How Affirmational versus Negational Identification Frames Influence Uniqueness-Seeking Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This research tested the proposition that consumers presenting under a negational identification frame are more likely to choose unique products than when they present themselves affirmationally. Study 1 demonstrated this main effect in a real-choice setting. Study 2 underlined temporary accessibilities to one's desired (undesired) identities when an affirmational (negational) identification frame is adopted. Study 3 further demonstrated that identity valence interacts with identification frames in driving uniqueness-seeking tendency. Additionally, this effect was found to be mediated by self-other distinction in Study 4. The research implications for both the “what” and the “how” aspects of identity-driven consumption are discussed. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
consumers’ likelihood to choose unique products in one pilot study and four laboratory experiments. The pilot study tests how consumers’ intentions to choose unique products are affected by the affirmational versus negational identification frame. Consistent with the finding in the pilot study that consumers’ intentions to favor a less popular product is stronger when they perform self-categorization negationally rather than affirmationally, Study 1 further examines this differential effect of alternative identification frames in a real-choice setting and produces converging evidence. By exploring the potential confounding effect of asymmetries in the use of positive and negative identities between the affirmational and negational frames, Study 2 indicates that when identity items are spontaneously generated by consumers, consumers tend to create more desired identities when they identify affirmationally and more undesired identities when under the negational frame. Thus, in Study 3, the valence of identity items is experimentally manipulated and the interaction effect between the identification frame and identity valence is examined further. Given the consistent findings of these studies, Study 4 measures consumers’ need for self-other distinction and examines its role in mediating the effect of the affirmational versus the negational identification framework in a real-choice context. Theoretical contributions, future directions, and managerial implications are discussed at the end of the paper.

**AFFIRMATIONAL VERSUS NEGATIONAL IDENTIFICATION FRAMES**

According to the self-presentation literature (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982), people attempt to present themselves to control or shape how others view them. Although some aspects of self-presentation are deliberate and effortful, other aspects are automatic and involve little or no conscious thought (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). Self-presentation is usually directed to external audiences. However, people sometimes create self-presentations for themselves (Leary, 1996). The specific identities that consumers generate and perceive for themselves thus may be unconsciously altered by the manner in which they are presented, such as by adopting affirmational versus negational categorization in describing themselves.

Research on linguistic biases indicates that people use more negations (e.g., not smart instead of stupid) in descriptions of stereotype-inconsistent behavior (e.g., “That professor is not smart.”) than in descriptions of stereotype-consistent behavior (e.g., “That soccer hooligan is stupid.”). These linguistic biases can operate outside people’s awareness (see, e.g., Von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1997). Additionally, this “negation bias” has communicative consequences; that is, when one’s behavior is described using negations, message recipients infer that this behavior is an exception to the norm (Beukeboom, Finkenauer, & Wigboldus, 2010). Thus, one function of negations can be their indication of something that is different or unusual (Jordan, 1998).

It is thus reasonable to speculate that the negational identification frame (e.g., “I am not a manager.”) that consumers use for self-categorization may prime thoughts of being unusual, exceptional, different, or distinctive. Then, these thoughts prime a behavior; that is, the choice of a unique product, which is associated with distinctiveness.

In recent research on affirmational and negational self-categorization, negational categorization refers to the process by which an individual’s identity is defined by out-groups or by what people are not (e.g., not managers), which is in contrast to affirmational categorization, in which the self and the in-groups are defined by what they represent (e.g., professors). Negational categorization leads people to focus on differentiating and contrasting the self from out-groups rather than through assimilation with in-groups (Zhong et al., 2008). This out-group–orientated focus on differentiation derived from the negational identification frame may result in a higher need for distinctiveness that can later be satisfied by choosing unique products.

The abovementioned differences between the consequences of affirmational versus negational categorization largely draw on a process account at the intergroup level. With affirmational identification, the focus is on assimilating the self to the in-group, which highlights the similarities between the self and in-group members, whereas with negational identification, the focus is on distinguishing the self from the out-groups, which emphasizes dissimilarities between the self and out-group members (Mussweiler, 2003). In contrast, when the distinctiveness of a product is operationalized in a minimal group paradigm (e.g., the choice share of red [orange] umbrellas for existing customers is 83.7% [16.3%]), the decision to obtain a popular or unique product appears to be significantly driven by an interpersonal process. There appears a missing link between the group-level inclusion versus differentiation process and individual-level similarity versus uniqueness motives.

By theorizing the self-concept system as three fundamental self-representations, which include the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self, Sedikides and Brewer (2001) proposed that persons seek to achieve identities in three fundamentally different ways. Specifically, the individual self is achieved by differentiating oneself from others. This form of self-representation relies on interpersonal comparison processes. However, the collective self is achieved through inclusion in large social groups and contrasting the group to which one belongs (i.e., in-groups) and relevant out-groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Following this track, Brewer and Pickett (2002) emphasized the motivational properties of social identity and contended that optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991) should be extended from the collective-self level to encompass the other two self systems, as optimality needs play out at each level simultaneously.
For instance, at the same time when individuals meet needs for inclusion and differentiation at the collective level through identification with distinctive in-groups, within those groups, they seek optimal resolution of their needs for similarity and uniqueness in comparison with other individual group members. Correspondingly, Chan, Berger, and Van Boven (2012) demonstrated that consumers simultaneously pursue assimilation at the collective-self level and differentiation goals at the individual-self level along different dimensions of a single choice: they assimilate to their in-groups on one dimension (by conforming with regard to identity-signaling attributes such as brand) while differentiating on another dimension within the group (distinguishing themselves from other group members with regard to uniqueness attributes such as color).

Because identity needs function at each level of the three forms of self-presentation simultaneously, the differentiation motive activated by the negational identification frame at the collective-self level has a good reason to function as a superordinate goal, which also stimulates the individual-self level need for distinctiveness and boosts the likelihood that a consumer will choose unique products. Thus, consumers will be more likely to choose unique products when they present themselves within a negational identification framework than when they present themselves within an affirmational identification framework.

Five studies demonstrate that consumers tend to choose unique products after the negational identification framework has been adopted for self-presentation (the pilot study and Studies 1, 3 and 4) and that this process is driven by consumers’ need for self-other distinction (Study 4). The differential effect of alternative identification frames holds when consumers make real choices (Studies 1 and 4). The valence of the spontaneously generated identity items covaries with affirmational and negational frames (Study 2) and is incorporated into the experiment as a moderator (Study 3 and 4).

PILOT STUDY: IDENTIFICATION FRAME AND UNIQUENESS-SEEKING INTENTION

The purpose of this pilot study is to explore how consumers’ intentions to choose unique products are affected by different identification frames.

Method

A total of 38 undergraduates (20 females, 18 males) from a major university participated in this pilot study in exchange for extra course credit. The study uses a one-factor (Identification frame: negational vs. affirmational) between-subjects design.

Affirmational and negational identification frames were manipulated by adapting Srull and Wyer’s (1980) and Zhang and Khare’s (2009) sentence-completion task. Specifically, participants were presented with 16 sets of scrambled words and asked to form a complete and meaningful sentence with each set of words. The words were scrambled randomly. For the affirmational identification condition, participants formed sentences that implied affirmational identities, such as “I am a student” and “I am a young person.” In a similar vein, participants exposed to the negational identification condition completed sentences that implied negational identities, such as “I am NOT a manager” and “I am NOT an old person.” All the task identities were carefully chosen to fit the backgrounds of the participants (i.e., students) to enhance the personal relevance of the sentence-completion tasks.

Upon arrival, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two between-subjects conditions. After completing the identification-priming tasks, participants read a scenario about soft drink choices, as outlined below.

Imagine you are having a meal with ten of your friends. The restaurant offers only two soft drinks, Coke and Sprite. Nine of your friends ordered Coke, whereas one ordered Sprite. Now it’s your turn to make an order. Which one would you choose? Coke or Sprite?

Then, participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = would like to choose Coke [i.e., popular option], 7 = would like to choose Sprite [i.e., unique option]) which drink they would choose in the given situation. Participants’ need for self-other assimilation and their need for self-other distinction were measured by asking the following two questions, respectively: (1) “How important is it for you to assimilate with others?” and (2) “How important is it for you to deviate from others?” Both questions were measured using 7-point scales (1 = not important at all, 7 = very important).

Results and Discussion

Participants exposed to the negational identification condition reported a stronger preference for the unique option (i.e., Sprite) than those exposed to the affirmational condition (Mnegational = 6.67 vs. Maffirmational = 5.00; t(36) = 3.22, p < 0.01), which implies that identification frame had a significant main effect on consumers’ intention to seek uniqueness via the less popular product option. In addition, a paired-samples t-test indicates that participants who identified themselves affirmationally reported a higher need for self-other assimilation (M = 4.55) than for self-other distinction (M = 3.35; t(19) = 2.77, p < 0.05). In contrast, participants who identified themselves negationally reported a higher need for self-other distinction (M = 4.28) than for self-other assimilation (M = 3.67; t(17) = 1.63, p = 0.06).

To summarize, the results of the pilot study provide initial supports for the proposed theory by finding that when people identify themselves in a negational way, they exhibit a tendency to seek uniqueness by
choosing less popular product options. On the basis of this pilot study, an experiment in a real-choice setting was launched to further examine consumers’ actual uniqueness-seeking behavior within different identification frames.

**STUDY 1: IDENTIFICATION FRAME AND UNIQUENESS-SEEKING BEHAVIOR**

In this study, in which experimental subjects made real choices, participants were first asked to describe themselves using different identification frames. In contrast to the sentence-completion priming tasks used in the pilot study, participants were asked to generate a list of 10 identity items using either an affirmational or a negational frame. Then, participants were offered real product options to choose from. In this way, the results of the previous pilot study could be further tested with compelling evidence.

An ancillary test was conducted to further examine the proposed theory’s implications for the literature on perceptions of self-group similarities. In the experiments, the uniqueness versus the pervasiveness of a product option is operationalized as the small versus large share of sales, based on those who have purchased the products before. In this minimal group paradigm, experimental subjects’ choices are determined by both their appraisals of the product options and their intuition regarding whether others will like those products (Ames & Iyengar, 2005). In this experiment, participants are asked to estimate the percentage of peer participants who make the same choices. In this way, the impact of the affirmational versus negational identification frames on the consumers’ social projection can thus be examined (e.g., Krueger, 2000).

**Method**

A total of 96 graduates (47 females, 49 males) participated in this study in exchange for course credit. Fifteen participants did not follow the instructions; thus, all analyses were performed for the 81 remaining participants.

Similar to the pilot study, the current experiment used a one-factor (identification frame: **affirmational** vs. **negational**) between-subject design. The identification frames were manipulated using instructions adapted from prior works (Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Specifically, participants exposed to the **affirmational** (vs. negational) identification condition were provided with the following instructions: “We would like you to write in the names of any small, tightly knit social groups that you (do not) belong to and/or (do not) feel a part of, using statements such as ‘I am a ______’ (‘I am NOT a ______’). ‘You should feel that you are (not) this type of person and that you (do not) fit in with these people.’”

Upon arrival, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two between-subjects conditions. Participants were told that the aim of the study was to understand people’s attitudes toward group identities. Having listed 10 such group identities following the identification manipulation instructions provided above, each participant was then asked to report how they felt (1 = feel very bad, 7 = feel very good) and to what extent they are satisfied with themselves, using the same 7-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied).

When all measurement questions had been finished, participants were told that the study was complete. They were then invited to participate in a lucky drawing, in which 20% of them would be rewarded with an umbrella. Before the lucky drawing, participants were presented with two umbrellas that were identical except for their color (orange vs. red). To determine whether their choices were driven by affirmational or negational identification, a choice paradigm similar to that proposed by Chan, Berger, and Van Boven (2012) was adopted. That is, the popularity of a particular umbrella was manipulated by providing comparative sales data (which implied market preference). For instance, half of the group was told that the sales ratio of the red umbrellas was 83.7% (i.e., the popular option), compared with 16.3% (i.e., the less popular option) for the red umbrellas. The sales ratio and color were counterbalanced for the other half of the group to eliminate any possible disturbance from the color itself.

Each participant was asked to choose either the orange or the red umbrella, and was told that they would receive the exact umbrella they chose if they won the lucky drawing. In addition, every participant was asked to estimate the percentage of other participants who might have made a choice similar to his/hers. Then, the drawing was performed and the recipients were rewarded with their preferred umbrellas. Finally, all participants were debriefed and thanked.

**Results and Discussion**

Logistic regression analyses revealed that the identification frame significantly predicted the choice option ($B = 1.50$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 9.81, p < 0.001$). As shown in Figure 1, 64.1% of participants exposed to the affirmational identification condition chose the popular option, whereas 35.9% of participants chose the less popular one. In contrast, only 28.6% participants exposed to the negational identification condition chose the popular option, whereas 71.4% chose the less popular one.

To rule out the potential alternative explanation of mood, the authors investigated whether different identification frames may lead to a change in participants’ moods, which in turn, may affect subsequent uniqueness-seeking behavior. For this purpose, participants were asked to report how they felt after listing their social identities on a 7-point scale (1 = feel very bad, 7 = feel very good). The results indicate...
that there was no difference in participants' moods between the two identification frames ($M_{\text{affirmational}} = 4.62, M_{\text{negational}} = 4.50, t (79) = 0.41, p = 0.68$). When mood was controlled, the identification frame still predicted participants' choices significantly ($B = 1.52$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 9.96, p < 0.001$), whereas mood did not influence participants' choices ($B = 0.13$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 0.42, p = 0.52$). Thus, the possibility of mood's effect can be eliminated.

According to the ancillary analysis, participants who chose the popular umbrella estimated that 71.06% of the others made the same choice that they did. As a comparison, those who chose the less popular umbrella estimated that 50.67% of the others made the same choice. The difference is statistically significant ($t (76) = 5.06, p < 0.001$). Uniqueness-seeking consumers not only embrace unusual products, but also assume that most others would share their views. Participants exposed to the affirmation frame estimated that 60.89% of their peers made the same choice, and this percentage is not significantly different from that obtained for the negational identification condition (58.93%, $t (76) = 0.41, p = 0.68$). When both product choice and identification frame were included when estimating this percentage, the effect of product choice was significant ($B = 16.40, t = 2.54, p = 0.01$), and neither the effect of identification frame ($B = 0.40, t = 0.06, p = 0.95$) nor the interaction term ($B = 11.88, t = 1.39, p = 0.19$) was significant.

By using a real-choice design, Study 1 provides additional supports for the proposed theory. When people present themselves affirmationally, they tend to favor a popular option, whereas it is more likely for people to favor a less popular option when they categorize themselves negationally.

Although identification frames influence one's own likelihood of choosing unique products, they are not found to govern their projection of these preferences to others. What may govern such projection is the perceived similarity between self and others: those who view themselves as being similar to a group assume that their own attitudes are widely shared, whereas those who view themselves as different engage in less projection (Ames, 2004). Uniqueness motives do not govern the projection of appraisals, but will govern consumers' own preferences for distinctive products (Ames & Iyengar, 2005). These theoretical accounts and the findings from the current study jointly suggest that affirmation versus negational identification frames activate the need for distinction between self and others.

Although both the pilot study and Study 1 provide convergent evidence for a main effect exerted by the identification frame on consumers' uniqueness-seeking behavior, this study has limitations: when different identification frames are adopted, how do people access their desirable and undesirable identities, respectively? In addition, would the nature of the temporarily accessed identity, rather than the identification frame itself, determine people's subsequent uniqueness-seeking behavior? Study 2 addressed these questions by examining how people access their desired and undesired identities under different identification frames. Study 3 further examined the joint effect of the identification frame and the valence of accessed identity (i.e., desired vs. undesired) in influencing people's uniqueness-seeking behavior.

**STUDY 2: IDENTIFICATION FRAME AND TEMPORARY ACCESSIBILITY OF IDENTITIES**

Self-presentation is inherently goal-directed; people present certain images because they benefit from the images in some way. Previous research demonstrates that individuals possess goals for a positive or desired social identity rather than a negative or undesired one. As noted by Turner (1999), a positive identity is "expressed through a desire to create, maintain or enhance the positively valued distinctiveness of in-groups compared to out-groups on relevant dimensions" (p. 8). A positive social identity plays a particularly important role in enhancing self-worth and subjective well-being. In the real-world, however, people's social identities include not only those that are emotionally positive and desired by the self (e.g., a *top-school graduate*), but also those that are less desired and that may even carry a negative emotional burden (e.g., a *net-game addict*).

When a negational versus affirmation identification frame is used, does it temporarily affect people's mental processes in accessing their desirable versus undesirable social identities? Prior research suggests that people have a self-enhancement motive to maintain, create, or amplify a positive self-image and engage in self-protection to deny undesirable aspects of themselves (e.g., through consumption; Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Dunning, 2005; Kunda, 1990). Thus, consumers retrieve identities selectively under different identification frames: when presenting themselves affirmationally, they tend to generate more positive identity items; when adopting a negational...
identification frame, they are more likely to access negative identity items.

Method

A total of 43 undergraduates (20 females, 23 males) from the same university participated in this experiment in exchange for $5. In one group, the participants were asked to list 15 identities that they actually possessed, using affirmational frames such as “I am a ______,” whereas in the other group, the participants were told to list 15 identities that they actually did not possess, using negatinal identification frames (i.e., “I am NOT a ______”). Next, all participants were asked to evaluate the desirability of each identity item they listed on a 3-point scale (−1 = undesired, 0 = neutral, 1 = desired).

Results and Discussion

On average, the negatinal group listed fewer desired identity items ($M_{\text{negatinal}} = 2.22$) than the affirmational group ($M_{\text{affirmational}} = 10.80$; $t (41) = 11.11$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, the negatinal group listed more undesired identities ($M_{\text{nega}} = 8.48$) than the affirmational group ($M_{\text{affirm}} = 0.70$), $t (41) = 8.42$, $p < 0.001$. There is no difference between the two groups in terms of the number of neutral identities generated by the participants ($M_{\text{nega}} = 2.35$ vs. $M_{\text{affirm}} = 3.20$), $t (41) = 0.99$, $p > 0.1$.

The above results suggest that people temporarily access different aspects of their identities when they present themselves using different identification frames. Specifically, when an affirmational identification frame is used, people are more likely to retrieve the desired aspects of their identities. In contrast, the undesired identities become more accessible when a negatonal identification frame is adopted.

As noted, Study 1 demonstrated that individuals prefer a unique consumption choice when they identify themselves using a negatinal frame. However, is uniqueness seeking the product of negatinal identification? Or, does the valence of retrieved identities, which are most likely undesired, as demonstrated in Study 2, instead influence people’s tendency to seek uniqueness? Next, Study 3 was designed to answer this question by investigating the possible interaction effects between identity valence (desired vs. undesired) and identification frames (affirmational vs. negatinal) driving consumers’ uniqueness-seeking behavior.

STUDY 3: THE INTERACTION EFFECT OF THE IDENTIFICATION FRAME AND THE VALENCE OF IDENTITY

Given the findings of Study 2, the valence of identities is manipulated in Study 3 rather than measured. To do so, half of the participants were asked to list the identity items they desired while the other half to report their undesired identities. In a task similar to that used in Study 2, the identification frame under which the participants presented themselves was also manipulated.

Method

A total of 138 undergraduate students (70 females, 68 males) were recruited from the same university noted in Studies 1 and 2. Each participant received $5 for participating in a computer-administered experiment that used a 2 (identification frame: affirmational vs. negatinal) × 2 (identity valence: desired vs. undesired) between-subjects design.

A similar set of sentence-completion tasks as those used in Study 2 was adopted to manipulate the identification frames with some modifications to further enhance the priming effects. The participants completed three tasks in sequence.

In Task 1, each participant was asked to list 10 identity items to present themselves realistically. Specifically, participants exposed to the affirmational desired condition were asked to list identities that they personally desire and that they actually possess. For example, “A top-university student” was an identity listed that fit the requirement. For the affirmational undesired condition, participants were asked to list identities that they currently possess but do not desire (e.g., “I am a lazy person.”). Similarly, participants in the negatinal desired condition were asked to list identities that they desire but do not possess (e.g., “I am not a smart person.”), whereas those exposed to the negatinal undesired condition were asked to list identities that they neither desire nor currently possess (e.g., “I am not illiterate.”).

When Task 1 was completed, all participants were asked to complete a filtering task by performing a few simple mathematical calculations (i.e., Task 2). The purpose of this filtering task was to shift the participants’ attention from the previous identity generation task.

Then, a sentence-completion task (i.e., Task 3) was automatically generated (supported by a customized computer program), incorporating the specific identity items that each individual participant had listed in Task 1. This task sequence ensures that (1) the identity items generated in the experiment can be kept as relevant as possible to each participant’s actual identities and (2) Task 1’s possible carryover effect on Task 3 can be minimized. Thus, participants were exposed to identification manipulation (affirmational vs. negatinal) and identity valence manipulation (desired vs. undesired) in equal measure.

Next, all participants read the scenario for notebook purchase decision making shown below:

Suppose you are about to buy a notebook (costs roughly $550). You have decided on the brand and
the specific model. However, you are still struggling with the color, as you have an equal preference for both the black and the white. The salesperson says to you that eight of the previous ten customers chose the black, whereas only one customer chose the white.

Participants were then asked to indicate which notebook they would choose in the given situation using a binary choice scale (0 = white notebook, 1 = black notebook).

Results and Discussion

As a manipulation check, participants were asked to evaluate the 10 identities they listed in Task 1 on a 7-point scale (1 = undesired, 7 = desired) at the end of the experiment. Then, a composite index was calculated using these 10 evaluation scores to measure the desirability of identities across the four experiment conditions. Next, a 2 (affirmational vs. negational identification) × 2 (desired vs. undesired identity) ANOVA was conducted, using the identity desirability index as the dependent variable. The results indicate that identity valence manipulation had a significant main effect (F(1, 134) = 258.45, p < 0.001). No other main effects or interaction effects were significant (p > 0.5). Specifically, participants exposed to the desirable-identity conditions (i.e., affirmational desired and negational undesired) reported significantly higher identity-desirability scores (M = 55.84) than those exposed to the other two undesired-identity conditions (i.e., affirmational undesired and negational undesired; M = 27.43), which suggest the validity of the manipulation on identity valence in the study.

A Logistic regression analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between the identity valence and the identification frame (β = 1.34, Wald χ²(1) = 3.70, p < 0.05). Under the affirmational identification frame, 61.1% of the participants chose the less popular notebook when their desired identities were generated (see Figure 2). This amount was reduced significantly to 34.4% for those whose desired identities were underscored (χ²(1) = 4.85, p < 0.05). However, under the negational affirmation frame, 58.8% of the participants chose the less popular notebook when their desired identities were underscored; in comparison, 52.8% of the participants exhibited a similar choice when their undesired identities were noted (χ²(1) = 0.26, p > 0.1). These results suggest that the effect of identity valence is more pronounced for the affirmational identification condition than the negational identification condition.

By manipulating the valence of identities that participants use to present themselves rather than asking them to spontaneously decide on the nature of each identity item, Study 3 underscores the findings of Study 2. Because consumers selectively generate identities of varying valence under different identification frames, this tendency necessitates the examination of the interaction effect between both factors.

One might wonder what causes the difference in identity valence’s impact across identification frames. A plausible explanation may be obtained from linguistics and pragmatics research. Rather than discarding the negated concept from the mental representation, a negation marker mitigates this information. When negations are used, the meaning of the negated concept is introduced to the discourse, and the exact opposite of the message content is made more accessible in recipients (Grant, Malaviya, & Sternthal, 2004). By introducing information via negation, people therefore convey a more neutral version of the described event (see Giora, Fein, Ganzi, Levi, & Sabah, 2005). In other words, when negations are used, a less extreme meaning is conveyed. Beukeboom et al. (2010) found that negation descriptions would communicate a more neutral impression of the described person than would affirmation descriptions. Extending these suggestions to the current study, when someone is presenting the desired (undesired) aspects of her identities by categorizing herself in a negational way, the negated undesired (desired) identities are still accessible. A negational identification frame may function as a mitigation instrument that downplays both desired and undesired identity. Thus, the effect of identity valence in Study 3 is reduced in the negational identification condition in comparison with the affirmational frame.

**STUDY 4: THE MEDIATION ROLE OF THE NEED FOR SELF-OTHER DISTINCTION**

When theorizing the effect of a negational identification frame on consumers’ uniqueness-seeking behavior, it was noted that affirmational and negational self-categorization operates at a group level. This group process may activate a superordinate goal for differentiation, which can also be reached at the individual level by driving consumers to choose unique products. To confirm that the identification frame impacts unique product choice by altering consumers’ generalized need
for differentiation, a mediation analysis is performed in Study 4. Basically, the design is similar to Study 3, and in which both identification frame and identity valence are manipulated. In addition, participants’ need for self-other distinction was measured as an interpersonal level construct after the identification frame manipulation, and its mediation effect was examined in the proposed theory.

Method

A total of 172 undergraduates (89 females, 83 males) from a major public university participated in the study for a monetary reward. The study used a 2 (identification frame: affirmational vs. negational) × 2 (identity valence: desired vs. undesired) between-subjects design.

Upon arrival, participants were informed that the study was to test an online retailing Web site and consisted of two sections. In the first section, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to earn electronic coupons for online shopping. The identification frame and identity valence were manipulated using tasks similar to those used in Study 3. For instance, participants randomly assigned to the affirmational desired condition were asked to list 10 identity items that they personally desire and that they actually possess under an affirmational identification frame (i.e., “I am a ______”; an example of such a statement collected is “I am a top-university student.”). For the affirmational undesired condition, participants were instructed to generate identities that they currently possess but do not desire (e.g., “I am a lazy person.”). Similarly, participants exposed to the negational desired condition were required to list identities that they desire but do not possess using a negational frame (e.g., “I am not a smart person.”), whereas those exposed to the negational undesired condition were asked to produce identities that they do not desire and do not possess under the same negational frame (e.g., “I am not illiterate.”). After completing this task, each participant received a $5 equivalent electronic coupon and was told that it could be spent during the subsequent online-purchase task or be redeemed at the end of the study.

Next, participants were asked to make an online purchase using the e-coupon they just earned (this is the primary experiment). To ensure that observations were valid and that the purchases were real, participants were reminded that the purpose of the study was to test the reliability of the online retailing Web site; thus, the e-coupon could not be redeemed unless they had made at least one online purchase from the target Web site. In addition, participants were assured that they would receive exactly what they purchased online and that the unspent portion of the e-coupon could be redeemed for equivalent cash after the study was concluded.

During the shopping task, participants were provided with both images and text descriptions of two bottles of chewing gum on the webpage. They were asked to choose one of them. The two bottles varied only by flavor (i.e., orange vs. mint) and were both priced at $2. The actual gum bottles were physically presented in the lab to enhance the perception that the purchases were real. A unique choice was manipulated by labeling the bottle “Selected by 17% of other participants” and a majority choice using the label “Selected by 83% of other participants.” To eliminate predominance effects, both the orange and the mint flavors were randomly selected as the unique choice in all experimental conditions.

In this study, the need for self-other distinction was directly measured by asking participants the following questions: (1) “How important is it for you to deviate from others? (1 = very unimportant, 9 = very important)” and (2) “On a continuum from individualization to de-individuation, where would you ideally position yourself?” (1 = absolute de-individuation, 9 = absolute individuation). These two items were adapted from Pickett, Silver, and Brewer (2002) and exhibited high correlations (r = 0.79). The two items were then collapsed into an index of the need for self-other distinction, in which a higher number indicates a greater need for self-other distinction.

Finally, all participants were offered the specific gum flavor that they purchased, and the unspent portions of their e-coupons were redeemed. None of the participants were able to guess the true purpose of the study.

At the end the experiment, participants were asked to recall the identification frame under which they had generated the 10 identity items by reporting “I have described myself in this way ______ (1: I am ______ or 2: I am not ______).” Similar to Study 3, each participant was also required to rate the desirability of each identity item she or he had listed on a 7-point scale (1 = extremely undesired, 7 = extremely desired). By averaging the ratings of the 10 identity items, a composite index was calculated to present the overall desirability of the identities in each of the four experimental conditions.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. All of the participants correctly reported the identification frame to which they had been assigned. In testing the effectiveness of the identity desirability manipulation, a 2 (affirmational vs. negational identification) × 2 (desired vs. undesired identity) ANOVA confirmed that the identity desirability index (1 = extremely undesired, 7 = extremely desired) was significantly higher under the desired identity condition (M = 5.70) than it was under the undesired identity condition (M = 2.54, F (1, 168) = 391.15, p < 0.001). Neither the identification frame manipulation (F (1, 168) = 1.19, p > 0.2) nor the interaction of the two manipulations (F (1, 168) = 1.16, p > 0.2) imposed a significant effect on the identity desirability index.
**Choice of Unique Option.** For data analysis purpose, the choice of the unique gum was coded as 1 and the choice of the popular gum as 0. Then, this binary variable of uniqueness-seeking behavior was employed as the dependent variable in a logistic regression model that included identification frame, identity valence, and their interaction terms as predictors. The analysis yielded an interaction effect between identification frame and identity valence: $B = -1.22$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.73$, $p = 0.05$. Specifically, among participants who presented themselves using the affirmational identification frame, 61.4% purchased the unique gum when listing their undesired identities, compared with 34.1% when listing desirable identities, and this difference was significant: $\chi^2(1) = 6.56$, $p = 0.01$. However, among participants who identified themselves using the negational frame, the choice rate for a unique gum did not differ between the desired (64.3%) and the undesired identity (61.9%) conditions, $\chi^2(1) = 0.05$, $p > 0.1$. These results are consistent with Study 3.

**Need for Self-Other Distinction.** A two-way ANOVA for need for distinction yielded a significant identification frame × identity valence regression model: ($F(1, 168) = 7.42$, $p < 0.01$). The results suggested that when participants present themselves using an affirmational frame, the listing of undesired identities triggered a stronger need for self-other distinction ($M = 6.14$) than when the desired identities were listed ($M = 5.02$; $t(86) = 3.48$, $p < 0.01$). However, the need for self-other distinction did not differ among participants who identified themselves under the negational identification condition, despite the valence of the identity items listed ($M_{\text{undesired}} = 5.62$, $M_{\text{desired}} = 5.88$, $t(82) = 0.67$, $p > 0.1$).

**Mediated Moderation Analysis.** To examine whether the interaction effect between identification framework and identity valence was mediated by a need for self-other distinction, a three-step mediated moderation analysis was performed using a bootstrapping procedure ($n = 5000$) proposed by Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) and Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007, Model 8). In Step 1, the dependent variable of choice of unique option was regressed on the interaction between identification frame and identity valence, as well as on the mediator of need for self-other distinction. Results showed that choice of unique option was significantly predicted by the interaction term ($B = -1.22$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.73$, $p = 0.05$), and the mediator ($B = 0.49$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 20.57$, $p < 0.01$), respectively. In Step 2 (the mediator model), the mediator of need for self-other distinction was regressed on the same interaction term, which also revealed a significant relationship ($B = -1.38$, $t = 2.68$, $p < 0.01$). In Step 3 (the dependent-variable model), a full model that regressed the dependent variable on the two independent variables, their interactions and the mediator, was analyzed. This step requires that the mediator should significantly affect the dependent variable, and the interaction effect found in step 1 should drop in magnitude significantly. Results from the current study confirmed that the main effect of need for self-other distinction on choice of unique option was significant ($B = 0.46$, $t = 4.15$, $p < 0.01$), while the interaction between identification frame and identity valence was no longer significant ($B = -0.74$, $t = 1.08$, $p > 0.10$) in the full model (see Figure 3). Furthermore, the indirect effect of identification frame × identity valence interaction, exerted through need for self-other distinction, was significant ($B = -0.64$, 95% CI: $-1.39$ to $-0.14$). Together, these findings indicated that the interaction between identification frame and identity valence on choice of unique option was mediated by the need for self-other distinction.

**Figure 3.** Path model of the mediation effects of need for self-other distinction (Study 4). Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the simple regression coefficients when the interaction term and the mediator predict the dependent variable, respectively. Numbers without parentheses indicate (1) the effect of the interaction term on the mediator (the mediator model), and (2) the multiple regression coefficients when both the interaction term and the mediator have been incorporated to predict the dependent variable (the dependent-variable model).
GENERAL DISCUSSION

This article integrates research on linguistic bias with respect to the use of negation, negational self-categorization in self-presentation, and uniqueness-seeking behavior to illustrate the impact of a negational identification frame on consumers' likelihood of choosing unique products relative to pervasive affirmational identification. Previous research has typically studied "what" possessions viably satisfy the diverse motives underlying the pursuit of "which" self in the multiple-self system. In contrast, this paper introduced a "how" perspective by examining the framing effect of negational vs. affirmational identification.

Five experiments demonstrate that when people identify themselves in a negational way, the desire to conform to others is reduced and they are motivated to seek uniqueness (pilot study and Study 1). As demonstrated in Study 2, people temporarily access identities of different valence when they present themselves under different identification frames. When an affirmational identification frame is used, people are more likely to retrieve the desired aspects of their identities, whereas the undesired social identities become more accessible when a negational identification frame is applied. When both identification frame and identity valence is manipulated, there is an interaction effect between them in the driving of uniqueness-seeking behavior (Study 3). Moreover, this effect is mediated by the need for self-other distinction (Study 4).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The current research contributes to the extant literature in several ways. First, the research on the consequences of negational categorization has been extended from stereotyping and interpersonal communication (Beukeboom et al., 2010), out-group derogation (Zhong et al., 2008), changes in people's attitudes toward minority group (Zhong, Galinsky, & Unzueta, 2008), etc. to consumer behavior (i.e., uniqueness seeking in choosing products) in this paper.

Second, the study contributes to the consumer identity literature by providing new evidence on the interaction between different self-presentation systems. The needs for assimilation to the in-group and differentiation from other in-group members have been found to be satisfied simultaneously with a single product choice across different product attributes (Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012). This result confirms the proposition that self-presentations at the individual-, relational-, and collective-self levels can be conceived as complementary (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The results of the current research suggest that the differentiation motive generated at the collective-self level during a group process may trigger improvement in the need for self-other distinction, which is consequently satisfied by uniqueness-seeking behavior at the individual-self level. This implication suggests that the NFU has a potential spillover effect between the collective-self and the individual-self system during self-presentation.

Third, this research also contributes to the consumer preference literature. The existing research on consumer preference suggests that preference is constructed and may be changed subject to contextual factors (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Payne, Bettman, & Schkade, 1999; Slovic, 1995). By introducing identification frames to studies on consumer choice, the current research demonstrates that consumers' preferences for unique products may be changed through the different frames under which they identify themselves. Thus, this research provides evidence suggesting that the identification frame may be an effective context factor that marketers can utilize to alter consumers' preferences.

The current research also has important managerial implications for firms in terms of the effective design and communication of their marketing strategies. In many cases, firms must develop appropriate advertisement themes to fit their brand identities. Findings obtained from this research suggest that affirmational identification frames may be more effective for a mass-market brand. In contrast, firms may adopt a negational frame when the communication focus is the uniqueness of the brand. In addition, firms may strategically choose appropriate identification frames to improve the effectiveness of personal selling. For example, salespersons may encourage consumers to buy less frequently chosen products (e.g., a red Rolex watch) by describing a typical user of the product as a person who is not conservative, rather than saying that the buyer is an innovator.

The current research also has important implications for market segmentation. Prior research suggests that consumers can be segmented on the basis of their general, chronic NFU (or conformity), and therefore, are identified as either snobs or conformists. In contrast to this static, discrete view of market composition, findings from the current studies offer an adaptive, continuous perspective on each consumer's degree of snobbery or conformity. That is, when identified with a negational frame, people are more likely to turn into snobs, but when an affirmational frame (especially when a desirable identity is underscored during the identification process) is adopted, people move close to the conformist end of the NFU continuum. Given the abundant marketing literature on the strategic implications of social needs and consumption externality (e.g., Amaldoss & Jain, 2005), findings from the current research facilitate marketers' efforts to promote consumers' NFU versus conformity by adjusting the situational factors during the self-identification process. By adopting this identification-frame approach in marketing communication campaigns, firms can reinforce the consumer psychology base of their differentiation strategy.
Limitations and Future Research

The current study also raises several issues relevant to further research exploring the impact of the identification frame on uniqueness-seeking behavior. First, recent research indicates that people do not simply assimilate or differentiate, but that they can do both simultaneously. To resolve the opposing desires to signal conformity and to signal distinctiveness, consumers may make strategic choices on different product dimensions. In fact, consumers can conform to the brand preferred by their in-group and differentiate by choosing a more distinct color option from that brand (Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012). When accessing one's identity, there might be a similar hierarchy that may interact with different identification schemas. For instance, one may identify herself/himself as follows: “I am an American, but I am not a white.” How would the hierarchy of identification frames interplay with people's uniqueness-seeking behavior at the brand and/or product level? Future research is needed to explore this question further.

Second, research has demonstrated that people in different cultures exhibit various tendencies in seeking uniqueness. For instance, Aaker and Schmitt (2001) found that European Americans prefer uniqueness more than East Asians. Consequently, future research may further examine the degree to which negational versus affirmational identification frame influence uniqueness-seeking behavior when cultural differences are considered.

Finally, in the current study, the uniqueness of product options is the objective information input for consumers, for which there is no need for them to infer the uniqueness of a specific product. However, in real market circumstances, such inference is almost inevitable. An extension of Study 2 on consumers' perceptions of how many peer consumers make the same choices as they do makes it worthwhile for future studies to investigate the effect of identification frames on the self-stereotyping process and social projection process (Krueger, Acevedo, & Robbins, 2006) in driving this self-other similarity inference.

REFERENCES


The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial supports for this study from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (70832001, 71272075), the National Social Science Foundation of China (08CTQ008), and Shanghai Pujiang Talent Program. The authors contributed equally to this paper.

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