1. Identity salience: understanding when identity affects consumption

Keri L. Kettle

Brent Fikowski is an accountant, a former collegiate volleyball player, and was crowned the world's second fittest man at the 2017 CrossFit Games: "A big part of my identity has been I've been this really good CrossFit athlete who's also held a full-time job as an accountant for a private company. And I've been really proud of that" (Brent Fikowski).

Shon Hopwood briefly served in the United States Navy, then turned to robbing banks and, after serving 11 years in federal prison, became Law Professor at Georgetown University: "It makes me laugh hearing you say it out loud because there are days where it doesn't make sense to me, and I've lived it. That's because the bank robber's long dead and gone" (Shon Hopwood).

Consumers are not unidimensional people. Like Brent Fikowski and Shon Hopwood, they have a sense of self that ebbs and flows, in large part because they have multiple identities that form and dissolve over time – even if their identities are less extreme than those held by Brent and Shon. Some consumers, like Brent, are proud of their multiple identities and embrace the richness of their complex self. Others, like Shon, desire to hide or forget particular identities and thus suppress aspects of their self-concept. Yet, all consumers rely on those identities to make sense of who they are. How and when these different identities actively influence their consumption behaviour is a question central to identity-based marketing, and the focus of this chapter.

DEFINITIONS

The self-concept is germane to researchers in many diverse fields, ranging from organizational behaviour to child development, psychiatry to marketing. These distinct, but overlapping, literatures have used different terms interchangeably to refer to similar processes. Let me begin by defining key terms.

What is "the self"? Well, people have an overall sense of who they are. They are aware that they exist, that they exist separately from other people,

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and that they have characteristics that define their similarities to and differences from others. Developmental psychologists tend to refer to this as the self (Harter 1999; Happé 2003), and focus on how the awareness of oneself forms (or does not form) over time. Children are not born with a sense of self, and it is thus central to human development to understand the process by which the sense of self is established and evolves over time.

Identity theorists have described one's sense of self as the "self-identity" (Aquino and Reed 2002; Kettle and Häubl 2011; Ryder et al. 2000), whereas others have used the terms "self-concept" and "identity" interchangeably (Baumeister 1999; Markus and Wurf 1987). More recent theorizing has clearly differentiated between an individual's overall sense of who they are, and specific clearly distinguishable identities that reside within the self-concept (Kettle and Häubl 2011; Oyserman et al. 2012; Reed et al. 2012). Consistent with this recent work, I use the term "self-concept" to refer to a person's overall sense of self, and "identity" to refer to a particular category label that resides with the self-concept.

It is important to note that a self-concept is not merely limited to identities. Each person's self-concept includes different aspects (Kettle and Häubl 2011), which include individual characteristics, real or perceived (Aquino and Reed 2002; Markus and Wurf 1987), as well as identities (Oyserman et al. 2012; Verrochi Coleman and Williams 2013), such as social or group identities (Verrochi Coleman and Williams 2013; White and Dahl 2007). Generally speaking, there is substantial overlap across the aspects of an individual's self-concept. It is well established that identities are associated with particular characteristics – accountants are detail-oriented and analytical, for example – but identities do not inherently create personal characteristics. Becoming an accountant does not cause a person to become detail-oriented and analytical, but having those characteristics makes a person more likely to become an accountant.

What does it mean for an identity to become salient? The key premise underlying identity salience is that the many aspects of one's self-concept cannot all be simultaneously occupying one's thoughts. Rather, individual aspects may become more or less active in one's thoughts over time, owing to any number of factors. This may be referred to as 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 behaviour" (Reed et al. 2012, p. 313)

Historically, identity theorists have confounded identity salience with the self-importance or centrality of an identity (Reed 2004; Stryker and Serpe 1994), as these constructs are highly correlated. The centrality of an identity describes its chronic role within the self-concept: an identity is

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more central if it plays a more dominant role in defining one's overall sense of self, and is thus associated with a greater proportion of the individual's self-concept.

There should be little doubt that some identities are more self-important than others and, over time, it is reasonable to expect that an identity's centrality to one's self-concept predicts the amount of time it is active in one's thoughts. Identity salience thus becomes confounded with identity centrality when salience is measured rather than manipulated. Numerous articles in the marketing literature have labeled their construct as identity salience when, in fact, they were really assessing identity centrality (Arnett et al. 2003; Grier and Deshpande 2001; Marin et al. 2009). This distinction is critical because a highly self-important identity is not always salient. The essence of identity salience is understanding that particular aspects of one's self-concept, such as an identity, can be predictably made more or less active at a given point in time, and that doing so predictably affects behaviour.

IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY SALIENCE

The history of mankind is littered with powerful examples of how behavior is changed by making particular identities salient. From the Crusades to the Holocaust to the Vietnam War, ordinary people have been driven to undertake extraordinary acts of heroism and evil when a particular identity dominates their thoughts.

We need look no further than the Rwandan genocide to note the power of identity salience. Although the exact history of pre-twentieth-century Rwanda is up for debate (King 2009), it is known that for several centuries Rwanda's two substantial ethnic groups, the majority Hutus and the minority Tutsis, cohabitated, spoke the same language, observed the same cultural traditions, and intermingled in marriage and military service (Waters 1995). They were, for all intents and purposes, one social group. Formal establishment of their ethnic identities arguably began when Belgian colonialists introduced personal identification cards in the 1930s (Waters 1995), upon which each person was categorized as Hutu or Tutsi.

The organized murders of the Rwandan genocide began on April 4, 1994. For the nine months prior to that, however, a newly formed radio station – Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines – broadcast pro-Hutu, anti-Tutsi propaganda, referring to Tutsis as (among other things) "cockroaches" who must be "exterminated" (Thompson 2007). Nine months of identity salience, followed by 100 days of genocide in which ordinary Hutus executed nearly 1 million of their fellow countrymen because they

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were identified as Tutsi on their Rwandan National Identity Card. Identity salience is powerful.

Thankfully, consumer behaviour is typically more benign than genocide. Yet, the central point remains: if identity salience can drive individuals to unspeakable acts of evil, surely it can have substantive effects on consumption behaviour. So, how do we make particular identities salient?

Broadly speaking, there are two routes to identity salience, which I characterize as unsubtle and subtle. Unsubtle routes to identity salience involve unnaturally lengthy interventions in which the focal identity is discussed or elicited to the point where it is undoubtedly active in the individual's thoughts, irrespective of how self-important that identity may be to the individual. Subtle routes to identity salience use seemingly natural interventions that may be barely noted by the individual. Unsubtle routes are more common, so I will address these first.

A popular unsubtle method to invoke a salient identity is to simply ask people questions about that identity. I confess to having used this method myself, with much success. The expectation is that thinking about an identity, or identity-relevant concepts, causes the identity to become more active in one's thoughts. Seems reasonable. As one example, in a well-known study about math performance, Shih et al. (1999) recruited female Asian American university students with the goal of differentially activating either their gender identity or their Asian identity and then observing the effects on their math performance. To do so, Shih and colleagues asked these participants to answer several questions, which they manipulated to be either about gender-relevant topics (to make the gender identity salient) or related to languages and family history (to make the Asian identity salient). This general method has been widely adapted to different identities. For instance, Morris et al. (2008) made salient the political identity of Republicans and Democrats by asking them a series of questions about political identity; and LeBoeuf (2003) used the question method to make salient identities ranging from scholar to Asian. Asking people to think about a particular identity seems a sure-fire way to have that identity become more active in their thoughts.

A similar unsubtle means to identity salience is to ask individuals to recall and/or describe their own identity-relevant behavior. Recently, Verrochi Coleman and Williams (2013, 2015) made distinct identities salient (athlete versus volunteer) by asking participants to spend five minutes describing a specific time they performed in that role. Similarly, Reed (2004) made a family (versus independent adult) identity salient by asking participants to write five sentences describing that identity. Along the same lines as asking questions about an identity, engaging people to describe an identity-relevant action or situation seems to make an identity more active in their thoughts.

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I have some concern that asking people to think about a particular identity can contribute to a process of identity reinforcement or dilution. Identity researchers tend to view identity salience effects as isolated events, where we temporarily make an identity active with the assumption that our intervention has no effect on its place within an individual's self-concept. Yet, we also know that identities strengthen (or weaken) over time, and we have some sense that this evolution results from the identity having been made more (or less) salient over time (Reed and Forehand 2016). As we ask individuals to think about a particular identity, we need to consider that the way we make an identity salient could impact the long-term role of that identity in an individual's self-concept. It seems likely that asking a study participant to write an elaborate story about their identity as an athlete (or musician) will reinforce the role of that identity. At best it might have a minimal, undetectable effect, but we certainly would not expect such an intervention to dilute that identity, would we?

A third unsubtle pathway to identity salience is to present statements or scale items, and manipulate the content of those statements to target particular identities. In the realm of Asian versus female identity activation, Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) made those identities salient by administering a ten-item Collective Self-Esteem Scale and manipulating whether the scale items were worded to reflect the collective Asian identity or gender identity. Likewise, LeBoeuf (2003) manipulated the salience of an undergraduate's business student (versus university student) identity by presenting a logo of the business school (versus university) and having them respond to items worded to target the focal identity.

Each of three aforementioned unsubtle methods (responding to identity-relevant questions, describing identity-relevant activity, responding to identity-relevant scale items) relies on the assumption that the resulting heightened identity-related thought accurately reflects that individual's own identity. This is a non-trivial issue, given that these interventions seem to work for almost everyone who may have that identity, irrespective of its self-importance. A possible limitation of these unsubtle methods, therefore, is that they could be activating expectations or beliefs about the identity rather than the individual's true self-concept. Though it is near impossible to determine the extent to which these interventions activate one's true sense of self, I would suggest that the less subtle the intervention, the greater the risk that it activates something other than the individual's identity.

A second limitation of unsubtle interventions lies in their heavy-handedness. It is easy to understand why researchers use these interventions: identity scholars have limited resources, inattentive participants, and skeptical reviewers. The cost of running studies leads researchers to

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unsubtle identity interventions that are fairly certain to make an identity salient, rather than subtler interventions that may lead to (the unambiguously dreaded) ambiguous null results. When navigating the review process, it is much easier to argue that a lengthy identity manipulation generates salience as compared to something as simple as signing one's name. But, we must ask ourselves, is this what identity salience looks like in the field? When was the last time you entered a store or browsed a website and had to spend five minutes describing an identity-relevant activity before you shopped? If we are to guide marketers, we should be seeking identity salience interventions that reflect the real world. Identity researchers need to think: must we (figuratively) beat consumers over the head with an identity to make it salient? Thankfully, there is hope that identity salience may be obtained with subtle cues.

Several studies suggest that the presence of subtle identity-relevant cues or situational affordances can make an identity salient. For example, Forehand et al. (2001) have shown that the ethnic identity of minority consumers (but not ethnic majority consumers) can be made salient through simple identity-relevant cues in advertising, such as mentioning the ethnicity in the advertisement (Forehand et al. 2001), using same-ethnicity spokespeople (Forehand et al. 2001), or exposing individuals to identity-congruent brands and images (Chattaraman et al. 2010).

My own research points to two subtle interventions – signing one's own name and seeing another person's signature – that heighten consumers' sensitivity to identity-relevant cues. I have found that consumers are more sensitive to identity-relevant situational affordances after they have signed their name for an ostensibly unrelated task (Kettle and Häubl 2011), and that seeing another person's signature makes salient aspects of a consumer's identity that are relevant to the signer's identity (Kettle and Mantonakis 2019). Because people use their personal signature to represent their self in writing (Ham et al. 2017; Hawkins 2011), the personal signature of another person can essentially make that person an identity-relevant cue. Consistent with other subtle identity cues, the effects of personal signatures are moderated by identity self-importance, and thus only generate identity-congruent behavior when the identity is of high self-importance (Chattaraman et al. 2010; Kettle and Häubl 2011; Kettle and Mantonakis 2019).

The need for high levels of identity self-importance to enable subtle identity-relevant cues is both a blessing and a curse. It is a curse for researchers because it (conservatively) doubles or triples the number of participants required to conduct a sufficiently powered study (Simonsohn 2015). It also requires researchers to effectively measure identity self-importance as a trait variable, in addition to the focal elements of the

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study; a seemingly small addition that actually complicates experimental design substantially. If you measure the self-importance of an identity before your salience manipulation, you may inadvertently make that identity salient and thus wipe out or inhibit any effect of your key intervention. But if you measure it after the intervention, it is possible that your intervention affected the self-importance of the focal identity, and then you are left with a tainted measure of your hypothesized moderator. I have had each of these experiences when trying to capture identity self-importance for use as a moderator, and I testify that these challenges limit the number of manuscripts employing subtle identity salience interventions.

However, a need for high identity self-importance means that observed effects should be more readily reproducible in the field because they work for the focal consumers – those to whom the identity matters – and consequently have greater external validity than unsubtle interventions. Marketers can more easily craft identity-relevant messages or add a signature to their label versus giving customers a lengthy questionnaire; and consumers are more apt to tolerate subtle interventions rather than surrender the time needed to engage with unsubtle interventions. Consequently, identifying and understanding the role that subtle identity cues play in generating identity salience is of tremendous value to the field of marketing.

WHAT'S NEXT IN IDENTITY SALIENCE?

I began this chapter by introducing Brent Fikowski and Shon Hopwood, two individuals whose self-concept includes disparate identities. Let's return to these two cases to illustrate four important issues for identity salience researchers to consider moving forward. These issues are: (1) the limited range of identities we study; (2) the role of personal characteristics in identity activation; (3) the salience of conflicting identities; and (4) the salience of complex identities.

Let's Study More Identities, Shall We?

A meaningful shortcoming of identity research is our tendency to examine a limited range of identities. Why is this the case? Well, in order to investigate a particular identity in an experimental paradigm, particularly when multiple experiments are required, researchers have had to focus on identities for which there exist generally agreed-upon associations, and that are common enough – and commonly held within a given participant pool – to gather a sufficiently large sample size. Gender and national or

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ethnic identities tend to be the dominant identities investigated, as we know that we reliably find variants of those two identities in every sample. Every consumer has a gender, and every consumer has some form of national and/or ethnic identity. I confess to be as guilty of this practice as any identity researcher. With recent advances in our understanding of false-positive psychology, power and sample sizes (Simohnson 2015), this issue is not going away.

Yet, consumers also have countless unique identities. Moreover, marketers have moved far beyond targeting by broad categories such as gender and ethnicity, are keen to capitalize on distinctive identities, and with the growth of online marketing analytics are capable of targeting very specific types of consumers. Shon Hopwood and Brent Fikowski both happen to be Caucasian men, but any sane marketer would not consider them both as their target consumer. Their ex-convict/lawyer/accountant/athlete identities are perfect examples of identities that are shared by hundreds of thousands of consumers, yet virtually neglected by identity researchers. Moving forward, experimental researchers need to be creative in moving beyond gender and ethnic identities.

How, you ask, should we pursue more specialized identities? Well, the first step is to move away from Mechanical Turk and undergraduate subject pools, and instead to seek out groups of individuals who share a more distinct identity. These groups are relatively easy to find with a bit of looking, and quite eager to participate in identity-relevant studies. Recent work seems to be taking a positive step in this direction, with Verrochi Coleman and Williams (2013, 2015) studying athlete and volunteer identities, and Kettle and Häubl (2011) having investigated the running identity with an interesting field study. In my own work (Kettle et al. 2019), we have conducted lengthy field experiments with runners, with one of my co-authors successfully recruiting a group of elite marathon runners in one study, and a broader population of recreational runners in a follow-up study. Although many of our participants strongly identified as runners, in each of our groups there was a sufficiently broad distribution of identity self-importance to enable us to use identity self-importance as a moderator, as I have suggested above. Whether you wish to investigate runners, soccer moms, or musicians, these groups are easy to access, and are likely to be more useful examples of identity salience for marketers than repeatedly contrasting men versus women or Asians versus Caucasians.

Can Personal Characteristics Make an Identity Salient?

Identity salience research has largely focused on how making a particular identity salient can activate associated personal characteristics (Morgan

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et al. 2018; Verrochi Coleman and Williams 2013). The assumption underlying this is that personal characteristics are associated with identities. Yet, personal characteristics also operate separately as aspects within one's self-concept, and likely span different identities. For instance, Brent Fikowski's self-discipline is a characteristic likely associated with being an accountant as well as a professional athlete. In addition to focusing on how making salient one of these identities may activate a related personal characteristic, we also need to understand how activating aspects of one's self-concept can produce identity salience effects.

To illustrate, consider two identities investigated by Verrochi Coleman and Williams (2013) – athletes and volunteers – that are associated with emotional characteristics: anger for athletes, sadness for volunteers. If we were to prime anger in a competitive athlete, would that make their athlete identity salient? If so, would it lead to a direct activation of their identity as an athlete, or might it do so indirectly by making them more sensitive to identity-relevant situational affordances, as I have suggested above? We could ask the same questions about sadness for a volunteer. Now, what if we primed anger in a volunteer: would that suppress their volunteer identity?

The activation of personal characteristics is not new to marketing. As one example, advertisements from truck brands Chevrolet ("Like a Rock") and RAM ("God Made a Farmer") have focused on the personal characteristics of their blue-collar customers, albeit with these characteristics confounded with particular work identities. As other examples, Canadian Blood Services has used the slogan "It's in you to give" to suggest generosity as a personal characteristic, while Dove's successful Self-Esteem Project campaign has focused on low self-worth as a personal characteristic, with the tagline "You're more beautiful than you think." With such marketing efforts, the personal characteristic being targeted may influence consumption behavior directly by influencing feelings about the brand, but may also work indirectly by making a relevant identity salient. If I am made to think about myself as a giving person, it seems likely that activating that characteristic leads to thoughts about my past generosity, and thus makes my volunteer identity salient. Likewise, highlighting my hard-working nature seems likely to make my blue-collar identity salient, just as focusing on a woman's low self-perception of beauty may activate her gender identity. We need a better understanding of how activating personal characteristics influences identity salience.

Of course, these examples highlight personal characteristics that we have associated with a single identity. What if a personal characteristic is associated with multiple identities within an individual? Consider Brent Fikowski, who may be analytical in both his efforts as an accountant and as

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an athlete. For Brent, would activating his analytic personal characteristic make his accountant identity salient, his athlete identity salient, or perhaps both? Or, as I will discuss below, is there a more complicated identity as an athletic accountant (or analytical athlete) to be activated?

There is also much work to be done on understanding the role of personal characteristics in reinforcing versus diluting identities (Reed and Forehand 2016). Identity researchers tend to view the ebb and flow of identities as the direct result of those identities becoming more or less chronically activated over time. However, identities are associated with certain personal characteristics, and it seems likely that activating a particular personal characteristic may indirectly reinforce an associated identity, or dilute a conflicting identity. As one example, physical and mental strength are characteristics associated with the athlete identity. Reinforcing those personal characteristics, such as through self-talk ("I am strong") or physical strength training could reinforce an individual's athlete identity. Moving away from the athlete identity, being nurturing is a personal characteristic associated with the parent identity, and many people struggle to see themselves as parents because they do not view themselves as nurturing individuals (Rane and McBride 2000). It seems likely that developing or activating one's nurturing characteristics could reinforce the parent identity, whereas highlighting conflicting characteristics, such as being a neglectful individual, could serve to dilute that identity.

What About Conflicting Identities?

There remains much to understand about how identity salience works with competing or conflicting identities; an important question, given that many consumers have deeply contrasting identities with seemingly little overlap (Bodenhausen 2010). Just as Brent Fikowski has conflicting accountant and athlete identities, Shon Hopwood may see very little overlap between his identity as an ex-convict and his identity as a legal scholar. In the limited research that has examined conflicting identities, unsubtle interventions have been used to clearly make one identity salient over the other (Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2000; Shih et al. 1999). As these authors have noted, it remains an open question as to how behavior would be affected should an effort be made for both identities to become salient (Shih et al. 1999). Presumably, if researchers attempted to make salient both the Asian and the female identities of female Asian Americans, the relative self-importance of each identity would play a role; but this question remains unanswered.

Moreover, there may be substantive differences for desirable versus undesirable identities. Here is where we can contrast Brent Fikowski

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– clearly proud of his accountant and athlete identities – with Shon Hopwood's desire to reject his ex-convict identity in favor of his lawyer identity. Building on these examples, several avenues for future research can be considered.

First, identities may simultaneously conflict and harmonize in terms of their associated personal characteristics, such as with Brent's accountant and athlete identities. Both identities may be harmoniously associated with the characteristic of self-discipline, but conflicted with the characteristic of physical strength. When past research suggests that making salient one identity suppresses competing identities (Bodenhausen 2010), it neglects the multidimensionality of these identities. I would suggest that whether identity salience suppresses or activates distinct identities depends on the context, and which associated characteristics are afforded by the context. To illustrate, making Brent's athlete identity salient would likely also activate his accountant identity in a context where the trait of self-discipline is valuable, such as when he is speaking to others about planning or when in an organizational meeting. By contrast, making Brent's athlete identity salient would likely suppress his accountant identity in a context where physical strength is valuable, such as when he is helping a friend to move boxes or engaging in physical labour.

Second, identities may conflict or concur in terms of their desirability, as we see with Shon Hopwood's ex-convict identity. Although it seems that Shon's identity as a lawyer is related to his identity as an ex-convict, in that both aspects of his self-concept relate to his experience with the federal legal and prison system, being an ex-convict (versus lawyer) is an unambiguously less desirable identity for Shon to possess. Even though Shon states that his identity as a bank robber is "long dead and gone," it seems likely that elements of that identity persist in spite of his wishes. Each of us has identities that, while less extreme than being a convicted felon, we cannot shake despite their undesirability. We need a better understanding of the process by which identity salience affects a consumer when the salient identity is one that they are ashamed of, or trying to suppress, versus proud of and seeking to reinforce. Does making an identity salient always reinforce that identity? And what effect does it have on related identities? Identities may be clearly related and in conflict, such as Shon's ex-convict and lawyer identities; or they may be quite unrelated and in conflict, such as Brent's athlete and accountant identities. Understanding the effects of identity salience on the reinforcement (and dilution) of other identities is an important path for future research, and requires thinking about distinct identities in different ways beyond seemingly obvious conflicts.

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What About Complicated Identities?

Finally, it is necessary to move beyond clearly defined identities such as athlete or musician, and consider more ambiguous and complex identities (LeBoeuf et al. 2010). An important path for future identity research is to investigate deeper into complex identity structures, and understand how identity salience manifests with consumers who seek to differentiate themselves by affiliating seemingly disparate identities. It is pretty clear by now that we can guide consumers to make different decisions by making salient readily differentiable identities within these consumers (LeBoeuf et al. 2010). But how does identity salience work for someone who sees themselves as an intelligent athlete, or a scholarly soldier? How would we expect identity salience to manifest among consumers who view themselves as a combination of distinct identities (Berger and Heath 2007)? Among these consumers, could making salient a particular identity actually activate, rather than suppress, seemingly conflicting identities?

Broadly speaking, marketing scholars have used identity salience manipulations as the means, rather than the end, in their research programs. Identity salience interventions have enabled us to gain novel insights into the structure of identities (Verrochi Coleman and Williams 2013), the role of conflicting identities in guiding behavior (LeBoeuf et al. 2010), and the implications of consumer identities for marketers (Bolton and Reed 2004). With identity salience functioning as the means, there has been limited focus on understanding the process underlying the identity salience. This question is critical for identity-based marketing, as marketers would benefit from understanding the conditions under which they can predictably invoke particular identities in the field.

Consider a hypothetical brand that wishes to target current and former female university student-athletes. This is a substantial but thin target market with a distinct and complicated identity. It is an attractive market, as female student-athletes have a higher graduation rate than the general student population (Rishe 2003), but also complicated as female student-athletes feel different and somewhat isolated from their peers (Sturm et al. 2011). How should such a brand go about predictably making the female student-athlete identity salient when it engages its target consumers? Should it emphasize one element of that identity over others, such as by focusing on the athletic identity above the others; or should it focus on the complex intersection of these conflicting identities? Perhaps it should seek to activate personal characteristics that make female student-athletes distinct, such as their drive and determination; or personal characteristics that make them similar to the rest of the student population, such as their fears and self-doubts. How would the brand know whether subtle

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or unsubtle identity salience interventions would be more effective? Right now, the identity salience literature does not provide a clear direction for such a brand. Future identity salience research should enable us to more clearly guide marketers in all aspects of identity-based marketing.

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