
Introduction: the long and winding road to understanding identity theory and marketing

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In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. (Erikson, 1968, p. 130)

The above quotation illustrates the importance of identity. It is hard to imagine any behavior a person could engage in that would somehow not have implications for how they see themselves and how the world sees them. Indeed, the question of “Who am I?” is one that we as human organisms ponder. We surmise, re-evaluate and update our self-conceptions throughout our lifespan. The cognitive sophistication and complex ability to articulate self-reflective thoughts separates humans from other species; the ability to define who we are and what we want to become. Therefore, “identity is important” is probably not a controversial statement. That is the easy part. What is more difficult is to pinpoint the best way to define and study it. After all, if something defies definition and measurement, then it is nothing more than lofty philosophical rhetoric, a useful metaphor, perhaps (Cohen 1989). If the idea of “identity” is a serious area of empirical inquiry, then one must face the difficult challenge of developing a precise theoretical, methodological and substantive set of ideas to capture this construct. In that regard, there has been great progress, yet there is much more work to do.

From the early days of personality research (Allport 1937; Murray 1938; Barenbaum and Winter 2008), the idea of a monolithic self was appealing. A person has a “self-concept”: the sum total of thoughts, ideas and beliefs about who they are, and what they want to be. If you could identify what the key elements were, then you might be able to predict what that person is going to say, think and do. It made sense to focus on static and enduring traits that may be an important set of building blocks to base this conception on (Cristal and Tupes 1992; Costa and McCrae 1997; Costa et al. 1998). The fact that measuring these traits often produced weak relationships to other outcomes pointed to the need for additional nuance within the conception of what a self-concept actually means (see Griffith and Jenkins 2004). It was the information processing revolution, the self as an organizing structure in memory (Kihlstrom and Klein 1986), and the idea that the self-concept is better thought of as categories or a collection of

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“social identities” (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Abrams and Hogg 1990) that opened a door forward to deeper understanding. This need for complexity comes at a price, though. Now the questions are: What are the key social categories that matter? When do they matter? Why do they matter? How do they change over time?

Psychologists care about these questions; however, so do marketers. Brands are more than just logos and taglines. They are meaning systems. Products, services, organizations, behaviors or even people can be brands. That means that they are also markers of identity (Forehand et al. 2002; Reed 2004). Therefore, the coupling of identity and marketing is a natural marriage. In fact, in marketing, there is a parallel path of the evolution of the self and identity as it emerged in psychology. Classic work recognized “symbols for sale” (Levy 1959) and how marketing stimuli might be self-expressive extensions of consumers (Belk 1988; Cohen 1989) that can trigger positive responses (Forehand et al. 2002; Lenoir et al. 2013). Marketers, brand managers and public policy advocates understand that deeper connections exist if a product, service, organization, behavior or person becomes a part of a consumer’s identity. Therefore, the same vexing questions that psychologists ask about identity (the what, where, when and how) are also on the minds of scholars in the marketing world. We need a precise definition of identity and a set of key principles to help guide where to put the magnifying glass to build a deeper understanding.

In recent work, we set forth a unifying definition of identity as “any category label to which a consumer self-associates either by choice or endowment” (Reed et al. 2012, p. 312). Building from this definition, we further advocated for five unifying principles that have received consistent support within identity research in marketing. These principles provided an overarching lens for understanding the many effects of identity salience, identity association, identity verification, identity conflict and identity relevance.

As we began our own program of research to tease apart and deeply understand these five principles, it occurred to us that enlisting scholarly help is an extremely valuable exercise: recruit the best of the best in the field of marketing, to take their specific areas, meticulously dissect and diagnose their fields of study in the context of this five-principle framework. The *Handbook of Research on Identity Theory in Marketing* is the result of those efforts. We believe that this volume represents a careful, innovative and important treatment of identity. We are quite proud of the depth of intellectual talent that has so graciously agreed to take time to dive into these five principles. Each chapter rigorously relates specific areas of expertise that marketers, brand managers, and public policy advocates care about. The volume gives us a full view of key aspects of how deeply

integral identity and identity theory is to the field of marketing. We have divided the 31 chapters into five parts, each built around a single principle. To help frame that presentation, we wanted to take a moment to formally introduce each principle here and discuss what each chapter adds to our understanding of that principle.

Part I of this *Handbook* includes six fantastic chapters focused on the identity salience principle: “Factors that increase the salience of a particular identity within a person’s self-concept will increase the probability that the identity will have a subsequent influence on the person’s attitudes and behavior” (Reed et al. 2012, p. 313). This identity salience part begins with a review of identity salience research and the development of proscriptive guidelines for triggering salience with subtle interventions in real-world practice (Kettle, Chapter 1). A chapter that integrates research on identity salience with research on goal activation follows. This chapter proposes that the co-activation of goals and identities may dramatically influence traditional salience-driven behaviors (Laran, Chapter 2). The third chapter leverages insights from evolutionary psychology to model how and when identities are adopted and become salient (Jones, Durante and Griskevicius, Chapter 3). The final three chapters in this part take a deeper dive into specific consequences of heightened identity salience. This includes investigations of the effect of identity salience on signaling through luxury consumption (Wilcox, Chapter 4), creativity (Mehta, Xu and Dahl, Chapter 5) and response to victim groups after one’s moral identity is made salient (Graso, Aquino and Ok, Chapter 6).

Part II of this *Handbook* includes five excellent chapters that investigate the identity association principle: “When stimuli become associated with a positively regarded identity, those stimuli will receive more positive evaluations and can acquire other identity-related content independent of any explicit processing of the association” (Reed et al. 2012, p. 315). This part begins with two chapters that investigate the implicit and explicit drivers of identity association. The first builds from the conception of the self as an associative structure in memory and discusses the non-conscious relationships between consumer identity, stereotypes and self-esteem (Connors and Perkins, Chapter 7). The second association chapter identifies the more conscious drivers of self-brand connection and argues that both experiential and symbolic drivers of association should be a part of self-brand connection measures (Escalas, Gallo and Gaustad, Chapter 8). Next is a chapter that argues for actual or perceived ownership as a key driver of consumer tendencies to categorize objects as part of the self. This influences product perceptions even in product-irrelevant domains (Johar, Chung and Weiss, Chapter 9). The next chapter proposes that much of the power of identity association comes from self-esteem boosts that occur

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after selective comparisons across temporal domains of the self (Dagogo-Jack, Chapter 10). The final chapter in this part flips identity association on its head and investigates the drivers of consumer response to products connected to negatively regarded identities and/or dissociative reference groups (Simpson, Dunn and White, Chapter 11).

Part III of this *Handbook* includes seven groundbreaking chapters focused on the identity verification principle: “Feedback from the external environment will be introspectively processed to determine progress toward the ideal representation of an identity” (Reed et al. 2012, p. 317). This part begins with an investigation of five different classes of compensatory consumption behaviors (direct resolution, symbolic self-completion, fluid compensation, dissociation and escapism) that verify desired identities (Rucker and Cannon, Chapter 12). The second chapter of the part develops a model to predict when identity threats will prompt verification. This work argues that the specific identity associations that are threatened dictate response (Spangenberg and Angle, Chapter 13). Next are two related chapters that discuss the role of memory in identity verification. The first of these proposes that consumers systematically acquire and retain objects and photos that can serve as future memory pointers to important identities (Zauberman, Diehl and Barasch, Chapter 14). The second investigates how consumer memory for whom they used to be, as well as their predictions for whom they will become, drive perceptions of personal continuity that can help them to verify desired identities (Urminsky and Bartels, Chapter 15). The final three chapters in this part investigate very novel means of increasing (or inhibiting) identity verification: the use of technology (Leung, Paolacci and Puntoni, Chapter 16), the experience of pain (Scott, Husemann and Hill, Chapter 17) and the use of language to create, enact and verify consumer identities (Lelchuk, Gordon, Ringberg and Luna, Chapter 18).

Part IV of this *Handbook* includes five thought-provoking chapters focused on the identity conflict principle: “Individuals are motivated to reduce conflict across multiple identities and can do so by managing the relative salience of their various conflicting identities” (Reed et al. 2012, p. 318). We open the identity conflict part with a chapter that highlights the challenges of studying multiple identities simultaneously, and investigates how the number, complexity and similarity of identities within a consumer’s self-structure influences their ability to resolve conflicts between component identities (Winterich, Coleman and Dommer, Chapter 19). The second chapter in this part argues for a causal centrality approach to understanding identity conflict. This approach proposes that some identities are more causally central than others. This influences their interplay and relative dominance in behavioral determination (Chen, Chapter 20).

Next is a chapter that argues that dyadic decision contexts can serve as both a source of identity conflict and as a potential means of identity conflict resolution (Nikolova and Lamberton, Chapter 21). In a similar vein, the next chapter reviews research on globalization and cultural identities to identify the drivers of cultural identity conflict, particularly among multicultural consumers (Torelli and Oh, Chapter 22). We conclude the identity conflict part with a chapter that investigates the behavioral consequences of actual and desired attitude conflict, with particular attention to attitude conflicts that arise from one's consumer identities (Wheeler and DeMarree, Chapter 23).

The final part of this *Handbook*, Part V, includes eight cutting-edge chapters focused on the identity relevance principle: "When identity information is deliberately processed, its influence will be greatest on stimuli that possess object relevance, symbolic relevance, goal relevance, action relevance or evaluation relevance to the identity" (Reed et al. 2012, p. 316). The chapters in this part all investigate the power of identity in domains of high prominence and importance in modern society. The first two chapters in this part develop models to understand the role of identity in two contentious, and often related, issues of our time: religion (Barbour, Mandel and Cohen, Chapter 24) and politics (Briley, Jung and Danziger, Chapter 25). Attention then turns to identity relevance and expression in the two dominant social consumer contexts of our time: social media (Grewal and Stephen, Chapter 26) and retail environments (Argo, Chapter 27). A pair of chapters that look at two opposing behaviors follow: the identity drivers of charitable giving (Shang, Chapter 28) and of emerging materialism among children (Chaplin, Shrum and Lowrey, Chapter 29). The next chapter extends relevance outward and investigates how identity-relevant information helps consumers to evaluate choices of others, with particular focus on how the wealth status of others influences the perceived morality of their actions (Olson, McFerran, Morales and Dahl, Chapter 30). The final chapter of the volume explores how the meaning of identity-relevant symbols can change depending on the specific consumer identity, a shift that can prompt unintended negative consequences in consumer responses (Rank-Christman and Henderson, Chapter 31).

As we read each of these fantastic treatments, we realize the true depth of meaning embodied by the quotation that opens this Introduction. We as co-editors learned an extremely great deal from the scholars who have so kindly contributed to this work. As identity theorists, we indeed felt alive as we pondered the insights and "ah-ha" moments revealed in each of these chapters. We are undoubtedly excited and proud to be a part of this project. We hope you enjoy this work as much as we have.

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