

Escaping the Crosshairs: Reactance to Identity Marketing

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A large body of research suggests that identity marketing leads to increased purchase and deeper loyalty. In contrast, we demonstrate that some identity marketing messages can backfire. Four studies show that messages that merely *reference* consumer identity increase purchase likelihood, but messages that *define* the terms of consumer identity expression actually reduce purchase likelihood. We theorize that identity-defining messages threaten perceived consumer freedom to express the identity in question, provoking reactance. We document this effect across different identities and product domains, in both laboratory and field settings. Importantly, our results suggest that managers do not anticipate these effects. Instead, they prefer identity-defining messages to identity-referencing messages because they are stronger and thus intuitively appealing. Together, our findings highlight the importance of understanding the theoretical implications of different approaches to identity marketing, and this work is, to our knowledge, the first to connect identity to the burgeoning consumer literature in reactance.

Marketing messages are often designed to appeal to consumers based on identities they possess. Jif peanut butter targets mothers by suggesting that “Choosy Moms choose Jif.” DirecTV advertises, “If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!” The Chevrolet “This is Our Country” campaign suggests that real Americans drive Chevys. Finally, advertising for holidays such as Mother’s Day, Valentine’s Day, and Christmas abound with messages imploring consumers to make a purchase or risk being a lousy child, mate, or parent.

Such approaches are consistent with decades of consumer research suggesting that positioning and marketing brands around an identity can prompt more favorable judgments from consumers who possess (or want to possess) that identity (e.g. Escalas and Bettman 2005; Levy 1959; Katz 1960; Reed 2004). Consumers are naturally attracted to brands that reflect identities that they possess or want to achieve (e.g. Belk 1988; Englis and Solomon 1995; Forehand, Deshpandé and Reed 2002; Reed, Cohen and Bhattacharjee 2009). Presumably, fostering this sense of connection between a brand and a consumer identity is a holy grail for marketing strategists and brand managers, and may lead to a deeper, more persistent sense of consumer loyalty (Oliver 1999; Bolton and Reed 2004).

In contrast, we suggest that many examples of identity marketing, including some of the slogans listed above, may actually produce unfavorable outcomes. While marketing messages that merely reference consumer identities (*identity-referencing* messages) are beneficial, we argue that messages which define the terms of consumer identity expression (*identity-defining* messages) will backfire and reduce purchase likelihood. Adding to the growing consumer literature on reactance processes in the marketplace (e.g. Chartrand, Dalton and Fitzsimons 2007; Fitzsimons 2000; Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004; Kivetz 2005; Levav and Zhu 2010), we propose that consumers may perceive identity-defining messages as a restriction of their freedom

to express the targeted identity (Brehm 1966). Consequently, consumers may react against such identity marketing, avoiding purchase to restore their freedom. Four laboratory and field studies demonstrate reactance to identity marketing, highlighting an important and previously unstudied consideration for both scholars and practitioners.

Despite the rich literature in identity marketing, no prior research has examined the possibility of identity marketing actually hurting managerial outcomes among the target identity segment of consumers. Moreover, no prior work has studied reactance in the context of identity marketing. Our findings have important substantive implications. We demonstrate that prospective managers do not anticipate the possibility of reactance. Rather, they predict that more strongly phrased messages will be more effective, and thereby prefer identity-defining messages that are likely to provoke reactance. Doing so may reduce purchase and completely undermine the benefits of identity marketing, emphasizing the importance of considering perceived consumer freedom to express identity.

In the next few sections, we first review the pertinent literature on identity marketing and then tie it to the literature on psychological reactance. We relate these literatures by introducing the theoretical framework that drives our current research, and then present the empirical work.

IDENTITY MARKETING

An underlying assumption of targeting, a fundamental marketing practice, is that targeting consumers will increase their attraction to the brand (Aaker, 1999). A large body of research has demonstrated that the success of target marketing is driven by the consumer's inference of similarity between some aspect of the marketing message and some characteristic of

himself, resulting in greater persuasion (e.g. Aaker, Benet-Martinez and Garolera 2001; Deshpandé and Stayman 1994; Gronhaug and Rostvig 1978). Targeted messages are a cornerstone of marketing practice that has generally been regarded as mutually beneficial: consumers' needs are better met and firms are rewarded with higher profits and deeper loyalty (Aaker 1999).

One basis for targeted marketing appeals that has received increasing attention in recent years is *identity* (Reed and Forehand 2010). Identities can be defined as labels, varying over time and across situations, that consumers use to socially categorize themselves and express who they are (Reed 2004; Reed et al. 2009). A sizable literature has established that the identities consumers hold drive them to select constellations of products and services that construct, strengthen, and communicate those identities (e.g. Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Katz 1960; Shavitt 1990). Given that consumers are attracted to brands and products that reflect the identities that they possess (Forehand et al. 2002; Stayman and Deshpandé 1989), brand managers and marketers are presumably smart to attempt to position brands and products in order to reflect particular social identities (Reed 2004).

Consistent with this thinking, consumers have been found to be more receptive to marketing messages that appeal to identities that they hold (e.g. Deshpandé and Stayman 1994; Meyers-Levy 1988) or want to achieve (e.g. Englis and Solomon 1995). Achieving a sense of congruence or fit between the product, marketing appeal, and the consumer is thus seen as mutually beneficial (Aaker, Benet-Martinez and Garolera 2001; Sirgy 1982): the symbolic needs of consumers will be better satisfied, and consumers will in turn reward firms with an exceptionally robust sense of loyalty (Bolton and Reed 2004).

But are all identity marketing appeals equally effective? The existing literature has not yet begun to examine conceptual distinctions in this space. However, given the traditional emphasis on notions of congruity between brands and consumer identity (e.g. Sirgy 1982), a naïve hypothesis is that identity messages that are more strongly worded will be more readily seen as congruent with consumer identities, thus leading to greater receptiveness. For instance, “If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!” might be more effective than simply stating “DirecTV. All the sports you love, all in one place,” because it is more strongly phrased, and may thus more clearly fit with a sports fan identity.

In contrast, we suggest that such messages, though intuitively appealing, may actually be less effective because they provoke reactance.

PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTANCE

We propose a theoretical distinction between *identity-referencing* messages and *identity-defining* messages. Identity-referencing messages merely make reference to the target consumer identity. “DirecTV. All the sports you love, all in one place,” for example, simply references sports fans, the target identity, and suggests how the brand meets their needs. In contrast, identity-defining messages define the terms of identity expression (i.e. implicitly or explicitly arguing that in order to truly express an identity, consumers must select a given brand). “If you call yourself a sports fan, you gotta have DirecTV!” for example, implies that sports fans should choose the brand in order to truly demonstrate that they love sports enough to warrant calling themselves sports fans. Therefore, identity-defining messages are stronger in their appeal towards a targeted identity. Though identity-defining messages may be intuitively appealing

because they are more strongly phrased, we propose that they are likely to provoke consumer reactance, and may thus lead consumers to avoid the brand.

The theory of psychological reactance concerns freedom of choice (Brehm 1966). Reactance itself is defined as “the motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination” (Brehm and Brehm 1981 p. 37). In other words, the theory contends that when an existing freedom is threatened, people are motivated to restore the freedom. Restoration of freedom may take a variety of forms. For instance, people may exhibit reactance by acting in opposition to persuasion attempts (Brehm and Sensenig 1966) or disparaging the source of a perceived threat (Worchel 1974). Importantly, reactance may arise even when the threat to freedom aligns directly with individual preferences, leading people to reverse their own preferences to reassert their freedom (Brehm 1966; Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004; Wicklund 1970).

Reactance has interesting implications in the context of identity marketing. A sizeable literature has established that consumers choose products in order to construct their identities and communicate identity information to others (e.g., Berger and Heath 2007; 2008; Douglas and Isherwood 1978; Shavitt 1990). Choices that are free and unconstrained are likely to be more meaningful as expressions of identity. We propose that identity-defining messages may be perceived as a threat to consumer freedom to express the targeted identity. A variety of work has found that perceptions of external pressure or extrinsic incentive may undermine intrinsic motivation (e.g. Deci and Ryan 1985; Lepper 1981). Similarly, we argue that consumers may perceive identity-defining messages as exerting pressure to make a given consumption choice in order to express a given identity. Consequently, making this choice will no longer be a meaningful, intrinsically motivated expression of identity (cf. Kivetz 2005).

According to Brehm (1966 p. 118-119), “The magnitude of reactance aroused...is a direct function of...the magnitude of the pressure to comply.” An identity-defining message might, for instance, present its product as the only true way to express the target identity. Identity marketing messages that dictate the terms of authentic identity expression are likely to infringe on the consumer’s ownership or intrinsic expression of that identity. Though expressing this identity through the consumption choice in question may be fully consistent with consumer preferences, consumers may nonetheless reverse their preferences and avoid that choice in order to restore their freedom (Brehm 1966).

Results of a pilot study are consistent with the notion that identity-defining messages can constrain consumers’ freedom to express their identity. One hundred and seventy seven students rated fifteen identity messages advertising university apparel on the extent to which they threatened their freedom to express their student identity (1 = not at all, 11 = very much so). These messages were conceptually categorized into six types. Consistent with our theorizing, the messages that were perceived as most threatening were those that defined identity expression, either in terms of identity group membership (e.g. “You can’t be a [University] student without the right sweatshirt.”) or possession of a desired identity attribute (e.g. “Smart [University] students choose [University] sweatshirts.”). Less threatening messages included those that simply referenced the target identity in a neutral (e.g. “[University] students like you choose [University] sweatshirts.”) or positive manner (e.g. “Show your [University] pride!”). As a baseline, messages that did not explicitly mention the target identity had the least potential to threaten consumer identity expression (e.g. “Wear a [University] sweatshirt!”). Specifically, pairwise comparisons found that such identity-defining messages ($M = 6.07$) were seen as significantly more threatening than identity-referencing messages ($M = 4.86$, $F(1, 176) = 52.44$,

$p < 0.001$) and the non-identity baseline ($M = 3.36$, $F(1, 176) = 123.82$, $p < 0.001$). Though these results are preliminary, they are at least consistent with our suggestion that identity-defining marketing appeals may have negative effects.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

In sum, we suggest that while identity-defining messages may seem more effective, they may actually backfire by provoking consumer reactance. The identity literature has not yet explored the theoretical implications of different identity marketing approaches, and while the notion of congruence (e.g. Sirgy 1982) suggests strongly worded messages will be more effective, congruence may represent an insufficient conceptualization of identity (Kleine, Kleine and Kernan 1993; Reed and Forehand 2010). No prior research has examined psychological reactance in the context of identity marketing, and we seek to further illustrate the universality of reactance in the marketplace (cf. Kivetz 2005). More broadly, while some research has examined negative effects of targeted messages on nontargeted consumers (e.g. Aaker, Brumbaugh and Grier 2000), little work has investigated whether targeted messages can produce undesirable outcomes even *within* the target segment. Finally, our work has substantive implications for managers who seek to target consumers on the basis of identity. Consistent with our above naïve hypothesis, we predict that people are likely to employ a “stronger is better” heuristic and think identity-defining messages will be more effective, even though they may actually hurt purchase likelihood.

We present four studies. Study 1 is designed to test managerial intuitions regarding reactance to identity marketing. Study 2 examines reactance to identity marketing in a noisy field

setting to demonstrate its implications for actual consumer behavior. Next, using the same stimuli as the first study, study 3 further investigates actual consumer response to identity marketing messages and tests whether reactance (i.e., a lack of perceived freedom to express identity) mediates our effects. Finally, study 4 uses existing identity marketing messages from the field to further examine the external validity of this phenomenon, and seeks further process evidence by measuring individual differences in reactance propensity.

STUDY 1: MANAGERS PREFER GREEN IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGES

Are people able to anticipate how identity defining messages might restrict others' freedom? Study 1 used a managerial decision-making scenario to test whether managers anticipate consumer reactance and fashion marketing messages accordingly. Consistent with the previously reported marketplace examples, we predicted that participants would expect that strongly worded messages are better. Accordingly, we predicted that participants would believe that identity-defining messages would be more effective than identity-referencing messages.

Method

Seventy undergraduate students, staff, and area residents, recruited through a northeastern university, participated in the study in return for financial payment. The study was embedded in a longer session including unrelated questionnaires. We used a 3-condition within-subjects (Message Type: Non-Identity vs. Identity-Referencing vs. Identity-Defining) design.

Participants completed an exercise in which they were asked to imagine that they were the marketing manager for a new product and needed to evaluate various potential marketing messages. For the sake of external validity, we used an actual (but unfamiliar) product called Charlie's All Purpose Soap, and employed actual product descriptions and imagery in our stimuli. The soap was described as a biodegradable, environmentally friendly cleaner, and the managerial task was to market the product to a segment of "green" consumers who care deeply about environmental issues. Participants viewed an advertisement for Charlie's Soap containing a picture of the product and a brief description of its features, and were informed that the advertisement was nearly complete and missing only the title. They were presented with three potential titles that varied in terms of message type: "Two thumbs up for Charlie's!" (Non-Identity message), "Two green thumbs up for Charlie's!" (Identity-Referencing message), and "You're not green unless you clean with Charlie's!" (Identity-Defining message). Pretest results confirmed that the Identity-Referencing and Identity-Defining messages were seen as successively stronger and more targeted to green consumers.¹ To prevent potential order effects, the order of presentation of the three messages was randomized for all questions.

The key dependent measure was participants' predictions of which message would increase purchase (i.e., "How likely do you think green consumers will be to purchase Charlie's Soap after seeing an advertisement using the following title?" (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). Participants also rated each message on its perceived effectiveness in reaching the target segment of consumers.

¹In a pretest, participants using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all strong, 7 = very strong) rated the identity-defining message as significantly stronger ($M = 5.92$) than the identity-referencing message ($M = 4.70$; $F(1, 122) = 62.15, p < .001$), which in turn was seen as significantly stronger than the non-identity message ($M = 3.24$; $F(1, 122) = 77.52, p < .001$). On a 7-point scale (1 = not at all targeted, 7 = very targeted), the identity-defining message was also perceived as more targeted towards consumers within the target identity segment ($M = 6.29$) than the identity-referencing message ($M = 5.65$; $F(1, 122) = 19.70, p < .01$), which in turn was rated as significantly more targeted towards green consumers than the non-identity message ($M = 2.63$; $F(1, 122) = 212.00, p < .001$).

Results

As predicted, a repeated ANOVA found a significant effect of message type ($F(2, 136) = 46.43, p < 0.001$; see figure 1). In particular, participants thought that stronger messages would increase purchase. Not only did participants think that the identity-referencing message ($M = 4.56$) would lead to higher purchase likelihood than the non-identity message ($M = 3.17, F(1, 68) = 45.99, p < 0.001$), but they also thought that the identity-defining message ($M = 5.08$) would lead to even higher purchase likelihood than the identity-referencing message ($F(1, 68) = 8.37, p < 0.01$). Results were similar for predictions of effectiveness.

Insert figure 1 about here

Discussion

Results of study 1 indicate that peoples' intuitions favor identity-defining messages: stronger identity marketing is thought to be more effective. Prospective marketing managers believed that identity-defining messages would lead to the highest purchase likelihood. While one could argue that these results were somehow an artifact of our within-subjects design, we found the same results using a between-subjects design as well.

But are managerial intuitions correct? Do consumers actually respond best to identity-defining messages? Our next study examined the effects of identity marketing messages on consumer purchase.

STUDY 2: EAGLES FAN RESPONSE TO IDENTITY MARKETING IN THE WILD

In our second study, we simply sought to test the basic hypothesis that identity-defining messages, while stronger, can hurt consumer purchase. Further, we examined whether such messages would impact actual purchase in a noisy real world setting: Philadelphia Eagles fans buying facial stickers with the team logo right before a game. We manipulated the strength of the identity message inviting fans to buy a sticker from a stand and examined how this manipulation impacted purchase. We had two predictions. First, consistent with the identity marketing literature, we predicted that compared to a non-identity message, a message referencing an Eagles fan identity would boost purchase. More importantly, however, and consistent with our theorizing about reactance, we predicted that a further increase in message strength would backfire: compared to the identity-referencing message, an identity-defining message would reduce purchase.

Method

In the two hours before a Philadelphia Eagles football game, research assistants from a large northeastern university dressed in Eagles apparel sold facial stickers to passing fans outside the football stadium. The stickers featured the Eagles logo and were chosen in order to serve as a highly visible indicator of Eagles fan identity.

The only difference between conditions was the signage in front of the stand. The message was changed every 10 minutes in a 3-group (Message Type: Non-Identity vs. Identity-Referencing vs. Identity-Defining) between-subjects design. The non-identity condition message

read “Put on your game face!” The identity-referencing message added two words, “Eagles fans, put on your game face!” while the identity-defining message read “REAL Eagles fans put on their game face!” A pre-test confirmed that the identity-referencing and identity-defining messages were perceived as successively stronger and more targeted towards consumers with an Eagles fan identity.²

The key dependent measure was the percentage of passing Eagles fans that stopped to purchase a sticker. All fans that stopped made a purchase. A confederate counted the total number of Eagles fans who both passed by and purchased in each condition. The proceeds from the sales were donated by the experimenters to an Eagles-affiliated charity.

Results

A chi-square analysis revealed a significant effect of identity message type on purchase ($\chi^2(2) = 6.91, p < .05$; see figure 2). First, consistent with prior work, identity marketing was able to increase purchase above baseline. Compared to the control (non-identity) condition (8.1%), people exposed to an identity-referencing message were more likely to purchase the facial sticker (14.0%), though the effect did not reach significance ($\chi^2(1) = 1.88, p = .17$). More importantly, however, supporting our reactance hypothesis, the identity-defining message *reduced* purchase. Compared to the identity-referencing condition, fewer people bought a sticker when the sign used an identity-defining message (4.9%; $\chi^2(1) = 6.53, p < .05$).

²In a pretest, participants using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all strong, 7 = very strong) rated the identity-defining message as significantly stronger ($M = 6.11$) than the identity-referencing message ($M = 5.15$; $F(1, 122) = 53.37, p < .001$), which in turn was seen as significantly stronger than the non-identity message ($M = 4.06$; $F(1, 122) = 50.59, p < .001$). Similarly, participants using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all targeted, 7 = very targeted) viewed the identity-defining message as more targeted towards consumers with the target identity (i.e. Eagles fans; $M = 6.31$) than the identity-referencing message ($M = 6.01$; $F(1, 122) = 9.71, p < .01$), which was seen as more targeted towards the identity than the non-identity message ($M = 3.49$; $F(1, 122) = 185.92, p < .001$).

Insert figure 2 about here

Discussion

Using actual purchase in the field, study 1 provides preliminary evidence that identity marketing can backfire. Consistent with decades of work on identity marketing, compared to a control condition, relating a message to the target audience's identity (Eagles fans) increased purchase of an identity-relevant good. A stronger message that defined the identity, however, actually had a perverse effect. Eagles fans were less likely to purchase the product when they viewed an identity-defining message. These results are especially noteworthy because of the busy environment and the inherent appeal of the product to the target segment—a subtle change in signage could have easily been ignored.

While these findings are supportive, study 3 used a more tightly controlled lab setting to directly test whether reactance is driving these effects.

STUDY 3: GREEN CONSUMERS REACT AGAINST IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGES

To more directly test whether the managerial predictions in study 1 were incorrect, study 3 examined the actual effects of the same identity marketing messages on consumer judgments. Consistent with the identity literature, we expected that marketing that references identity would increase purchase likelihood above non-identity marketing. However, contrary to the managerial

forecasts in study 1, we predicted that identity-defining messages, compared to identity-referencing messages, would provoke reactance and reduce purchase likelihood.

We also test the underlying mechanism behind these effects in two important ways. First, if these effects are really driven by identity, as we suggest, then they should only occur among consumers who have the target identity salient. Identities are thought to guide judgments and behaviors only when they are salient and temporarily more accessible (Reed 2004; Reed and Forehand 2010; Tajfel and Turner 1979). For participants who do not have the target identity salient, the message should not evoke reactance and no backlash should occur. In study 2, we chose the setting as one in which the target identity was extremely likely to be salient. In the current study, to directly test this hypothesized moderation, we primed participants with either the target or a neutral identity and examined how identity messages of different types influenced purchase likelihood.

Second, we tested whether reactance was driving any observed effects. We measured how the messages impacted participants' freedom to express the target identity to directly examine whether this mediated the effect.

Method

One hundred fifteen undergraduates, staff, and area residents, recruited through a Northeastern university, participated in the study in return for financial payment. The study was part of a larger group of questionnaires. We used a 3 (Message Type: Non-Identity vs. Identity-Referencing vs. Identity-Defining) x 2 (Identity Salience: Target vs. Neutral) between-subjects experimental design.

First, participants completed a “writing and visualization task” meant to temporarily activate the target identity (green, environmentally conscious) or a neutral identity (Reed 2004). In the target (neutral) condition participants were asked to visualize their role as a friend to the environment (their peers). In each condition, participants were asked to list five reasons why the identity is important to them, then reflected and wrote about a personal event involving that identity.

Next, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated “advertising evaluation task,” in which they viewed an advertisement for Charlie’s Soap, the environmentally friendly cleaning product featured in study 1. The advertisement contained the same picture and product description used in that study. The only difference between conditions was the message type, and the advertisements were the same as those used in study 1. As before, the Non-Identity message read, “Two thumbs up for Charlie’s!” the Identity-Referencing message read “Two green thumbs up for Charlie’s!” and the Identity-Defining message read “You’re not green unless you clean with Charlie’s!”

Finally, participants reported their purchase likelihood (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). We also measured reactance by assessing whether the ad restricted participants’ freedom to express the target identity (“This advertisement allows me the freedom to express who I am,” 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Results

Purchase Likelihood. A 3 (message type: non-identity vs. identity-referencing vs. identity-defining) x 2 (identity salience: target vs. neutral) ANOVA on purchase likelihood

revealed a main effect of message type ($F(2, 109) = 3.18, p < 0.05$), qualified by the predicted message type x identity salience interaction ($F(2, 109) = 5.36, p < 0.01$; figure 3).

We examined the data separately by identity salience to help clarify the pattern of results. Among participants for whom the target identity (i.e., green) was salient, message type had a significant effect ($F(2, 109) = 7.51, p < 0.001$). Consistent with prior work on identity marketing, compared to the non-identity message ($M = 2.91$), the identity-referencing message increased purchase likelihood ($M = 4.58; t(52) = 3.15, p < .01$). As predicted, however, stronger identity marketing had a negative effect. Compared to the identity-referencing message, the identity-defining message reduced purchase likelihood ($M = 2.65, t(48) = 3.57, p < .001$). In contrast, among participants primed with the neutral identity, there was no effect of message type ($F(2, 109) < 1.4, p > 0.25$), and no contrasts were significant.

Looked at another way, the data show that while identity marketing can be particularly effective among people who have the target identity salient, it is among these same individuals that identity-defining messages are particularly detrimental. While the identity-referencing message significantly boosted purchase likelihood for target compared to neutral identity participants ($M = 4.58$ vs. $3.41; F(1, 109) = 4.29, p < 0.05$), the identity-defining message had the opposite effect. Compared to control participants, individuals primed with the target identity reported significantly lower purchase likelihood ($M = 2.65$ vs. $4.06; F(1, 109) = 6.57, p < 0.05$).

 Insert figure 3 about here

Reactance. We conducted similar analyses on reactance. As with purchase likelihood, a main effect of message type ($F(2, 109) = 3.59, p < 0.05$) was qualified by a significant message

type x identity salience interaction ($F(2, 109) = 3.87, p < 0.05$). Among participants primed with the target (i.e. green) identity, message type had a significant effect ($F(2, 109) = 5.99, p < 0.01$). The identity-referencing message allowed greater freedom to express the target identity than the non-identity message ($M = 4.32$ vs. 3.05 ; $t(52) = 2.99, p < .01$). Importantly, as predicted, the identity-defining message reduced perceived freedom to express the target identity, compared to the identity-referencing message ($M = 3.00$ vs. 4.32 ; $t(48) = 3.05, p < .01$). There was no effect of message type among participants primed with the neutral identity ($F(2, 109) = 1.71, p = 0.19$).

Mediation Analysis. To test our proposed mechanism, a moderated mediation examined whether reactance mediates the interactive effect of identity salience and message type on consumer purchase likelihood. Because our main hypotheses concern identity marketing, we focused on the two identity marketing conditions. (The non-identity condition does not involve identity, so no such mediating mechanism should operate). We used the bootstrapping technique for assessing conditional indirect effects recommended by Preacher, Rucker and Hayes (2007), allowing us to avoid many of the problems associated with traditional techniques (e.g. Zhao, Lynch and Chen 2010). Using 5000 bootstrap samples, we estimated a significant indirect effect among target identity participants: the identity-defining message reduced purchase likelihood through diminished freedom to express the target identity ($b = -0.436, z = -2.42, p < .05$). There was no corresponding indirect effect among participants with a salient neutral identity ($b = 0.143, z = 1.15, p = .25$; see figure 4), supporting the hypothesized moderated mediation (i.e. conditional indirect effect). These results support our proposed process: identity-defining messages hurt consumer purchase likelihood by inducing reactance, but only among participants for whom the target identity was salient.

Insert figure 4 about here

Discussion

Though study 1 demonstrates that marketing managers believe that identity-defining messages will be more effective, study 3 suggests that this intuition is incorrect. Consistent with study 2, the identity-defining message reduced purchase likelihood. The results also support our proposed theoretical account and illustrate the mechanism underlying these effects. First, consistent with the notion that they are driven by identity, this reduction in purchase likelihood occurred only among individuals for whom the target identity was salient. Second, these effects were mediated by reactance. The identity-defining message reduced consumers' freedom to express the target identity, which in turn reduced purchase likelihood.

STUDY 4: HIGHLY REACTANT CHOOSY MOMS DON'T CHOOSE JIF

In our final study, we looked for further evidence for the role of reactance in driving these effects. Certain individuals are more prone to experience reactance (Hong and Faedda 1996). Given difficulties in measuring situational reactance, researchers often rely on this trait-level measure to provide evidence of a reactance process (e.g. Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004; Kivetz 2005; Levav and Zhu 2010). Consequently, we used the Hong Psychological Reactance Scale to examine whether our effects are stronger among individuals who are more likely to experience reactance.

In addition, to further test the generalizability of our findings, we used existing identity messages from the marketplace. Jif peanut butter often uses the slogans “Moms like you choose Jif” and “Choosy moms choose Jif!” While the first merely references identity, the second is characteristic of an identity-defining message (suggesting that possession of a desirable identity attribute is contingent on choosing Jif). We predicted that the identity-defining message would hurt purchase likelihood more among high reactance individuals.

Method

We approached one hundred and two mothers with their children at a train station and a public park in a northeastern city, and asked them to complete a short survey in exchange for a chocolate bar. To ensure that the mom identity was salient, all participants completed three items asking about the importance of being a mother. We used a 2 (Message Type: Identity-Referencing vs. Identity-Defining) x 2 (Trait Reactance) mixed design.

Participants viewed an advertisement for Jif peanut butter, and the only difference between conditions was the strength of the identity marketing appeal used. Both messages were actual Jif slogans, but one merely referenced an identity (“Moms like you choose Jif!”) while the other defined the identity (“Choosy Moms choose Jif!”). Participants rated their likelihood of purchasing Jif (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). Next, they were asked to imagine they were at the grocery store choosing between Jif and Skippy (another leading brand) and indicated the brand that they would choose. Participants then completed a trait reactance scale (Hong and Faedda 1996; sample item “I become angry when my freedom of choice is restricted”; averaged to create a trait reactance index, $\alpha = .77$). Finally, to rule out a competing explanation, we also

assessed familiarity and existing awareness of the slogans (“How familiar are you with Jif?”; “How are of the Jif slogan were you before?”; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much so).

Results

Participants reported no differences between the two messages in familiarity ($F(1, 92) = 1.09, p > .30$) or existing awareness ($F(1, 92) = 0.17, p > .65$), casting doubt on any alternative explanations involving these factors. Furthermore, trait reactance did not vary by condition ($F(1, 92) = 0.91, p > .30$).

Purchase Likelihood. Using the procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991), we regressed the purchase likelihood measure on the contrast-coded message type factor, participants’ mean-centered reactance scores, and interaction of these variables. Regression results revealed only the hypothesized interaction of identity message type x reactance: $\beta = -0.62, t(89) = -2.69, p < .01$, see figure 5. We further probed this interaction using a spotlight analysis, testing the effect of message type at one standard deviation above and below the mean reactance score. This enabled us to decompose the influence of message type on high and low reactance participants.

As expected, for high reactance participants, message type had a significant effect on purchase likelihood ($\beta = -0.84, t(89) = -2.73, p < .01$). Compared to participants who received the identity-referencing message, those who received the identity-defining message reported lower purchase likelihood ($M = 2.90$ vs. 4.58). There was no corresponding effect among low reactance participants ($\beta = 0.34, t(89) = 1.19, p > .25$).

Looked at another way, the effect of reactance on purchase likelihood varied significantly by message type. For participants who received the identity-defining message, those with higher reactance reported significantly lower purchase likelihood ($r(48) = -.403, p < .01$). In contrast, there was no corresponding effect for participants who received the identity-referencing message ($r(46) = .137, p > .35$).

 Insert figure 5 about here

Choice. To examine effects on choice, we again regressed participant choices on message type, participants' reactance scores, and interaction of these variables. Logistic regression found a main effect of reactance ($\beta = -0.619, \chi^2(1) = 4.90, p < .05$), qualified by the expected significant interaction of message type and reactance ($\beta = -0.593, \chi^2(1) = 4.49, p < .05$). Again, we probed this interaction by testing the effect of message type at one standard deviation above and below the mean reactance score.

As predicted, for high reactance participants, message type had a significant influence on choice of the target brand ($\beta = -0.802, \chi^2(1) = 4.89, p < .05$). Compared to those who viewed the identity-referencing message, participants receiving the identity-defining message were less likely to choose the target brand (i.e. Jif; $M = 0.18$ vs. 0.53). No such effect emerged among low reactance participants ($\beta = 0.270, \chi^2(1) = 0.69, p > .40$). Finally, the effect of reactance on choice also varied significantly by message type. For those who viewed the identity-defining message, higher reactance participants reported less choice of the target brand ($\beta = -1.357, \chi^2(1) = 8.28, p < .01$). No corresponding effect emerged for participants who received the identity-referencing message ($\beta = -0.029, \chi^2(1) < 1$).

Discussion

Using existing identity marketing appeals, these results again demonstrate a potential downside to identity marketing, while providing further evidence for the mechanism behind the effects. Compared to identity-referencing messages, identity-defining messages hurt purchase likelihood and choice of Jif peanut butter for mothers who were high in reactance, suggesting that the observed effects are indeed driven by reactance to identity marketing. Importantly, trait reactance predicted reduced purchase likelihood and choice only among those who had seen the identity-defining message. This result lends credence to the conceptual distinction we make between identity-referencing and identity-defining messages: different identity marketing approaches produce different outcomes, and only messages that define identity expression elicit a reactance response. These findings also reinforce the external validity of our proposed theory by demonstrating that our predictions hold for actual marketing messages.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Firms often target consumers on the basis of identities they hold, and decades of identity marketing research suggest that such appeals should lead to greater persuasion (e.g. Deshpandé and Stayman 1994; Meyers-Levy 1988), loyalty (Bolton and Reed 2004), and more favorable outcomes for the firm (e.g. Forehand et al. 2002; Reed 2004). Heightening the sense of congruence between a brand and a consumer identity should therefore be mutually beneficial (e.g. Aaker et al. 2001; Sirgy 1982).

In contrast, we demonstrate that identity-defining messages can sometimes backfire. Across multiple identities (Eagles fan, green consumer, mother) and product domains (facial stickers, biodegradable cleaning product, peanut butter), we demonstrate that while messages that merely reference consumer identity can increase purchase likelihood (consistent with extant literature), messages that define the terms of identity expression can have the opposite effect, decreasing purchase likelihood and sales. Moreover, by demonstrating the effect in both the laboratory and the field, as well as using choice and real purchase, we underscore the external validity and generalizability of these effects

Further, we demonstrate the mechanism behind these effects: identity-defining messages reduce purchase likelihood by threatening consumer freedom to express identity and thereby provoking reactance. The effects are both mediated (Study 3) and moderated (Study 4) by reactance, and using both a state (Study 3) and trait (study 4) measure of reactance underscores the role of reactance in this process. Identity-defining messages provoke reactance by undermining the value of purchase decisions as a meaningful intrinsic expression of identity (e.g. Berger and Heath 2007; Kivetz 2005).

Implications and Directions for Future Research

These findings have clear managerial implications. Managers need to be aware of the potential downsides of certain types of identity marketing appeals. As illustrated in study 1, prospective managers do not anticipate reactance to identity marketing. Instead, they predict that more strongly phrased messages will be more effective, and thereby prefer identity-defining messages to identity-referencing messages. Accordingly, real-world managers may unwittingly

craft and select identity messages that are likely to provoke reactance. This is important because even if the brand in question is inherently appealing to the target identity segment, we show that consumers are willing to reverse their own preferences and avoid purchase in order to restore their freedom (cf. Brehm 1966; Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004; Wicklund 1970).

This research contributes to the growing body of work demonstrating the importance and ubiquity of reactance within consumer contexts (e.g. Chartrand et al. 2007; Fitzsimons 2000; Kivetz 2005; Levav and Zhu 2010). No extant research has connected the reactance and identity literatures. Our results also underscore the theoretical importance of examining the boundaries of identity marketing. Despite the sizable literature in identity, little work has examined the psychological implications of different approaches to identity marketing. The links between consumer identity, marketing messages, and brand choice are not yet well understood (e.g. Kleine et al. 1993; Reed and Forehand 2010), and we offer one new perspective to better clarify these relations. Given consumers' need to see identity-relevant choices as intrinsic in nature, it may be that perceived freedom of choice is especially crucial in identity-relevant consumption decisions.

One potentially fruitful avenue for future research is the implications of reactance to identity marketing for consumer identity. A large literature has examined how momentary threats, such as social comparisons (e.g. Argo, White and Dahl 2006; Smeesters and Mandel 2006) or personal failures (e.g. Vohs and Heatherton 2001), may temporarily threaten the self. Virtually all of the dimensions of identity along which we categorize ourselves (e.g. competence, sex appeal, fan loyalty, masculinity, morality, coolness) are meaningful only in a comparative context (Festinger 1954), and are thus vulnerable to threat. These same dimensions of identity are often the focus of identity marketing, and may be threatened by identity-defining messages.

In particular, by provoking reactance, such marketing actions may cause consumers to shift the relevance or importance of various aspects of their identity.

Ancillary data from study 3 are consistent with this notion. After completing the main measures, participants also rated the relevance of the advertised product to their identity. Analysis of this measure revealed a significant message type x identity salience interaction ($F(2, 109) = 4.62, p < .05$). While message type had no effect among participants primed with a neutral identity ($F(2, 109) = 1.98, p = .14$), it did have a significant impact on participants whose target (i.e. green) identity was salient ($F(2, 109) = 4.08, p < .05$). Participants who received the identity-defining message felt that the product was significantly less relevant to their identity ($M = 2.98$), compared to the identity-referencing message ($M = 4.26; t(48) = 2.72, p < .01$) as well as the non-identity message ($M = 3.91; t(54) = 2.05, p < .05$). Among participants primed with the target identity, a mediation analysis (Preacher et al. 2007) found a significant indirect effect through reactance (i.e. reduced freedom to express the target identity): $b = -0.301, z = -2.58, p = .01$. Though these findings are far from conclusive, consistent with work showing that people strategically shift identities in order to cope with self-threat (e.g. Mussweiler, Gabriel and Bodenhausen 2000), they suggest that consumers who view identity-defining messages as a threat to their freedom may subsequently reduce the centrality of that identity to deflect the threat. Thus, reactance to identity marketing may have important downstream consequences. Examining factors that reinforce or diffuse consumer identities is an important area for future research (Reed and Forehand 2010).

Following Kivetz (2005), we argue that psychological reactance is a pervasive feature of consumer decisions, and especially so when persuasion intent is salient. Thus, our approach is conceptually complementary with other psychological frameworks that assume that consumers

anticipate marketplace influence. A broad literature has discussed tactics that consumers use to resist marketing influence (e.g., Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Darke and Ritchie 2007; Friestad and Wright 1994; Wright 2002). Recent research suggests that these responses are learned and routinized over time, such that marketing slogans provoke an automatic behavioral backlash (Laran, Dalton and Andrade 2010). Furthermore, the conditional arguments used in identity-defining messages may also trigger cognitive counterargument (Chandon and Janiszewski 2009). Reactance may provide the motivational impetus for such cognitive processes, such that these processes work in concert to produce consumer resistance. Further exploring the interplay of these motivational and cognitive factors may better illuminate how consumers act to escape the crosshairs of marketers.

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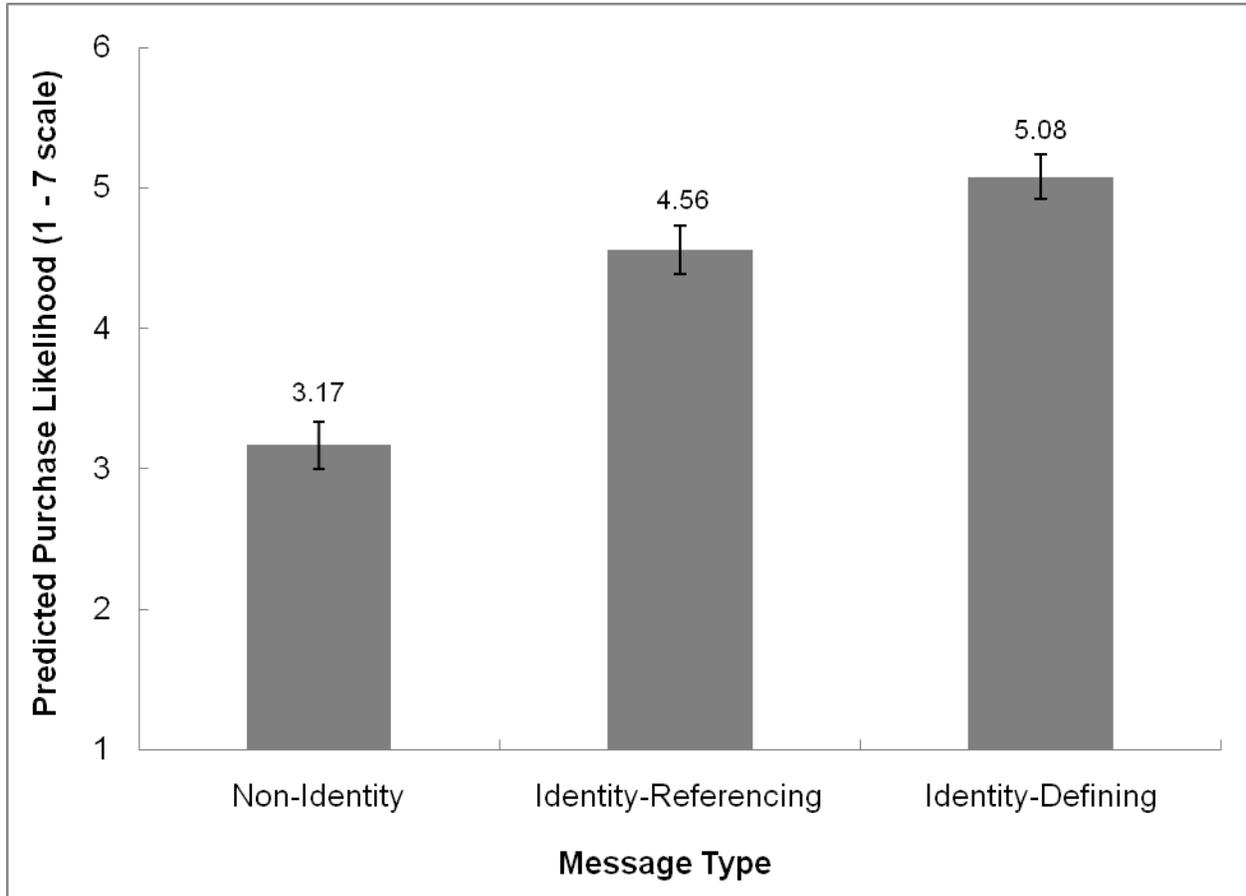
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FIGURE 1

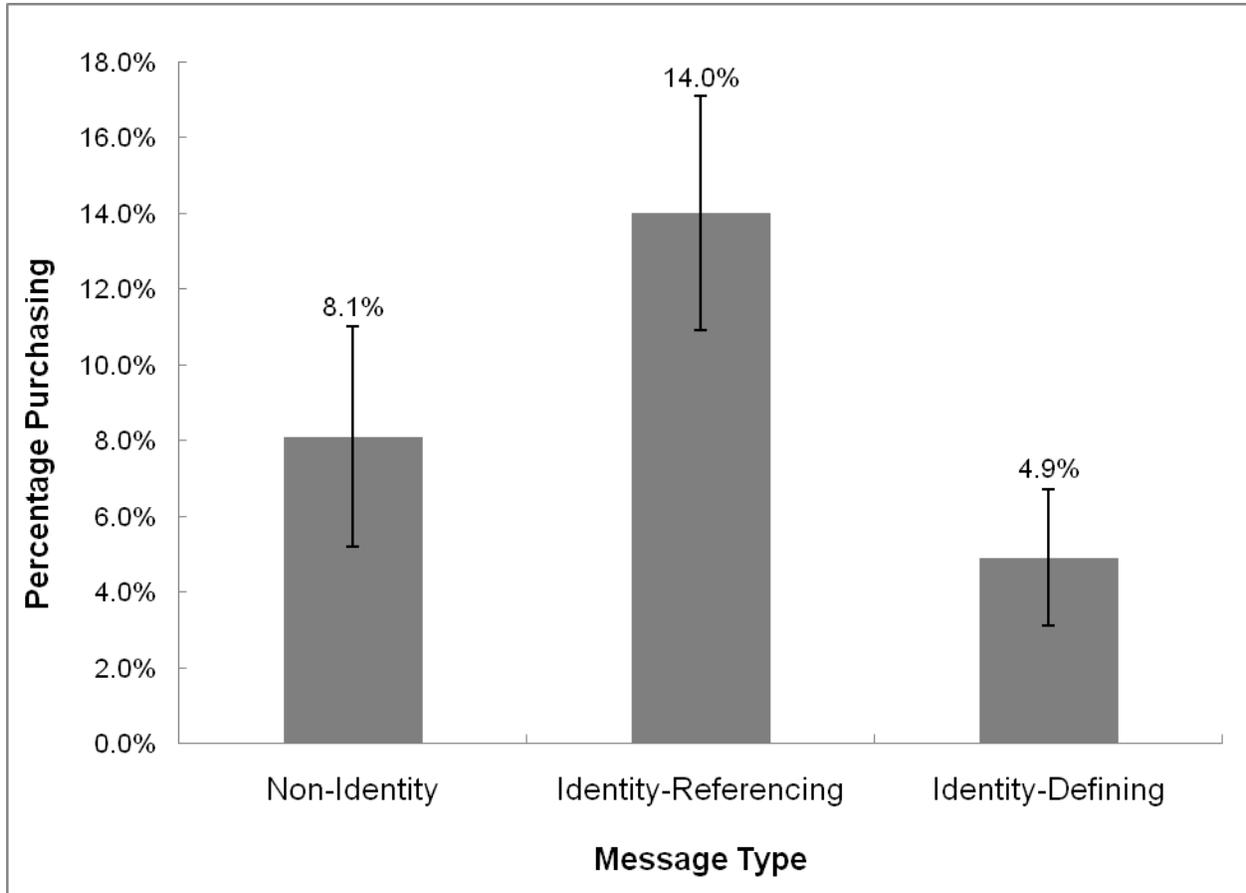
MANAGERS PREFER GREEN IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGES (STUDY 1)



Note: Error bars denote standard errors.

FIGURE 2

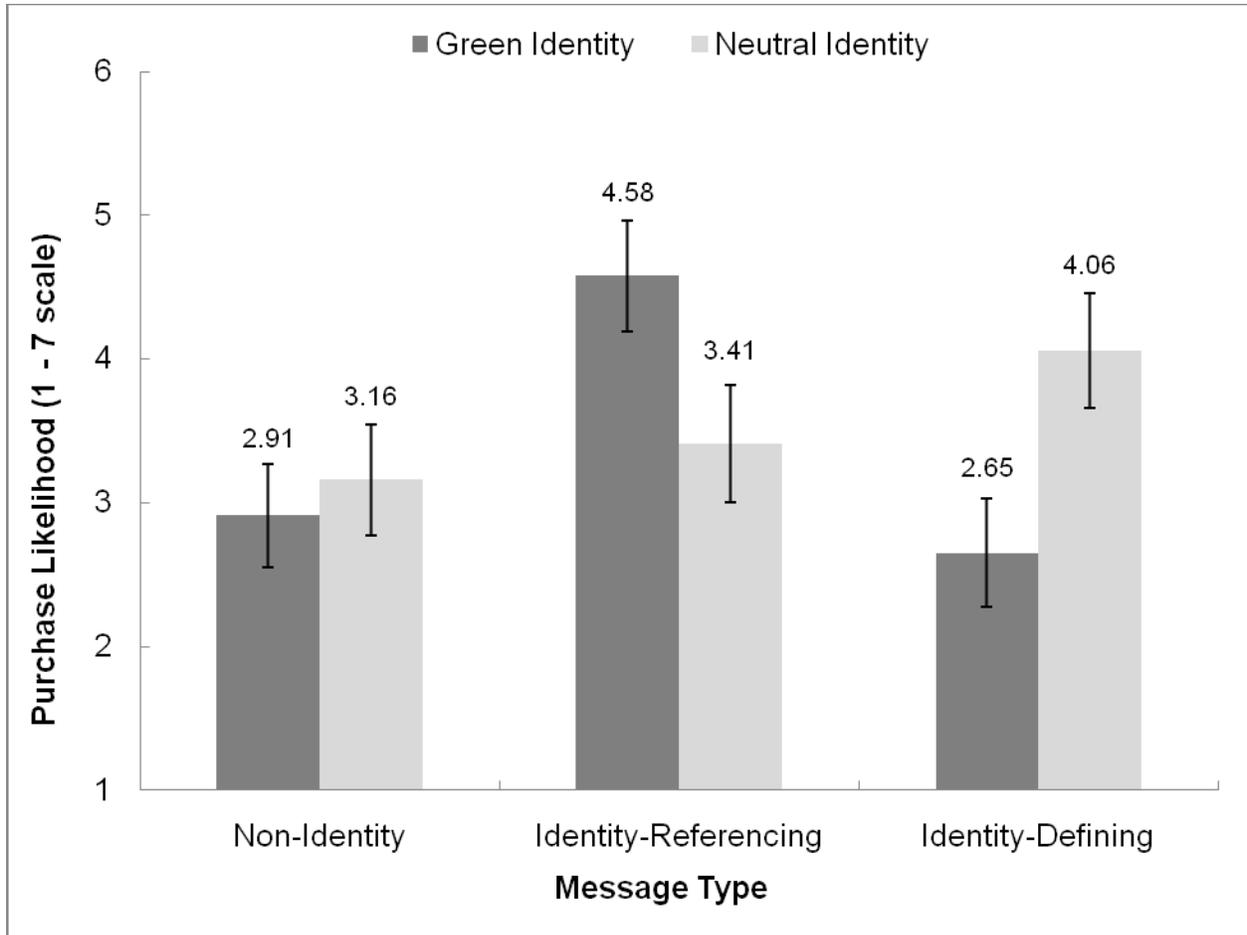
EAGLES FANS REACT AGAINST IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGES (STUDY 2)



Note: Error bars denote standard errors of logistic regression estimates.

FIGURE 3

GREEN CONSUMERS REACT AGAINST IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGES (STUDY 3)

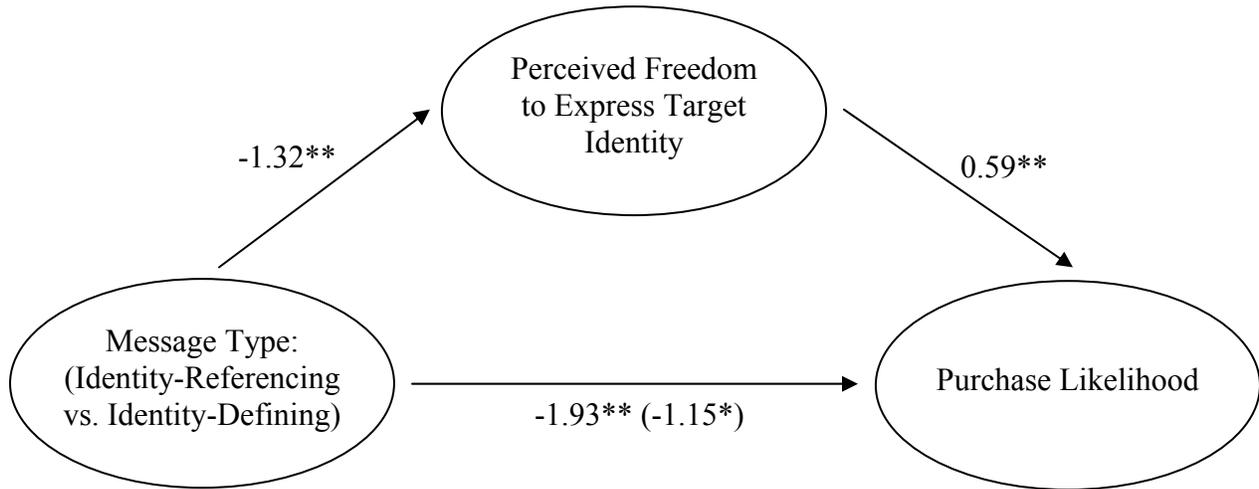


Note: Error bars denote standard errors.

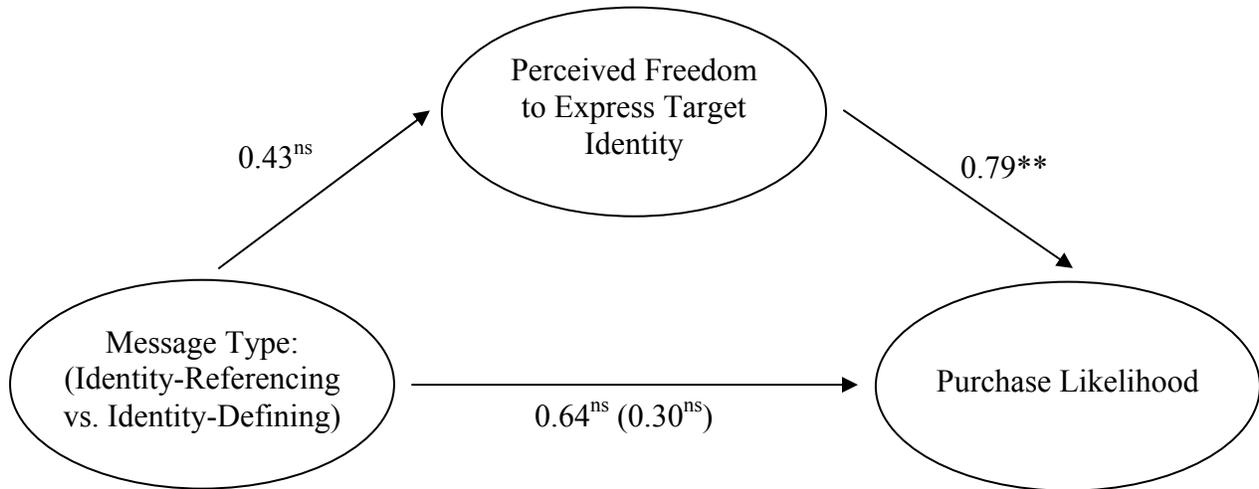
FIGURE 4

MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS: MEDIATION VIA PERCEIVED FREEDOM AS A FUNCTION OF IDENTITY SALIENCE (STUDY 3)

Identity Salience: Target Identity



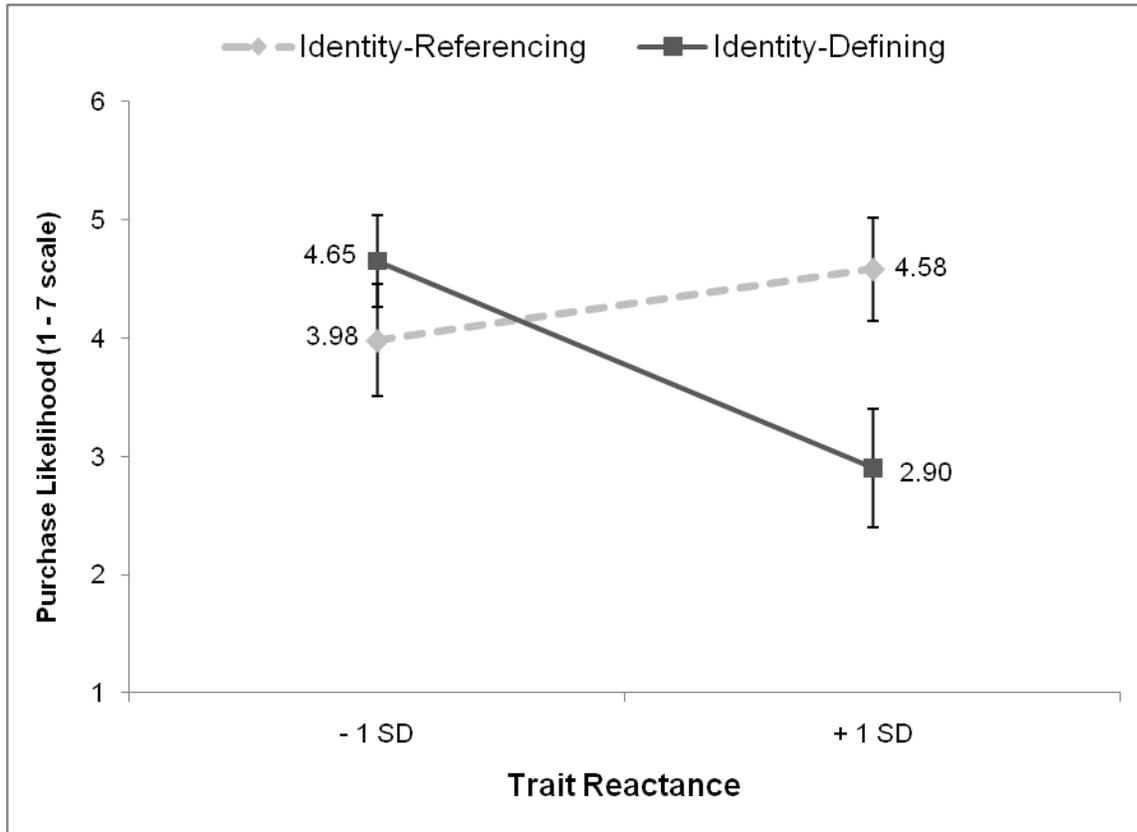
Identity Salience: Neutral Identity



Note: ns $p > .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

FIGURE 5

REACTANT MOTHERS REACT AGAINST IDENTITY-DEFINING MESSAGES (STUDY 4)



Note: Error bars denote standard errors.