Commentary on “Salient Cultural Identities and Brand Valuation”

SANDRA AWANIS

Management School, Lancaster University, UK

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive consumer market, a brand's unique value proposition is key to secure the firm's capacity to compete in non-price terms. Amaral and Torelli's (2018) article on Salient Cultural Identities and Consumers' Valuation of Identity Congruent Brands: Consequences for Building and Leveraging Brand Equity provides an integrative insight of how the malleable consumer identity can be regulated to enhance the consumer's valuation of and engagement with a brand. This work echoes prior research in consumer psychology that examined the link between self-concept and brand, such as the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), self-brand connection (McCracken, 1986) and identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2009). Central to these theories is the shared notion that the activation of a salient identity associated with a valued social identity leads to actions that are congruent with the perceived action of members of the desired social group. A distinct contribution of Amaral and Torelli's research is the “double-edged sword” nature of identity-congruent brand, which illuminates a boundary condition that limits the efficacy of identity-based branding strategies. Nonetheless, the research shows that the longstanding interest in social identity and branding among and marketing academia practitioners remains unabated. In this commentary, I discuss the emerging questions that arise from the field of identity-congruent marketing and offer suggestions for future developments.

Multiple Cultural Identities

A central tenet of identity salience is that people have multiple identities that reflect the various roles that they play in a society, and that these identities are organized in hierarchical order within the self-concept (Chattaraman, Lennon, & Rudd, 2010). In the context of culture, however, the concept of identity may be fuzzy. Like a Russian doll, consumer culture is a multi-layered construct that encapsulates group cultures passed on by one's reference groups (*e.g.*, family, religion, workplace), ethnic culture (*e.g.*, Hispanic), national culture (*e.g.*, Canadian) and the global consumer culture that transcends national borders and cultures. Cultural values based on these varying sources may not produce a consistent nor coherent set of identities. For example, a person's ethnic values may emphasize traditionalism and conformity, while the values of her national or global identity emphasize openness to new ideas, materialism, and individualism (Cleveland, 2015). As such, a question arises on whether there are multiple salient

cultural identities at play, and whether cueing a single cultural identity will effectively result in the (temporal or chronic) displacement of one cultural identity over another, or a conflict between salient identities.

Amaral and Torelli's article referred to the fluency effect (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004; Shapiro, 1999) to explain how consumers who subscribe to a particular cultural identity can easily relate to brands that associate with the same cultural schema and consequently demonstrate stronger valuation towards the brands. This perspective is consistent with congruity theory (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) and cultural fit theory (Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004), which posit that people are drawn to ideas that are congruent with their pre-existing values. However, the rise of multiculturalism and conflicting cultural identities may increase the complexity of consumer cognition and disrupt the unconscious formation of a salient identity. This is particularly apparent in conditions of uncertainty or when the accessibility of referents is low. Thus, future research may need to account for the influence of multiple cultural identities – particularly through the lens of different groups of bicultural such as immigrants, sojourners, and expatriates – on consumer dispositions and valuations of a product to assess the boundary conditions of the fluency and cultural “fit” effects. A meaningful analysis of subcultures and communities (*e.g.*, hipster, fandom, LGBTQ) and how their social identity competes with mainstream cultural identities to forge brand connection will also help to broaden the domain of identity-congruence marketing.

Stereotyped Identity

Another emerging issue from the salient social identity literature is the use of stereotypes associated with a particular culture. Indeed, identity-congruent marketing is likely to be more effective when there is a strong fit between the target consumers' favored social identity and the brand's association with the social identity. A common way in which such an identity is communicated is through images and messages that may incite a stereotypical view of a culture. Naturally, this raises the question of whether the use of stereotypes in social identity association will garner positive affect and social acceptance among consumers.

Proponents of social identity theory tend to argue that stereotypes have a meaningful function to help explain the social world and legitimize the past and current actions of the in-group (Hornsey, 2008). The accessibility of stereotypes also makes it more likely to activate perceptions of in-group memberships (Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009). However, consumers may avoid stereotyped marketing despite identity congruence in an attempt to retain their individuality or to avoid depersonalization. In a similar light, Amaral and Torelli's third experiment illustrate that explicit identity-congruent information in an advertisement failed to produce a significant positive brand valuation that has been evident in their baseline condition. In the context of cultural identity, stereotypes that promote the superiority of the ingroup over the outgroup can risk promoting ethnocentric tendencies among nationalists and patriots, which hinder cultural openness and tolerance (Balabanis, Diamantopoulos, Mueller, & Melewar, 2001). On balance, these arguments suggest the need for brand strategists to balance the fine line between communicating an effective social identity and avoiding explicit identity connection that may spur a stereotyped view of a cultural group.

The Ethics of Marketing Consumer Identities

The malleable and situation-dependent nature of consumer identity creates an optional condition for marketers to build innovative platforms that accommodate and encourage self-expression. For example, M&Ms offers mass-customization by providing customers with the option to select colors, photographs, and text to be printed on

their chocolates. Likewise, LEGO has been involved in various co-creation initiatives such as LEGO Ideas and Life Magazine that recognize and legitimize the customers' expressions of creativity. However, the quest for brands to promote self-expression of consumer identity often involve hidden persuaders or "nudges" that trigger nonconscious influences on choice decisions (Smith & Goldstein, 2007; Thaler & Sustein, 2008). Although most marketing activities pose no ill intents, there is a profound question arising concerning the ethicality of such nonconscious influences on consumer decision-making. Of particular interest to public policy and consumer protection associations are nudges that contribute to pure impulsive consumption. This is defined as the urge to buy immediately, spontaneously and without reflection about the long-term consequence of the purchase (Rook, 1987). The documented detrimental effects of pure impulsive consumption include lower self-esteem, post-purchase dissatisfaction, and mounting consumer debt (Lades, 2014). Importantly, Dittmar and Bond (2010) show that consumer goods with high identity-expressive potential (*e.g.*, clothes, and sports gear) elicit a stronger tendency for impulsive buying than goods lacking this feature. As such, marketers may do well to ensure that choices based on unconscious influences do not guide consumers towards making impulsive purchases that are detrimental to their well-being (*e.g.*, unhealthy foods, high-interest credit). Likewise, unconscious influences can be used to guide impulsive purchases in ethical directions (*e.g.*, fair-trade, sustainable) that ultimately help individuals to make better choices.

References

- Amaral, N. & Torelli, C. J., 2018. Salient Cultural Identities and Consumers' Valuation of Identity Congruent Brands: Consequences for Building and Leveraging Brand Equity. *Doing Business in an Interconnected World: Cross-Cultural Issues in Management and Marketing. Special Issue of the Journal of Management and Training for Industries*.
- Balabanis, G., Diamantopoulos, A., Mueller, R. D. & Melewar, T. C., 2001. The Impact of Nationalism, Patriotism and Internationalism on Consumer Ethnocentric Tendencies. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 32(1), 157–175.
- Chattaraman, V., Lennon, S. J. & Rudd, N. A., 2010. Social Identity Salience: Effects on Identity-Based Brand Choices of Hispanic Consumers. *Psychology & Marketing*, 27(3), 263–284.
- Cleveland, M., 2015. Wanting Things and Needing Affiliation: Ethnic Consumers and Materialism. In A. Jamal, L. Peñaloza, & M. Laroche (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Ethnic Marketing*. New York: Routledge.
- Dittmar, H. & Bond, R., 2010. I Want It and I Want It Now: Using a Temporal Discounting Paradigm to Examine Predictors of Consumer Impulsivity. *British Journal of Psychology*, 101(4), 751–776.
- Hornsey, M. J., 2008. Social Identity Theory and Self-categorization Theory: A Historical Review. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2, 204–222.
- Lades, L. K., 2014. Impulsive Consumption and Reflexive Thought: Nudging Ethical Consumer Behavior. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 41, 114–128.
- McCracken, G. D., 1986. Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13(1), 71–84.
- Osgood, C. E. & Tannenbaum, P. H., 1955. The Principle of Congruity in the Prediction of Attitude Change. *Psychological Review*. US: American Psychological Association.
- Oyserman, D., 2009. Identity-based Motivation: Implications for Action-readiness, Procedural-readiness, and Consumer Behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(3), 250–260.

-
- Reber, R., Schwarz, N. & Winkielman, P., 2004. Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience? *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8(4), 364–382.
- Rook, D. W., 1987. The Buying Impulse. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(2), 189–199.
- Shapiro, S., 1999. When an Ad'S Influence Is Beyond Our Conscious Control: Perceptual and Conceptual Fluency Effects Caused By Incidental Ad Exposure. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(1), 16–36.
- Shavitt, S., Torelli, C. J. & Wong, J., 2009. Identity-Based Motivation: Constraints and Opportunities in Consumer Research Access. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(3), 261–266.
- Smith, N. C. & Goldstein, D. G., 2007. *'Hidden Persuaders': Defaults and Consumer Welfare* (No. 07-105) (Vol. 44). London.
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J., 1986. The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In S. Worchel (Ed.), *The Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Chicago (pp. 7–24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Thaler, R. H. & Sustein, C. R., 2008. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ward, C., Leong, C. H. & Low, M., 2004. Personality and Sojourner Adjustment: An Exploration of the Big Five and the Cultural Fit Proposition. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 35(2), 137–151.