To Be Us or To Be Me? How Consumers' Close Relationships Create and Attenuate Ambivalence toward Self-Relevant Choices

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This research explores how consumers manage the ambivalence they may experience when they have to choose between being a good relationship partner and excelling in some other aspect of who they are (e.g., a mom choosing whether to spend money on products for her children versus products to help her excel in her profession). Conflicts of this sort are shown to have key behavioral correlates in consumption (study 1) and to cause consumers to feel ambivalent toward options in the choice set (study 2). When relevant close others acknowledge the ambivalence, ambivalence decreases among some segments of consumers, but not others (study 3). Therefore, close others can provide support to help consumers manage their ambivalence, but the extent of benefit may vary depending on what the close others say and on who the consumers are. This research bridges the interpersonal relationships, self-concept, and ambivalence literatures, providing conceptual and substantive contributions to both product marketers and consumer welfare policy makers.

Interpersonal relationships strongly influence consumers' choices and behavior (e.g., Gershoff and Johar 2006; Rick, Small, and Finkel 2011; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997; Ward and Broniarczyk 2011). Furthermore, relationships are critical to consumer welfare: they provide material and emotional support in difficult times (Duhachek 2005), and spending time with relationship partners increases happiness (Aaker, Rudd, and Mogilner 2011). Despite these benefits of relationships, relationships may cause distress as well, given that they must exist alongside other aspects of the self (Epp and Price 2008). Specifically, consumers sometimes have to make choices that pit a relationship against some other important aspect of who they are (e.g., a mom choosing whether to spend money on products for her children versus products to help her excel in her profession). This research investigates the behavioral and emotional consequences of such conflicts and the ways consumers manage these consequences.

Prior research acknowledges that consumers' relationships and sense of self are intertwined (Laverie, Kleine, and Kleine 2002), but empirical work has focused on only one relationship (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003) or one aspect of the self (Reed 2004) at a time. Therefore, conflict between consumers' relationships and other important aspects of who they are has received very limited attention (but see LeBoeuf, Shafir, and Bayuk 2010). The present work fills this gap, showing that such conflict is related to purchases for both the self and for close others in a way that has not been documented in the relationships and the self literatures. This suggests a need to look beyond paradigms focusing on a single relationship or a single aspect of the self. After all, the hardest choices in daily life occur when two priorities are both salient at the same time and need to be traded off (Luce 1998), as when consumers must choose between being good relationship partners and excelling in some other aspect of who they are.

Choices like this create negative emotion (Luce 1998). Beyond that though, the present research proposes and finds that consumers feel ambivalent (simultaneously feel positively and negatively) (Kruglanski and Stroebe 2005) about options that are consistent with a relationship they value but inconsistent with some other aspect of who they are. Because ambivalence is uncomfortable (Williams and Aaker 2002), consumers may try to reduce it. This paper shows that the very relationship partners who caused the ambivalence in the first place can also help to reduce it through the feedback they provide on the choice. Therefore, consumers' interpersonal relationships may both create and attenuate ambivalence in choices.

This work makes two contributions. First, it studies choices in which two important aspects of the self (rather than just one) are salient at the same time and thus remedies a limitation in the relationships and identity literatures. Second, it brings these two literatures together by studying relationships as part of the self: when two aspects of the self are salient and at least one of the two aspects is a relationship, relationship partners can create and help resolve conflict and ambivalence in self-relevant consumption choices. These contributions are important for marketing products chosen in contexts that pit relationships against other aspects of the self. The findings can also help policymakers, who may seek to improve consumer welfare by fostering more satisfying close relationships.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, literature on relationships, the self, and ambivalence is reviewed and incorporated into a theory of how close others create and help address conflict and ambivalence in choice. Second, three studies are presented to test the theory. The paper concludes by discussing how consumers manage their close relationships alongside their individual sense of self and by providing marketing implications and directions for future research.

CONFLICT BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS AND OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SELF

RELATES TO CONSUMPTION

Consumers' interpersonal relationships are intertwined with their sense of self (Andersen and Chen 2002). For example, a woman's relationships with her children influence her sense of self as a mom. Despite this, the literatures on interpersonal relationships and on the self have developed relatively separately. They have reached similar conclusions though: consumers behave and choose in ways that reinforce salient aspects of who they are, whether those salient aspects are relationships or more individually focused identities (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003; Reed 2004). For instance, LeBoeuf et al. (2010) primed either people's relationship with family or their professional self and observed the consequences for choice between a family activity and a work activity. People preferred spending time with family when their relationship with family was salient but preferred working when their professional self was salient (LeBoeuf et al. 2010).

However, this research has overlooked situations in which consumers' relationships with close others and another aspect of the self are both salient and conflict in how they guide choice. For example, a woman may have to choose between spending her limited income on toys for her children and spending it on new work clothes, given that both her relationship with her children and her professional self are salient at the time of choice.

Of course, a rich literature has studied how consumers manage conflicting goals (Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Khan and Dhar 2006). This research chiefly focuses on predicting how prior choices and anticipated future choices involving conflicting goals influence current choices. For instance, if consumers choose in line with one goal in one choice, are they then more or less likely to choose in line with the conflicting goal in their next choice? Likewise, if

consumers anticipate that they will choose in line with one goal in their next choice, are they then more or less likely to choose in line with the conflicting goal now?

While these questions are important, the focus of the present research is different. Rather than predicting what consumers will choose when goals conflict, this paper examines how consumers cope with the emotional ambivalence they experience toward whatever choice they make. In turn, ambivalence is likely to be greatest (and coping is likely to be most difficult) when the choice involves relationships or other important aspects of the self. Relationships and other aspects of the self may encompass a whole host of goals (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003), but they are broader than goals in that they may also include attitudes (Finnel et al., forthcoming), behaviors (Aquino and Reed 2002), and even emotions (Verrochi and Williams 2011). For this reason, they are a fertile ground for studying the conflict and ambivalence of interest here.

This paper proposes that conflict between a relationship and some other aspect of the self may have important behavioral correlates in consumption choices. Prior research finds that consumers buy products to reinforce aspects of the self that are important to them (Reed 2004). Thus when a woman has to choose between spending money on products for her children and spending it on products for work, she is more likely to buy products for her children as her relationship with her children becomes more important to her. On the other hand, she is more likely to buy products for work as her profession becomes more important to her.

The present research proposes that this trend will hold only under low conflict between the two self-aspects. If a relationship and another aspect of the self consistently conflict, thoughts of one are likely to bring to mind thoughts of the other (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, and Morris 2002). Thus when consumers are thinking about purchasing something for a relationship partner, they may remember that spending their limited income on this relationship partner means not

spending it on another aspect of the self and vice versa. This thought may make consumers hesitate to make the purchase. Hence, the importance of a particular relationship or other aspect of the self may no longer predict purchase behavior in the way it would if there were less conflict between the two aspects of the self. Thus:

> **H1: When consumers make choices between different aspects of the self, conflict attenuates the positive relationship between an aspect's importance and the purchase of products reinforcing that aspect.**

A focus on relationship partners can enrich the study of choice conflict in a way that merely studying individually focused identities cannot. For years, researchers have argued that identities are "social," but social has typically meant social groups (Escalas and Bettman 2005), rather than close others in interpersonal relationships. By focusing on interpersonal relationships, this paper illustrates how conflict relates to purchases not just for the self but also for close others (e.g., for both the self and one's children). Thus, this research puts the social directly into the study of social identities in consumption.

H1 suggests that conflict involving close relationships may have behavioral correlates in consumption. Specifically, appealing to a particular aspect of the self may no longer be an effective marketing tool if that aspect conflicts with relationships or other aspects of the self. It is therefore important to understand conflict, its consequences, and the ways close others can help consumers cope with those consequences. Marketers may then be able to attenuate the effects of conflict on purchases of products for the self and for close others.

CONFLICT BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS AND OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SELF TRIGGERS AMBIVALENCE AND COPING EFFORTS

This research proposes that consumers feel ambivalent (simultaneously feel positively and negatively) about the available options when a choice pits a relationship against another important aspect of the self (Kruglansi and Stroebe 2005, 331). On the one hand, they feel positively because the choice is consistent with one aspect of who they are, whether that aspect is a relationship or another identity. On the other hand, they feel negatively because the choice is inconsistent with another aspect of who they are. Moreover, ambivalence is uncomfortable (Williams and Aaker 2002) so consumers may feel discomfort toward their choice.

H2a: When a choice pits a relationship against another aspect of the self, consumers feel ambivalent and hence uncomfortable about the options.

Although H2a has not been tested, recent gift giving research provides evidence consistent with it. This research cleverly shows that gift givers sometimes choose gifts that make close others happy but that violate their own identity (Ward and Broniarczyk 2011). For instance, Democratic (Republican) participants in Ward and Broniarczyk's (2011) study imagined giving a close Republican (Democratic) friend a Republican (Democratic) mug. Nonverbal measures suggested that consumers felt uncomfortable about making such a choice.

But why precisely would consumers feel uncomfortable? The present research identifies a reason: consumers felt ambivalent toward their choice because it reinforced their relationship with their friend but violated their political identities. If this reasoning is correct, then consumers should feel particularly ambivalent and uncomfortable when the neglected political identity is important to them. Therefore:

H2b: When a choice pits a relationship against another aspect of the self, the importance of the neglected aspect of the self moderates the effect of conflict on ambivalence and discomfort.

Ambivalence is uncomfortable (Williams and Aaker 2002) so consumers may try to cope with or reduce it (Nowlis, Kahn, and Dhar 2002; Zemborain and Johar 2007). Since relationship partners created the conflict in the first place, their support may facilitate coping. Consistent with this idea, the coping literature recognizes that social support can aid in coping with stress (Duhachek 2005). However, this work does not focus specifically on ambivalence toward choices, preferring instead to concentrate more generally on "stressful consumption episodes" such as unpleasant run-ins with customer service representatives (Duhachek 2005, 41).

However, a significant proportion of stress in consumption likely comes from choices. Recent research suggests that ambivalence toward an option only causes discomfort when consumers have to make a choice concerning that option (van Harreveld, Rutjens, Rotteveel, Nordgren, and van der Pligt 2009). This discomfort is likely to be particularly great when the choice pits a relationship against another aspect of the self. This paper examines how feedback from close others may reduce ambivalence toward such choices.

FEEDBACK FROM CLOSE OTHERS MAY REDUCE AMBIVALENCE

Just as close others can cause ambivalence in choice, so too may they help to attenuate it. When close others cause the conflict, they may know how difficult the choice was for consumers. Accordingly, they may try to say something to make consumers feel better about their choice, which is inevitably consistent with one aspect of the self but inconsistent with another. What might close others say and how will it impact ambivalence toward the choice?

Researchers often distinguish between approaching and avoiding sources of distress (Solberg Nes and Segerstrom 2006), particularly in the context of close relationships (Murray, Derrick, Leder, and Holmes 2008). Approaching refers to thinking about the problem or the resultant emotions to find a solution or reinterpret the situation in a more positive light (Solberg

Nes and Segerstrom 2006). By contrast, avoiding entails not thinking about the problem or its resultant emotions (Solberg Nes and Segerstrom 2006). In the contexts of interest here, consumers may actively think about the choice they made and the resultant ambivalence (approach). Alternatively, they may try not to think about the choice they made or anything that reminds them of it (avoid).

Close others' feedback is important because it may promote approach or avoidance. On the one hand, feedback could help consumers avoid thinking about their choice; to this end, the feedback could adopt a positive tone but avoid any mention of the conflict or the ambivalence. On the other hand, feedback could recognize the ambivalence, thus bringing it front and center and giving consumers an opportunity to approach their emotions toward the choice they made.

This acknowledgement is provocative because predicting its effects is not straightforward. On the one hand, acknowledgement may be particularly effective at reducing ambivalence toward a choice consistent with one aspect of the self but inconsistent with another. When consumers feel ambivalent, a close other who acknowledges that ambivalence may be perceived as especially understanding and insightful. Moreover, if the acknowledgment is delivered as part of a positive message, consumers are likely to feel that the close other not only understands who they are but also accepts and appreciates them for who they are. This perceived partner understanding and caring may lead people to feel closer to their partner and more satisfied with and committed to the relationship (Ickes and Simpson 2001; Canevello and Crocker 2010). The positive emotion generated from these increased feelings of connection to the relationship partner may reduce ambivalence more so than other feedback would.

On the flip side, a close other's acknowledgement may not be especially effective at reducing ambivalence. Not everyone copes by approaching problems, and indeed, consumers

may dislike acknowledgement because it reminds them that they chose against a valued aspect of the self. If so, they may conclude that the close other does not understand their needs and are unlikely to experience positive emotion from an enhanced connection to their relationship partner. Then acknowledgement will not have any special power to reduce ambivalence.

Therefore, the principal benefit of acknowledgement is that it conveys understanding of what consumers are experiencing, and the principal drawback is that it brings the neglect of a valued aspect of the self to mind when consumers might prefer to avoid thinking about it. Given this, the present research proposes that consumers' sense of self, and specifically the importance they assign to the neglected aspect of the self, will determine the effects of acknowledgement. Those for whom the neglected aspect of the self is relatively less important can likely cope on their own, without any help from others. For them, acknowledgement is likely to be a reminder of ambivalence they had already put to rest. This suggests that acknowledgement will not be especially effective at reducing ambivalence among those for whom the neglected aspect of the self is less important. On the other hand, those for whom the neglected aspect of the self is relatively more important may find it more difficult to stop thinking about their ambivalence and may crave reassurance that they made the right choice. This idea is consistent with research suggesting that people seek reassurance when they are anxious or have self-doubts (Van Orden and Joiner 2006). For them, acknowledgement provides the reassurance and understanding they seek and thus is likely to be especially effective at reducing ambivalence. Therefore:

H3: The importance of the neglected aspect of the self moderates the effect of feedback on ambivalence.

Three studies test the hypotheses. Study 1 tests H1, showing that conflict attenuates the standard positive correlation between the importance of a particular aspect of the self and

purchase of products reinforcing that aspect. Study 2 tests H2a and H2b, providing the first evidence that conflict between a relationship and another aspect of the self causes ambivalence toward options in a choice context. Study 3 tests H3, finding that feedback acknowledging the ambivalence may be more or less effective at reducing ambivalence for different consumers.

STUDY 1: CONFLICT INVOLVING RELATIONSHIPS AND BEHAVIORAL CORRELATES IN CONSUMPTION

Study 1 tests H1, namely that when consumers make choices between a relationship and another aspect of who they are, the importance of each of these aspects of the self will positively predict purchase of products reinforcing that aspect under low conflict but not under high conflict. In this study, mothers completed a survey on their shoe purchases. Besides answering questions about those purchases, they indicated how important being a mom to their childen was to them, how important excelling in other aspects of their lives was to them, and how strongly being a mom conflicted with other aspects of who they were. The aim was to explore how conflict relates to consumption behaviors for both close others (children in this case) and the self.

Sample

A sample of 375 women from across the United States completed the survey. In the sample, 292 had at least one child under age 9 and provided usable data on all variables. These 292 mothers had between one and seven children ($M = 2.03$ children, $SD = 0.95$ children). They ranged in age from 19 to 61 years ($M = 31.43$ years, $SD = 8.17$ years). Most at least had a high school diploma (3 did not complete high school, 50 had a high school diploma, 85 completed some college, 121 had a college degree, and 33 had a graduate degree). They were recruited through an online panel administrator and were paid for their participation in a larger study.

Procedure

Participants completed a survey containing various measures, including the ones below.

Importance of Being a Mom. Participants indicated their agreement with two statements reflecting how important being a mom to their children was to them (adapted from Luhtanen and Crocker 1992) ("Being a mom has a lot to do with how I feel about myself." and "Being a mom matters a great deal to my self-image."). These items were averaged to form a scale (α = .82).

Importance of Other Aspects of the Self. Participants indicated their agreement with two statements reflecting how important other aspects of the self (aside from being a mom) were to them ("The other aspects of my identity, taken together, have a lot to do with how I feel about myself." and "The other aspects of my identity, taken together, matter a great deal to my self-image."). These items were averaged to form a scale (α = .82).

Conflict between Mom Identity and Other Aspects of the Self. Five seven-point scales tapped the conflict between being a mom and excelling in other aspects of the self. Each scale's left endpoint corresponded to low conflict (e.g., "It is definitely possible to be excellent both as a mom and in the other aspects of my identity."), whereas each scale's right endpoint corresponded to high conflict (e.g., "It is definitely impossible to be excellent both as a mom and in the other aspects of my identity."). These items were averaged to form a scale (α = .83).

Number of Shoes Purchased for the Self and for Each Child. Participants reported how many shoes they had purchased for themselves and for each child under age 9 over the past year. Because the interest was in how these women allocated their money between their children (representative of being a mom to young children) and themselves (representative of other aspects of the self), a shoes for self versus shoes for children variable was calculated by subtracting the number of pairs each woman had bought for herself from the number of pairs she had bought for each of her children. Higher scores on this variable mean that women bought

relatively more shoes for themselves and relatively fewer for their children; lower scores mean that women bought relatively fewer shoes for themselves and relatively more for their children.

Results

Consistent with H1, it was expected that women for whom being a mom was more (less) important would buy more (fewer) pairs of shoes for each of their children relative to the number of pairs they bought for themselves but that conflict would attenuate this relationship (a mom identity importance x conflict interaction). Likewise, it was expected that women for whom other aspects of the self were more (less) important would buy more (fewer) pairs of shoes for themselves relative to the number of pairs they bought for each of their children but that conflict would attenuate this relationship (an importance of other aspects x conflict interaction). The first part of these predictions is the standard finding in the literature: the more important an aspect of the self is, the more purchases consumers make to reinforce that aspect. The second part of these predictions is the novel contribution in H1: conflict attenuates the positive relationship between an aspect's importance and the purchase of products reinforcing that aspect of the self.

H1 was tested using hierarchical regression. The dependent variable was the difference between the number of pairs women purchased for themselves and the number of pairs they purchased for each child. The following predictors were entered into the regression in the following order: the importance of being a mom, the importance of the other aspects of the self, the conflict between the mom identity and other aspects of the self, all two-way interactions involving these three independent variables, and the three-way interaction of these independent variables. Throughout this paper, all continuous independent variables were mean centered to minimize multicollinearity (Aiken and West 1992).

The regression revealed a significant effect of mom identity importance: those for whom being a mom was more important purchased relatively more pairs of shoes for each child and relatively fewer pairs for themselves (b = -0.34, t(284) = -2.45, p<.05). However, this effect was qualified by the two predicted interactions: a significant mom identity importance x conflict interaction (b = 0.39, t(284) = 4.16, p<.001) and a significant importance of other aspects x conflict interaction (b = -0.38, t(284) = -2.89, p<.01). The form of these interactions was further examined using procedures from Aiken and West (1992) and Irwin and McClelland (2001).

Turning first to the mom identity importance x conflict interaction, the relationship between the importance of being a mom and shoe purchases was examined at one standard deviation below and above the mean on conflict. When women perceived relatively little conflict between their mom identity and their other aspects of the self, those for whom being a mom was more important reported purchasing more products consistent with that aspect of the self: they bought relatively more pairs of shoes for each child and relatively fewer pairs for themselves (b = -0.77, t(284) = -3.96, p<.001). Therefore, the standard finding in the literature held when conflict was low. However, this relationship was attenuated and became nonsignificant when women perceived relatively high conflict between their mom identity and other aspects of the self (b = 0.09, t(284) = 0.62, n.s.) (see Figure 1). Therefore, the positive correlation typically observed between the importance of some aspect of the self and the purchase of products reinforcing that aspect no longer emerged in the presence of conflict.

Turning now to the importance of other aspects x conflict interaction, the relationship between the importance of other aspects and shoe purchases was examined at one standard deviation below and above the mean on conflict. Consistent with H1, women for whom other aspects of the self were more important purchased relatively more pairs of shoes for themselves

and relatively fewer pairs for each child when conflict was low (b = 0.61, t(284) = 2.79, p<.01), but this relationship was attenuated when conflict was high (b = -0.24, t(284) = -1.23, n.s.) (see Figure 1). Therefore, the importance of other aspects of the self was no longer predictive of purchases of shoes for the self when these other aspects conflicted with the mom identity.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Discussion of Study 1

Study 1 documents a consumption correlate of conflict involving close others: when consumers' relationships conflict with other important aspects of the self, the importance of an aspect of the self may no longer predict purchase patterns. Women for whom being a mom to young children was important reported purchasing significantly more shoes for each child and fewer shoes for themselves, but only when being a mom did not conflict strongly with other aspects of their lives. Conflict rendered nonsignificant the relationship between the importance of being a mom and self-reported purchase patterns.

Likewise, women for whom other aspects of the self (aside from being a mom) were relatively more important reported purchasing significantly more shoes for themselves and fewer shoes for each child, but only when these other aspects of the self did not conflict strongly with being a mom to their children. Conflict again rendered nonsignificant the relationship between the importance of other aspects of the self and self-reported purchase patterns.

Therefore, conflict between consumers' desire to excel as relationship partners and their desire to excel in other important aspects of their lives has important correlates in consumption. Of course, the data here only examines the relationship between conflict and shoe purchases, but it is theorized that the same relationship would hold in other product categories. Thus it is critical to better understand conflict involving close relationships.

The present research proposes that being forced to choose between a relationship and another aspect of the self can take an emotional toll. Specifically, consumers may feel ambivalent and hence uncomfortable about the possibility of choosing an option consistent with a relationship but inconsistent with another aspect of the self, particularly when the inconsistent aspect is important. Study 2 documents this effect in a gift giving context.

STUDY 2: CONFLICT INVOLVING RELATIONSHIPS CAUSES AMBIVALENCE

Study 2 leverages Ward and Broniarczyk's (2011) gift giving context to test H2a and H2b: consumers feel ambivalent and hence uncomfortable about choosing an option consistent with a relationship but inconsistent with another aspect of who they are, particularly when the neglected aspect of who they are is important to them.

Participants in study 2 pictured a close other whose political affiliation either matched or opposed their own and imagined giving their close other a mug, which bore the logo of this close other's political party. For instance, Democrats assigned to think of a matching other imagined giving a close Democrat a Democratic mug, whereas Democrats assigned to think of an opposing other imagined giving a close Republican or Tea Party member a Republican or Tea Party mug. They then rated their thoughts and feelings about the prospect of choosing this mug. Compared to participants who thought of a matching close other, those who thought of an opposing close other were expected to feel more ambivalent and hence uncomfortable about choosing the mug, but only when their political identity was especially important to them.

Design

The design was a 2-group (No Conflict versus Conflict) between-subjects design with political identity importance as a measured covariate. Participants in the No Conflict condition thought of a close other who had the same political affiliation as they did, whereas those in the

Conflict condition thought of a close other who had the opposite political affiliation to their own. Participants were randomly assigned to the No Conflict or the Conflict condition.

Sample

Participants were recruited through a behavioral lab at a southwestern university. The study's purpose was to compare participants who imagined giving a gift bearing their own political party's logo to participants who imagined giving a gift bearing the opposing party's logo. Therefore, the original sample of 415 participants was restricted just to the 271 who were Democrats, Republicans, or Tea Party members (no Independents). Of these 271 participants, only the 188 (114 males) who could think of a close other matching the description constituted the final sample. They ranged in age from 19 to 40 years ($M = 21.91$ years, $SD = 2.89$ years). There were 62 Democrats, 120 Republicans, and 6 Tea Party members. The ethnic composition was as follows: 3 African Americans, 20 Asians, 141 Caucasians, 18 Hispanics, and 6 Other.

Procedure

Participants first filled out a measure of the importance of their own political identity. A filler task followed. Next, they completed the main study, which contained the critical manipulations and measures. Participants learned that the study was about how people react to gifts others have given them and how people choose gifts to give to others. To start, they provided some demographic information. Embedded in these demographic questions was a question about political affiliation. Participants' response to this question was used to give them the appropriate questions later in the study.

After the demographic questions, participants were asked to think of a close other (a friend or a relative). As noted previously, those in the No Conflict condition thought of a close other of the same political affiliation as their own, whereas those in the Conflict condition

thought of a close other of the opposite political affiliation to their own. They then imagined that their close other was about to have a birthday and that he or she really wanted a mug bearing his or her political party's logo. Participants saw a photograph of this mug and learned that the mug was only available from the political party's web site. They were further told that all proceeds from the mug's purchase would benefit the party, helping it promote its policies and get its candidates elected. This information was meant to augment the conflict, encouraging those in the Conflict condition to imagine that their purchase would put money in the opposing political party's hands.

Participants then imagined that they had also browsed Amazon.com and had found several other mugs. While these mugs did not have the political party's logo, they were otherwise similar to their close other's preferred mug. Participants imagined that they were looking at these various mug options, trying to decide what to purchase: their close other's preferred mug or one of the other similar mugs. Finally, they completed several measures (described below) concerning how they would feel about the possibility of purchasing their close other's preferred mug.

Measures

Political Identity Importance. Participants indicated their agreement with three statements concerning how important their political identity was to their sense of self (adapted from Luhtanen and Crocker 1992) (e.g., "My political affiliation has a lot to do with how I feel about myself."). These items were averaged to form a scale ($\alpha = .71$).

Subjective Ambivalence. On three scales, participants indicated how ambivalent they would feel about the possibility of purchasing their close other's preferred mug (1 = "Would feel no conflict at all" to 7 = "Would feel maximum conflict"; 1 = "Would feel no indecision at all" to

7 = "Would feel maximum indecision"; 1 = "Would have completely one-sided reactions" to 7 = "Would have completely mixed reactions") (Priester and Petty 1996). These items were averaged to form a scale (α = .83).

   Discomfort. Participants rated how uncomfortable, conflicted, confused, and uneasy they would feel about the possibility of choosing their close other's preferred mug (1 = "Would not feel this way at all" to 7 = "Would strongly feel this way") (Williams and Aaker 2002). These items were averaged to form a discomfort scale (α = .88).

   Control Variables. Prior research suggests that older consumers are more comfortable with mixed emotions than younger consumers are (Williams and Aaker 2002). Therefore, all analyses included the main effect of age as a control variable.

Results

   The hypotheses were tested using two hierarchical regressions, one predicting subjective ambivalence and one predicting discomfort. The predictors in both regressions were age, the conflict condition (No Conflict versus Conflict), political identity importance, and the conflict condition x political identity importance interaction. Consistent with H2a, a main effect of conflict condition emerged, such that participants felt more ambivalent and uncomfortable about the possibility of choosing their close other's preferred mug in the Conflict than in the No Conflict condition (Ambivalence: b = 0.75, t(183) = 3.44, p<.01) (Discomfort: b = 0.99, t(183) = 4.64, p<.001). However, this effect was qualified by the predicted conflict condition x political identity importance interaction (Ambivalence: b = 0.44, t(183) = 2.60, p<.05) (Discomfort: b = 0.49, t(183) = 2.95, p<.01). This interaction was examined using procedures from Aiken and West (1992) and Irwin and McClelland (2001). This analysis revealed that participants in the Conflict condition felt significantly more ambivalent and uncomfortable than participants in the

No Conflict condition but only when their political identity was highly important to them (1

standard deviation above the mean on political identity importance) (Ambivalence: b = 1.34,

t(183) = 4.26, p<.001) (Discomfort: b = 1.65, t(183) = 5.34, p<.001). There was no difference

between the conditions among those for whom political identity was less important (1 standard

deviation below the mean on political identity importance). This result supports H2b (see Figure

2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Finally, a mediated moderation analysis (Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt 2005) was conducted

to see if ambivalence mediated the effects of conflict condition and political identity importance

on discomfort. According to Muller et al. (2005), three regressions are needed to establish

mediated moderation: (1) a regression of discomfort on age, conflict condition, political identity

importance, and the conflict condition x political identity importance interaction, (2) a regression

of ambivalence on age, conflict condition, political identity importance, and the conflict

condition x political identity importance interaction, and (3) a regression of discomfort on age,

conflict condition, political identity importance, the conflict x political identity importance

interaction, ambivalence, and the ambivalence x political identity importance interaction. These

regressions were run, and mediated moderation was established since (1) the conflict condition x

political identity importance interaction was significant in the first regression (b = 0.49, t(183) =

2.95, p<.01), (2) the conflict condition x political identity importance interaction was significant

in the second regression (b = 0.44, t(183) = 2.60, p<.05), and (3) ambivalence was significant in

the third regression (b = 0.71, t(181) = .14.05, p<.001). Thus ambivalence mediated the

relationship between conflict condition and political identity importance on the one hand and

discomfort on the other. This result further supports the two hypotheses.

Discussion of Study 2

Study 2 provided support for H2a and H2b and thus documented the emotional consequences of conflict in relationships. When giving gifts, consumers feel ambivalent and hence uncomfortable about choosing an option that their close other wants but that is inconsistent with another aspect of who they are. In other words, conflict between who they are as relationship partners and who they are in another important aspect of the self leads them to feel ambivalent and uncomfortable, but only when that other aspect is important to them.

Just as close others can create ambivalence, so too may they contribute to its attenuation. In particular, consumers frequently turn to others for support in distressing situations. In the choice contexts of interest here, consumers may specifically rely on feedback from close others relevant to the conflict. Close others in turn may provide different types of feedback to reduce consumers' ambivalence, and as H3 suggests, certain forms of feedback may be more effective at reducing ambivalence in different consumers. The next study tests this idea.

STUDY 3: RELATIONSHIP PARTNERS' FEEDBACK CAN REDUCE AMBIVALENCE

Study 3 tested H3 using a paradigm like that of study 2. In study 3, all participants thought of a close other whose political affiliation opposed their own. As in study 2, they imagined giving their close other a mug bearing the logo of that other's preferred political party. This gift reinforced participants' relationship but was inconsistent with their political identity. The key addition beyond study 2 is that participants in study 3 imagined that their close other, who benefited from their choice, gave them feedback on their choice. That feedback was always positive, and it either did or did not acknowledge the ambivalence consumers experienced toward the choice. Consistent with H3, it was expected that positive feedback acknowledging the

ambivalence (but not merely positive feedback) would result in lower ambivalence relative to no feedback among those for whom the neglected political identity was very important.

Design

The study was a three-group (No Feedback, Merely Positive Feedback, Positive Feedback Acknowledging the Ambivalence) between-subjects design.

Sample

The sample consisted of 319 participants from a behavioral lab at a northeastern university. The sample was restricted just to Democrats and Republicans (Tea Party was not an option in this study) who could think of a close other of the opposite political affiliation. In addition, only those who indicated that they would choose their close other's preferred mug rather than some alternative were included. This was because the interest here was in the effects of feedback on participants who chose a conflict eliciting mug, one that reinforced their relationship but went against their political identity. Thus, the final sample consisted of 100 participants (35 in the no feedback condition, 31 in the merely positive feedback condition, and 34 in the acknowledgement feedback condition).

Procedure

The procedure was virtually identical to that in study 2 with three modifications. First, all participants were assigned to the Conflict condition, where they thought of a close friend or relative of the opposite political affiliation to their own. Second, participants actually indicated which mug they would choose for their close other: the close other's preferred mug or another similar mug (see Appendix A). Third, participants received feedback on their choice. Specifically, those assigned to the feedback conditions imagined receiving an email from their close other. They saw a screenshot of the email (see Appendix B). In the merely positive

feedback condition, this email thanked participants for the mug but did not mention the conflict or acknowledge the ambivalence in any way. In the acknowledgement feedback condition, the email thanked participants and mentioned that this choice must have been very difficult for participants given their political affiliation. Finally, participants completed post-feedback measures of their ambivalence toward their chosen mug.

Measures

Political Identity Importance. Participants completed the same measure of political identity importance as in study 2.

Subjective Ambivalence. After indicating what they would choose, participants completed the same measure of subjective ambivalence as in study 2.

Control Variables. Acknowledgement encourages consumers to think about their emotions toward their choice. Since women are more likely to cope with stress by expressing and thinking about their emotions (Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, and Danoff-Burg 2000), they may respond differently to acknowledgement feedback than men do. Therefore, study 2 controlled for the main effect of gender in addition to controlling for the main effect of age.

Results

To test H3, an ANOVA predicting subjective ambivalence was run, with feedback as the between-subjects factor and political identity importance as the covariate. The analysis also included the feedback x political identity importance interaction.

The only significant effect was a marginal feedback x political identity importance interaction ($F(1, 92) = 2.96$, p=.057). Consistent with H3, follow-up contrasts showed that this effect was driven by differences in the acknowledgement feedback condition relative to the no feedback condition at high versus low levels of political identity importance (see Figure 3).

Among those for whom political identity was very important (one standard deviation above the mean), subjective ambivalence was significantly lower in the acknowledgement feedback condition than in the no feedback condition ($F(1, 92) = 6.97$, $p<.05$), but was no lower in the merely positive feedback condition than in the no feedback condition. This implies that those for whom the neglected political identity was important found acknowledgement feedback, but not merely positive feedback, helpful in reducing their ambivalence. Further, among those for whom political identity was less important (one standard deviation below the mean), subjective ambivalence was equal across all feedback conditions. This implies that those for whom the neglected identity was relatively less important did not find acknowledgement feedback any more helpful than merely positive feedback in reducing their ambivalence. This result supports H3.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Discussion of Study 3

Study 3 provided evidence consistent with H3. When close others associated with the conflict acknowledged the ambivalence, ambivalence was reduced among consumers for whom the neglected political identity was important but not among those for whom it was less important. Further, merely positive feedback did not reduce ambivalence even when the neglected identity was important. These findings indicate that ambivalence reduction strategies may vary in their effectiveness across different segments of consumers.

Study 3 complements study 1 and study 2 by emphasizing that consumers are not doomed to feel ambivalent toward their choice. Rather, close others' feedback can reduce that ambivalence, perhaps bringing it to a level that consumers can accept and that no longer produces discomfort. This finding has implications for people in close relationships, who may

find that their close other sometimes feels torn between reinforcing the relationship and reinforcing some other identity. If relationship partners who benefit from a choice acknowledge the ambivalence, they may be able to reduce their close other's ambivalence over having made that choice and hence may increase the chance that the close other will be willing to make a similar choice in the future. This question is a potential avenue for future research.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across three studies, the present research explored how consumers react when they have to choose between being a good relationship partner and excelling in some other aspect of who they are. In study 1, such conflict was shown to have correlates in consumption, in that the importance of an aspect of the self may no longer predict relevant product purchases when that aspect conflicts with relationships or other aspects of the self. With this important consumption correlate established, the remaining studies sought to further unpack the construct of conflict involving close others, investigating conflict's emotional consequences in study 2 and the feedback close others may provide to attenuate these consequences in study 3. Taken together, this research contributes to and bridges the literatures on interpersonal relationships, the self, and ambivalence. The rest of this paper discusses contributions, directions for future research, and implications for marketing products that pit relationships against other aspects of the self.

Relationships are Embedded in the Multifaceted Self

This research conceptualizes relationships as embedded in the self. Although prior theorizing has acknowledged that relationships are part of the self and vice versa (Andersen and Chen 2002), the work presented here empirically studies the processes at the intersection of relationships and the self. In doing so, it complements and fills gaps in both literatures

This paper explores situations in which relationships conflict with other aspects of the self. Prior research states that the self has multiple dimensions (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004) and that people have multiple relationships (Fitzsimons and Fishbach 2010). However, empirical work has focused on one relationship (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003) or one other aspect of the self at a time (Aquino and Reed 2002; Reed 2004). By contrast, the present research focuses on choices in which two aspects are salient and conflict. This conflict was shown to have key behavioral correlates and emotional consequences. For instance, the importance of being a mom to young children was less predictive of purchases for those children when being a mom conflicted with other aspects of the self. This suggests that conflict between a relationship and another aspect of the self may relate to purchases for close others.

In addition, this paper views relationships as both causes and alleviators of conflict and ambivalence. Relationships create conflict when consumers have to choose between being good relationship partners and being faithful to some other aspect of who they are. For example, the participants in studies 2 and 3 chose between being good friends and being faithful to their political affiliations, and they felt ambivalent about the possibility of choosing an option consistent with their friendship but inconsistent with their political identity. Thus, relationships may create distress because they must be managed alongside other aspects of the self.

At the same time, the present research concurs with prior literature in treating relationships as sources of support (Burleson 2010). When consumers feel ambivalent about a choice that benefits a relationship partner but that is inconsistent with an identity they value, the relationship partner's feedback may reduce the ambivalence. Study 3 showed that feedback acknowledging the ambivalence is particularly effective at reducing ambivalence among those for whom the neglected aspect of the self is important, but not among those for whom it is less

important. This result qualifies Burleson's (2010) work on comforting, which finds that recognizing people's distress is nearly always beneficial. Acknowledgement may be more beneficial for certain consumers than for others, and the extent of benefit may depend on consumers' sense of self.

The present research also helps to address limitations in the social identity literature. It expands upon the definition of "social" in that literature by conceptualizing "social" not as ties to social groups (Escalas and Bettman 2005) but rather as relationships with close others such as friends and relatives. For instance, consumers' identities as moms to their children and as friends to their peers were studied. This conceptualization allowed for consumers' behavior with respect to these social selves to affect not just the consumers but also their close others.

Social identity research also has another limitation. It has not documented consumers' *interactions* with the social entities that comprise their identities, preferring instead to prime the idea of the identity and then observe the effects of the prime on the individual's behavior. Study 3 put the "social" into social identity by examining how close others influence consumers' emotions toward the choices they make when relationships with those others conflict with other aspects of the self. This contribution is important, given that consumers use feedback from close others to judge how well they are enacting various aspects of who they are (Laverie et al. 2002).

Directions for Future Research

The present work opens many directions for future research. First, this research focused on a single choice. However, consumers may have to make multiple choices between their relationships and other aspects of who they are. If feedback from a close other reduces consumers' ambivalence toward their choice, are consumers then more likely to choose the option that benefits the close other the next time a similar choice comes up? Or are they less

likely to do so since they reason that the close other understands the conflict and will be accommodating? Answering these questions is important for researchers interested in sequences of choices (Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Khan and Dhar 2006).

Second, the effect of acknowledging ambivalence may vary depending on consumers' relationship with the close other. Prior research finds that consumers are more comfortable talking about their emotions to those with whom they have a close (rather than a more distant) relationship (Clark, Fitness, and Brissette 2001). Since feedback acknowledging ambivalence recognizes consumers' emotions and encourages them to express those emotions, consumers may like such feedback more when it comes from a close friend rather than a more distant friend. Consequently, feedback acknowledging ambivalence may reduce ambivalence more as the relationship with the feedback provider grows closer. This hypothesis can be tested in the future.

Finally, reducing ambivalence may not be the only way to reduce discomfort. Indeed, ambivalence is not always predictive of discomfort. Some consumers, such as older people and East Asians, are quite accepting of ambivalence (Williams and Aaker 2002). Among some consumers, feedback may facilitate coping not by reducing ambivalence but rather by encouraging its acceptance. What types of feedback would achieve this end and among which consumers? This question is an excellent avenue for future research.

Marketing Products When Relationships Conflict with Other Aspects of the Self

The present research suggests implications for marketing products when relationships conflict with other aspects of the self. First, study 1 suggests that the importance of a relationship or other aspect of the self in a consumer segment may not always be predictive of that segment's purchases. If that aspect of the self conflicts with other important aspects, even consumers who greatly value the aspect may not purchase that many associated products. Therefore, marketers

need to collect information not just on how much their segment values a particular relationship or other aspect of the self but also on how much that aspect conflicts with consumers' other important priorities.

Second, study 3 indicates that marketers may be able to reduce the ambivalence consumers experience over choosing a product consistent with a relationship but inconsistent with another important aspect of the self. Marketers can encourage consumers to think about how close others might react. They can get consumers to imagine that their close other understands and acknowledges the ambivalence. This intervention may reduce ambivalence in a manner similar to that observed in study 3 in the appropriate segment of consumers.

CONCLUSION

The present research examines how consumers manage their close relationships alongside other aspects of who they are, finding that close relationships can both cause and attenuate ambivalence toward product choices. Relationships have these effects because consumers juggle those relationships alongside their individual sense of self. Thus managing the resultant ambivalence becomes important both for consumers seeking to cultivate healthier relationships and for marketers seeking to foster loyalty among consumers with multiple, potentially conflicting relationships and aspects of who they are.

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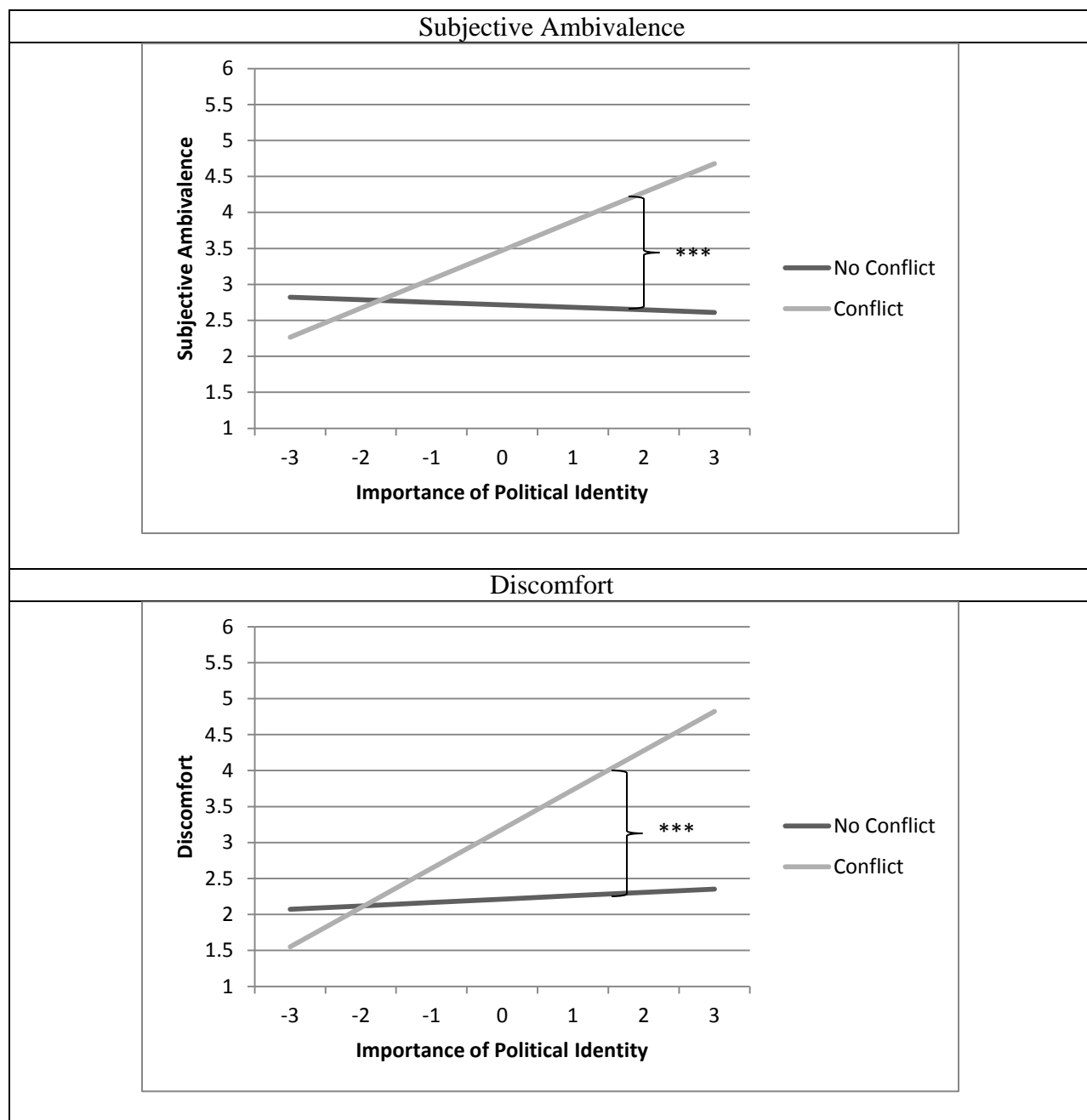
Figure 1

Women for whom an aspect of the self was more important reported making more purchases reinforcing that aspect, but conflict attenuated this relationship (study 1).

Mom Identity

Other Aspects of the Self
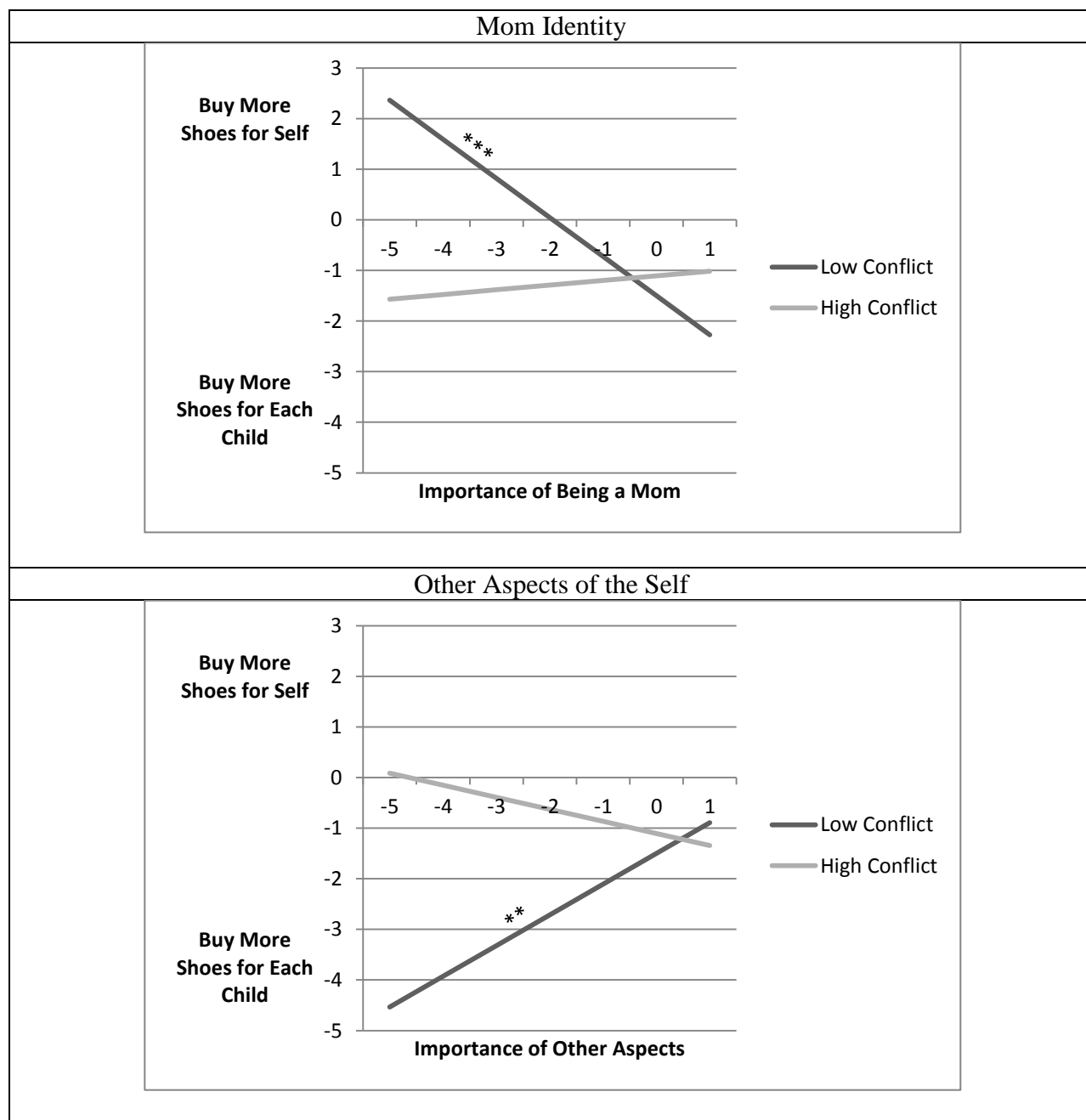
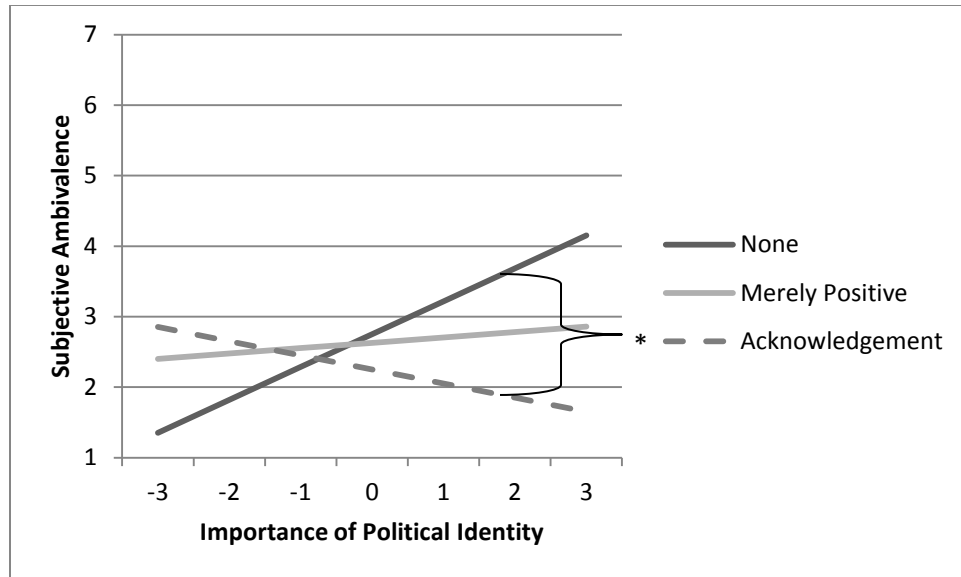Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Figure 2

When political identity was important (but not when it was less important), consumers felt ambivalent and uncomfortable about choosing a gift that reinforced their relationship but violated their political identity (study 2).

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Figure 3

Acknowledgement feedback, but not merely positive feedback, resulted in lower ambivalence than no feedback among those for whom the neglected political identity was important (study 3).

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

APPENDICES

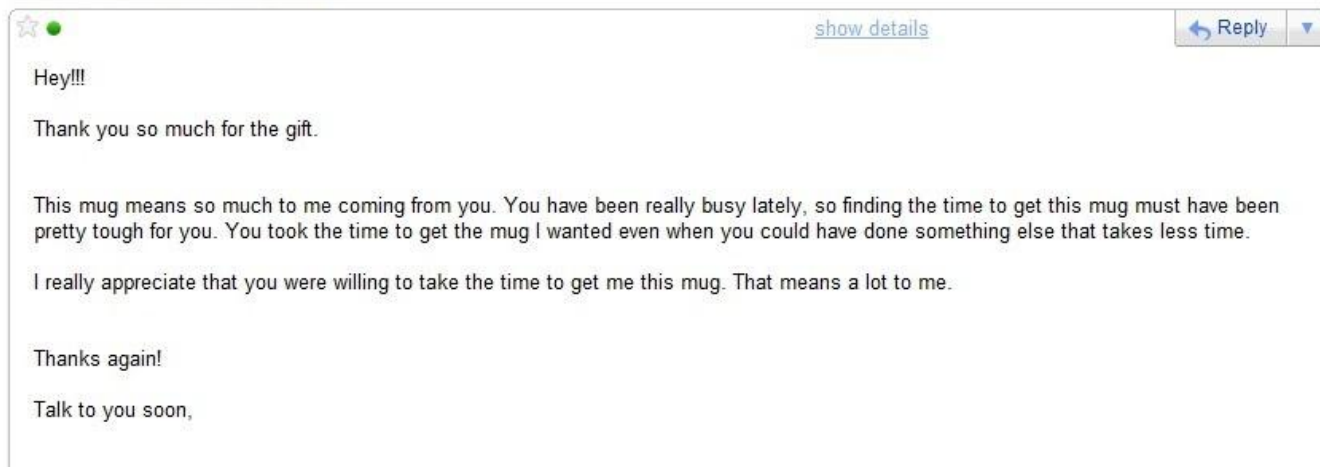*Appendix A: Screenshot of Choice in Study 3*

Appendix B: Screenshots of Feedback Emails in Study 3

Merely Positive Feedback

Acknowledgement Feedback (Phrased for Democrats and Modified Appropriately for Republicans)

Wow! A Republican Mug from a Democrat! Inbox | X

show details   ↩ Reply ▼

Hey!!!

Thank you so much for the gift.

This particular mug means so much to me coming from you. You are a Democrat, so choosing a Republican mug must have been pretty tough for you. You got the mug I wanted even when you could have chosen something else that is more consistent with your political views.

I really appreciate that you were willing to get me this particular mug. That means a lot to me.

Thanks again!

Talk to you soon,