

Escaping the Crosshairs: Reactance to Identity Marketing

AMIT K. BHATTACHARJEE*

*Amit K. Bhattacharjee is a Doctoral Candidate in Marketing, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania (ambhatta@wharton.upenn.edu). Correspondence: Amit K. Bhattacharjee, Marketing Department, The Wharton School, 700 Jon M. Huntsman Hall, 3730 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

SHORT ABSTRACT:

A large body of research suggests that targeting consumers based on social identity may lead to deeper customer loyalty, especially when the targeted identity is highly self-important. In contrast, three experiments demonstrate that identity marketing may have a dark side. Appeals that target consumer identities too strongly may be perceived as threatening consumer freedom to express that identity, provoking consumer reactance and thus reducing product evaluations and purchase likelihood. Ancillary data also indicate that managers underweight potential reactance when crafting identity appeals and that reactance may lead consumers to subsequently de-emphasize the targeted identity.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT:

Researchers and practitioners alike have long acknowledged the importance and potential of marketing appeals based on identity. For decades, academics have looked beyond the functional aspects of products to examine the symbolic nature of consumption (e.g., Levy, 1959). A sizeable literature has established that the identities consumers hold drive them to select constellations of products and services that maintain and strengthen those identities (e.g., Forehand, Deshpande, and Reed, 2002; Shavitt, 1990).

Given that consumers are attracted to brands and products that reflect the identities that they possess (Forehand, Deshpande, and Reed, 2002), brand managers and marketers presumably are smart to attempt to position brands and products in order to reflect particular social identities: fostering this sense of connection may lead to a deeper, more persistent sense of consumer loyalty (Reed, 2004). Achieving a sense of congruence or fit between the product, marketing appeal, and the consumer is thus seen as mutually beneficial, helping both the company and the consumer (Sirgy, 1982). Furthermore, it is assumed that consumers are more receptive to social identity marketing appeals if they consider the targeted identity to be self-important as a basis for self-definition (Reed, 2004).

But can targeted identity marketing messages have a dark side? Research suggests that consumers are inherently motivated to avoid biasing factors such as marketing influence (Wegner and Petty, 1997). Similarly, Friestad and Wright (1994) have argued that the marketplace is fraught with situations in which consumers must interpret and react to persuasion attempts and marketing messages. As such, consumers develop a store of personal knowledge of persuasion tactics, and are constantly employing these skills in negotiating the social environment (Wright, 1986). In addition, consumers should be particularly skeptical when the stakes are highest: in this case, when the targeted identity is highly self-important (Friestad and Wright, 1994).

The current research examines when identity marketing may backfire. In particular, we suggest that if messages are too strongly targeted, consumers may react against them, leading to decreased evaluation and choice. Consumers often choose products and cultural tastes in order to construct their identities and communicate information to others (e.g., Berger and Heath, 2007; Douglas and Isherwood, 1978; Shavitt, 1990), and they are motivated to protect their sense of individual agency, such that they can ensure that their expressions of identity are intrinsically motivated and not influenced by external factors (Kivetz, 2005; Lepper, 1981). 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 reassert the freedom. Thus, the present research proposes that identity marketing messages that are too strongly targeted—that is, messages that infringe on the consumer’s ownership of the identity, or that threaten the intrinsic nature of the expression of that identity—may threaten the freedom of consumers to freely express the targeted identity, resulting in consumer reactance. As a result, consumers may turn on the brand, leading to lower evaluation and purchase likelihood.

Three experiments begin to test this theorizing. The first study tested managerial intuition about potential reactance in identity marketing. Undergraduate business majors were shown three marketing messages (one strongly targeted: “You’re not green unless you clean with Charlie’s!”, one weakly targeted: “Two green thumbs up for Charlie’s!”, and one with no targeting: “Two thumbs up for Charlie’s!”) for a biodegradable cleaning product identity-relevant to “green”, environmentally friendly consumers, and told to choose the most effective one to reach this segment. Results revealed that the strongly targeted message was significantly favored over the nontargeted message, and directionally or significantly favored over the weakly targeted message on all measures (e.g., predicted consumer evaluation and purchase likelihood).

But while these results are consistent with the thrust of the identity literature, Study 2 demonstrates that stronger is not always better. Participants were primed with green versus neutral identities, and viewed the advertisement for a biodegradable cleaning product from the first study, followed by one of the three identity marketing messages. Results indicated that green participants felt significantly less freedom to express their identities, and indicated lower product evaluations and purchase likelihood, when they were strongly targeted, relative to the other conditions. Furthermore, a mediational analysis suggested that freedom to express identity mediated the relations between message targeting and the outcome measures of product attitude and purchase likelihood.

Study 3 extends these findings to look at the consequences of over-targeting. In particular, it provides initial evidence that consumers targeted with strong identity marketing appeals subsequently de-emphasize the targeted identity: participants who had viewed a strongly targeted message for the biodegradable cleaner indicated significantly less willingness-to-pay for an unrelated green identity-relevant item, relative to weakly targeted and nontargeted messages. This result did not hold for a neutral, non-identity-relevant item.

Taken together, the current results indicate that targeted identity marketing appeals may have a dark side. Strongly targeted messages can restrict consumer freedom, provoking consumer reactance and resulting in lower product evaluations and purchase likelihood. Furthermore, managers are unable to anticipate reactance. Lastly, reactance may have downstream consequences, with consumers placing less emphasis on the targeted identity, consistent with research suggesting that individuals shift identities strategically in response to threat (Mussweiler, Gabriel, and Bodenhausen, 2000). Though researchers have suggested that psychological reactance is an important construct to study in the field of consumer behavior (Clee and Wicklund, 1980), the topic has received scant empirical attention. The current research is the first empirical examination of reactance in the context of identity marketing. Following Kivetz (2005), we hold that psychological reactance is a mechanism critical to consumer functioning within the marketplace. As such, we believe that psychological reactance is a crucial avenue for future consumer behavior research.

REFERENCES

- Berger, Jonah and Chip Heath (2007), "Where Consumers Diverge from Others: Identity Signaling and Product Domains," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34 (August), 121-34.
- Brehm, J. W. (1966), *A theory of psychological reactance*, New York: Academic Press.
- Brehm, S. S., & Brehm, J. W. (1981), *Psychological reactance: A theory of freedom and control*, New York: Academic Press.
- Clee, Mona A. and Robert A. Wicklund (1980), "Consumer Behavior and Psychological Reactance," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 6 (4), 389-405.
- Douglas, Mary and Baron Isherwood (1978), *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, New York: W.W. Norton.
- Forehand, Mark R., Rohit Deshpande, and Americus Reed II (2002), "Identity salience and the influence of differential activation of the social self-schema on advertising response," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(6) 1086-1099.
- Friestad, Marian and Peter Wright (1994), "The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (1), 1-31.
- Kivetz, Ran (2005), "Promotion Reactance: The Role of Effort-Reward Congruity," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31, 725-736.
- Lepper, Mark R. (1981), "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Children: Detrimental Effects of Superfluous Social Controls," in *Aspects of the Development of Competence*, ed. W. A. Collins, Vol. 14 of *The Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology*, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 155-214.
- Levy, Sidney J. (1959), "Symbols for Sale," *Harvard Business Review*, 37(4), 117-124.
- Mussweiler, Thomas, Shira Gabriel, and Galen V. Bodenhausen (2000), "Shifting Social Identities as a Strategy for Deflecting Threatening Social Comparisons," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 79, 398-409.
- Reed II, Americus (2004), "Activating the Self-Importance of Consumer Selves: Exploring Identity Salience Effects on Judgments," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (2), 286-295.
- Shavitt, Sharon (1990), "The role of attitudes objects in attitude functions," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 26(2), 124-148.
- Sirgy, M. Joseph, (1982), "Self-concept in consumer behavior: A critical review," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9, 287-300.

Wegener, D.T., R. E. Petty, (1997), "The Flexible Correction Model: The role of naïve theories of bias in bias correction." In M.P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 29, pp. 141-208. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Wright, Peter (1986), "Schemer Schema: Consumers' Intuitive Theories about Marketers' Influence Tactics," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 13, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1-3.