreign manufacturer than when it was a domestic one (Nelson *et al.* 1997). Mortality salience also caused participants to bolster self-esteem by increasing activities central to their self-concept. For example, it increased intention to work out by those who valued fitness (Arndt *et al.* 2003) and increased performance on a handgrip exercise for those who valued strength (Peters *et al.* 2005).

Responses to mortality salience and existential threat also play out in the consumer domain. For example, when mortality was made salient, consumers who valued their body or their virtue as a source of self-esteem chose a less indulgent food (e.g. fruit salad) and increased donations and other charitable behavior compared to when mortality was not made salient (Ferraro *et al.* 2005). In contrast, consumers with low self-esteem increased the quantity of food they ate in response to mortality salience, but those with high self-esteem were little affected (Mandel and Smeesters 2008). Mortality salience has also been shown to increase the desire to acquire wealth and possessions (Kasser and Sheldon 2000; see Arndt *et al.* 2004 for a review), purchase luxury items (Mandel and Heine 1999), and form strong brand connections (Rindfleisch *et al.* 2009) as means of bolstering self-esteem. In addition, death-related media contexts led consumers to become more patriotic, focus on the brands' country of origin, increase their preference for domestic brands, and decrease their preference for foreign brands to defend their cultural worldviews (Liu and Smeesters 2010).



### Fear of social death: social exclusion

In addition to fears of physical death, fears of social death can be a source of threat. An example of social death is social exclusion (Williams 2009). Social exclusion occurs when people are excluded from a group. This may occur through explicit rejection, implicit ignoring, or extreme ignoring through ostracism. On the most general level, social exclusion threatens the fundamental need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995). On a more specific level, it threatens four needs noted earlier in this section: self-esteem, power and control, belongingness, and meaningful existence (Williams 2009).

Social exclusion has been shown to produce a variety of effects. For example, it has been shown to increase aggressive, antisocial behavior. Compared to non-excluded people, socially excluded people allocated more hot sauce to others whom they thought disliked spicy foods (Ayduk *et al.* 2008), gave unappealing snacks to interaction partners (Chow *et al.* 2008), and provided more negative job evaluations to someone who insulted them (Twenge *et al.* 2001). However, in other cases, social exclusion produced more prosocial, affiliative responses. Compared to non-excluded people, excluded people were more interested in working with others (Maner *et al.* 2007), engaged in more behavioral mimicry (Lakin *et al.* 2008), showed more conformity to group perceptions (Williams *et al.* 2000), and were more socially attentive (Gardner *et al.* 2000).

Like the other self-threats we have reviewed, consumer researchers have also documented social exclusion effects. For example, when participants were excluded (ostracized) in a computer-generated three-way ball toss, they showed increased preferences for nostalgic products (Loveland *et al.* 2010). The consumption of nostalgic products repaired threats to belongingness by providing a reconnection with the past and shared consumption experiences. Other research has documented similar consumption behaviors intended to bolster one's feeling of belongingness. Across a series of experiments, Mead *et al.* (2011) demonstrated that being socially excluded increased spending that facilitated affiliation with others. Excluded participants, compared to non-excluded ones, were more likely to buy products that signified group membership, adjusted their spending to conform to preferences of their interaction partner, and were even willing to consume illegal narcotics if it increased their chances of social inclusion.

However, reactions to social exclusion do not always promote prosocial, affiliative consumer responses. In a series of recent experiments, Lee and Shrum (2012) demonstrated that social exclusion can produce both prosocial responses and self-focused responses. Which outcome is produced depends on which needs are threatened. When relational needs (e.g. self-esteem, belonging) are most threatened, prosocial responses result, consistent with Mead *et al.* (2011) and Loveland *et al.* (2010). However, when efficacy needs (e.g. power and control, meaningful existence) are most threatened, more self-focused, antisocial responses result. To demonstrate this, Lee and Shrum manipulated whether exclusion was explicit (rejected) or implicit (ignored). Being rejected has been shown to threaten relational needs, whereas being ignored threatens efficacy needs (Molden *et al.* 2009). Their results showed that being ignored increased conspicuous consumption (self-focused), but being rejected did not. In contrast, being rejected increased charitable donations and intentions to help others (prosocial), but being ignored did not. They also provided explicit links to the repair of threatened needs. In a test of what they term the differential needs hypothesis, they demonstrated that when relational needs such as self-esteem were bolstered, the effects of being rejected on helping behavior were eliminated, but the effects of being ignored on conspicuous consumption were unaffected. In contrast, when efficacy needs such as power and meaningful existence were bolstered, the effects of being ignored on conspicuous consumption were eliminated, but the effects of being rejected



on helping behavior were unaffected. Thus, the specific consumer behaviors were clearly intended to repair the particular needs that were threatened.

### Direct threats to needs

People may also experience direct threats to particular needs. One example is direct threats to feelings of power. Feelings of low power can induce uncertainty (Anderson and Galinsky 2006) and learned helplessness (Seligman 1975). When people experience such threats to power, they will attempt to repair their threatened needs, and one way of doing so is through consumption. For example, when participants were induced to have feelings of low power, they increased their willingness to pay for high-status but not low-status products (Rucker and Galinsky 2008), and conversely, acquiring a status object increased feelings of power (Rucker *et al.* 2011). Similarly, feelings of low power caused people to choose larger products (e.g. portion sizes), which were associated with higher status (Dubois *et al.* 2012).

### Future directions

It is well established in consumer research that people use products and services to develop and maintain their identities. It is also well established in psychological research that when people's identities are threatened, they go to great lengths to shore up their identities. However, it is only recently that researchers have begun to put these two well-known facts together to investigate how consumers react to identity threats through their consumption behavior. As the research we have reviewed attests, consumer reactions to self-threats can explain diverse types of consumer behavior, including conspicuous consumption, luxury product purchase, nostalgic product demand, materialism, spending on products that indicate affiliation, and charitable donations.

However, despite the accumulation of research to date, relatively little is known about the underlying processes and reasons for specific reactions in particular situations. We expect that the future research will focus on understanding the particular conditions that contribute to identity threat. For example, when fundamental identity needs are threatened, what is the range of consumption activities that serve to repair the threatened needs? Answering this question requires a deeper understanding of what products mean to people. Moreover, the question is complicated because people often are not consciously aware of the meaning certain products have for their identity.

Another useful direction for future research is understanding precisely what aspects of identity are threatened by particular situations. For example, social exclusion has been shown to produce a number of different responses, many of which appear to be contradictory (e.g. prosocial and antisocial). It may be that particular types of social exclusion threaten multiple needs, and which is most salient to an individual may be a function of both personal and situational characteristics. More research is needed to understand both the main effects and the interaction of personal and situational factors. A better understanding of why consumers are motivated to purchase as a function of identity threat may help them make better purchase decisions.

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