10 Identity-Signaling Behavior

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What do wearing a tie-dye shirt, driving a high-end sports car, carrying an intellectual book on a train, placing political signs on one's lawn, filling out a consumer survey, posting on Facebook, reading a Japanese manga, donating to a charitable cause, sharing a rumor, and choosing a healthy snack have in common? While the answer to this question might serve as a projective test to some, one answer is that they all can be considered forms of identity-signaling behavior.

In this chapter, identity-signaling behavior is defined as behavior motivated by the belief that the behavior will convey particular information about the individual to the self or to others. In this context, it is not imperative that others in fact observe the behavior, or even that the individual has a strong expectation others will observe the behavior. Rather, for the purpose of this chapter, it is sufficient that the individual anticipates how others would interpret the behavior if they were to observe it to constitute identity-signaling behavior motivated by others' perceptions of the behavior. This definition is consistent with the conception of social psychology as the study of how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of others (Allport, 1985).

Whereas identity-signaling behavior can involve self-signaling without regard to the perceptions of others (Bodner & Prelec, 2003), most identity-signaling behavior appears to reflect concern with signaling information about the self to others (Ross, 1971; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). This is reflected in findings that show that people are more likely to engage in signaling behavior when engaging in public or conspicuous behavior than in private or inconspicuous behavior (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Ross, 1971). Likewise, individuals are more likely to engage in identity-signaling behavior in domains that they perceive can convey information about themselves to others (Berger & Heath, 2007; Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt & Nelson, 1999).

Research on identity-signaling behavior has a long history in consumer psychology research, with a number of well-known articles identifying identity-signaling motives as drivers of product and brand choice (Belk, 1988; Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Fournier, 1998; Gardner & Levy, 1955; Holman, 1981; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986; Sirgy, 1982; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In an early article articulating the importance of the topic, Levy (1959) argued that consumers adopt brands not only for their functional benefits, but

as a means to define their self-concept through the symbolic meaning with which brands are imbued. Similarly, McCracken (1989) described the process by which products become imbued with meaning and how consumers, in turn, construct their self-identity through acquiring and using brands with associations they wish to attach to the self.

Going further in connecting consumers with their possessions, Belk (1988) put forth the notion that people's possessions are part and parcel of the self. Consistent with this view, evidence shows that people tend to overvalue items in their possession relative to items outside their possession, and that this effect is driven by the extent to which people incorporate their possessions into their identity (Brenner, Rottenstreich, Sood, & Bilgin, 2007; Morewedge, Shu, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2009; Reb & Connolly, 2007; Shu & Peck, 2011; Strahilevitz & Loewenstein, 1998). Other researchers provided early evidence that product and brand choice are used by consumers to define themselves (Aaker, 1999; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993), and that people use product and brand choices to evaluate those using them (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977; Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Wernerfelt, 1990).

More recent research in consumer psychology has focused on distinguishing among the different motivations that drive identity-signaling behavior and on the unintended consequences of identity-signaling behavior. At the same time, identity-signaling behavior is still relatively underdeveloped as a research area, and many unanswered questions about the motives that lead to identity-signaling behavior and the consequences of such behavior remain, making the topic a potentially fruitful one for future research. The remainder of this chapter summarizes some of the key findings regarding the different motives identified as drivers of identity-signaling behavior and the unintended consequences resulting from identity-signaling behavior. The chapter then highlights potentially fertile areas for new research across these topic areas.

Drivers of Identity-Signaling Behavior

Identity-signaling behavior is not driven by a single desire; rather, many different motives likely lead people to engage in identity-signaling behavior. While various categorization schemes might be used to capture identity-signaling motives (see Swann, 1983), the current chapter delineates three broad categories of motives represented within the consumer psychology literature. In particular, a number of distinct findings can be classified into motives related to (a) need for belonging; (b) need for self-expression; and (c) need for self-enhancement.

Briefly, the need for belonging refers to people's basic need to belong to a group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); the need for self-expression refers to the need to display aspects of one's actual self, rather than one's idealized self, to others (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985); and the need for self-enhancement refers to the need to enhance self-worth (Sedikides & Strube,

1995). These different motives are presented separately and can operate distinctly, yet these motives often overlap, such that identity-signaling behavior is often driven by some combination of these motives. Indeed, in much of the research on identity-signaling behavior, little distinction is drawn between these motives, with researchers often treating, for instance, self-expressive and self-enhancement motives for identity-signaling behavior synonymously.

Nonetheless, though the motives underlying identity-signaling behavior might overlap, they are also distinct, having different desired aims and resulting in different consequences for the individual. For example, whereas self-expression tends to be energizing, self-enhancement can be depleting, due to the latter requiring self-regulatory resources (Gal & Wilkie, 2010). Moreover, these motives can interact with each other in a variety of ways (e.g., White, Argo, & Sengupta, 2012). For example, signaling a social identity may be perceived as a form of self-enhancement and conformity if the individual views signaling the desired social identity as conflicting with the expression of his or her individuality. Conversely, signaling a social identity might be perceived as a form of self-expression among those whose individual identity is closely tied to the signaled social identity (as might particularly be the case among those with an interdependent sense of self; Kim & Sherman, 2007). In this section, the focus is on describing each of the three general motives underlying the afore-mentioned identity-signaling behavior. Later in the chapter, potential interactions of these motives and their implications will be discussed.

Need for Belonging

People have a basic need to belong to a group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fiske, 2004). Research has shown that one means consumers use to identify their affiliation with a group is through acquiring and using products and brands that signal their belonging to the desired group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Products and brands can be used by consumers to signal membership in a particular social class, social group, professional group, family, society, or culture, among other groups (Braun & Wicklund, 1989; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Laverie, Kleine, & Kleine, 2002; McShane, Bradlow, & Berger, 2012; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Reingen, Foster, Brown, & Seidman, 1984; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Moreover, others tend to use consumers' product and brand preferences as a means of assigning them to particular social groups (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978).

Though brands and products often signal membership in particular groups, the group memberships associated with brands and products are continuously evolving. One reason for this is because people wish to signal their belonging to desirable groups; as a consequence, people tend to avoid the use of products and brands that might serve to signal belonging to an undesirable group (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Berger & Le Mens, 2009; Berger & Rand, 2008; White & Dahl, 2006, 2007). Thus, as increasing numbers of people adopt products or

brands associated with membership in a desired group, the products or brands lose their distinctiveness in signaling membership in that group and the meaning of the products or brands shifts (Pronin, Berger, & Molouki, 2007; Thornton, 1996). Early group members may thus abandon the products or brands initially associated with the group in favor of alternative products or brands that are more distinctive (Berger & Heath, 2007).

In some cases, signaling a social identity may simply reflect a basic need to belong to a group; however, in other cases belonging motives may overlap with self-expressive or self-enhancement motives. For example, signaling a social identity might, in addition to the belongingness need, be motivated by a need to engage in self-expression to the extent that individuals view the social identity as overlapping with their own identity. Indeed, the idea that signaling a social identity is a form of self-expression is implicit to a large number of research articles that have examined the determinants of social-identity signaling (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2007; Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Berger & Ward, 2010; Sirgy, 1982).

Other research shows, in contrast, that people are motivated to signal their social identity through product or brand choices not to fulfill a need for self-expression, but as a means to conform to, or fit in with, a group with which they want to be affiliated (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Gal & Wilkie, 2010; McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010). For example, research shows that people often use product or brand choices to conform to the majority, particularly when they feel socially isolated (Mead et al., 2011; Wang, Zhu, & Shiv, 2012). Thus, in such cases, signaling a social identity is not motivated by a need to engage in self-expression, but by a need to belong to the group and/or to enhance one's self-image through the group identity.

Need for Self-Expression

Self-expression can be defined as the expression or display of one's otherwise unobservable actual self or more tangibly as the expression of one's otherwise unobservable personality traits, values, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and so forth (Bellah et al., 1985). Self-expression is widely recognized as a driver of consumer behavior, including product and brand choice (Aaker, 1999; Kassarjian, 1971; Kim & Drolet, 2003; Richins, 1994; Sirgy, 1982; Ward, 1974).

However, despite the widely accepted belief that self-expression is a driver of consumer behavior, consumer research attempting to demonstrate the role of self-expression in driving behavior has a mixed history. Early research in the 1960s and 1970s hypothesized that consumers use brands to express their identity, and thus that consumers would prefer brands with personalities that were congruent with their own ("self-congruity"). However, early evidence did not support this hypothesis (for summaries, see Kassarjian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982).

To explain the lack of a positive relationship between brand choice and identity, scholars posited that early investigations of self-expression via brands

were based on a false premise, namely the idea of a stable individual identity (Kassarjian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982). In fact, subsequent research demonstrated that the self-concept is malleable and that different aspects of one's identity can be highlighted in different contexts (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986). To illustrate, aspects of one's identity that are likely to be accessible in a professional context, such as being diligent, might be less salient when in a social context, such as when having drinks with friends, where other aspects of one's identity, such as one's sense of humor, might be more salient.

In addition to the malleability of the self as an explanation for the failure of early self-expression research to identify a connection between individual personality and brand choice, researchers have proposed that different aspects of one's personality are likely to vary in importance to the self and hence in the degree to which one is motivated to express them (Markus, 1977; Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003). Thus, even if an individual possesses a particular trait, the individual will not be motivated to express that trait if the trait is not important to his or her identity. A further explanation put forth by researchers for the failure of early self-expression research to establish a link between individual personality and brand choice was that brand personality traits in early self-expression research were created ad hoc or adopted from human scales, such as from the big-5 personality inventory (Aaker, 1999), rather than from specific brand-personality scales. Lastly, it was argued that individual personality attributes might not be reflected in choice of brands because brand choice symbolism is not used simply to signal one's individuality but also to fulfill belonging and self-enhancement motives (Kassarjian, 1971; as also discussed in the other subsections of this section).

Consistent with many of these explanations for the failure of early self-expression research to identify a link between individual personality and brand choice, in an influential article, Aaker (1999) showed that consumers indeed prefer brands that match traits associated with their self-concept. The key differences between Aaker's (1999) research and the early self-expression research were that Aaker's investigation relied on the malleable conception of the self and used a brand personality typology systematically developed to apply to brands (Aaker, 1997). In particular, Aaker (1999) demonstrated that traits made accessible by situational cues and chronically accessible traits both positively influenced consumers' brand attitudes (see also Bhattacharjee, Berger, & Menon, 2014; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012).

Yet despite influential articles on the topic, and notable advances, the investigation of self-expression as a driver of consumer behavior, or of human behavior more generally, is relatively limited among both consumer psychologists and researchers from other disciplines. For instance, the work of Aaker (1999) focused on one important source of self-expression – expressing one's personality – but did not focus on other aspects of the individual, such as values, attitudes, or beliefs, that a consumer might similarly be motivated to express. With notable exceptions, such as Richins (1994), who showed that people's possessions reflected their material values, or Gal and Rucker (2011), who

showed that people tend to express their attitudes and beliefs even when they are not asked about them, examinations of aspects of individuality that consumers are motivated to express other than personality traits are mostly absent from the literature.

Likewise, research on self-expression in consumer research has tended to focus on self-expression through brands or possessions, and has, with some exceptions (e.g., Gal & Rucker, 2011; Schau & Gilly, 2003), neglected the study of other forms of self-expression, such as the expression of consumer attitudes (e.g., in market research surveys or in the form of product or services reviews such as on Amazon and Yelp) or consumer-generated content, such as might be created by consumers on their personal websites or on social media.

In general, and again, despite notable individual articles, self-expression, for all intents and purposes, does not exist as a distinct research topic in social psychology or even consumer psychology, and a self-expression motive is often conflated with a self-enhancement motive or with a belonging motive. Indeed, belonging and self-enhancement motives sometimes do overlap with a self-expression motive; however, these motives are also distinct from self-expression and in many cases polar opposite in terms of their consequences (more on this later).

The relative absence of self-expression as a distinct research topic in psychology is somewhat surprising given (a) its apparent centrality to real-world consumer behavior and (b) the vast literatures on the other motives underlying identity-signaling behavior discussed in this chapter, namely the need to belong and the need to self-enhance. For example, no psychometric scale has been developed to measure the need for self-expression, whereas several such scales exist to measure belonging and self-enhancement motives. Thus, some basic questions about the nature of self-expression remain murky and unexplored, though initial answers are emerging.

Do People Have a Need to Self-Express?

One basic question is whether individuals, broadly, have a need to express themselves. As noted, early demonstrations consistent with the need for self-expression showed that consumers tend to pick brands with personalities that are congruent with active aspects of their own personality (Aaker, 1999). However, though such findings demonstrate the influence of brand personality on choice in a manner consistent with a self-expressive motive, the findings are also consistent with other motives, such as a need for consistency (as reflected in consistency between one's personality and the personality associated with one's possessions). Further, despite the importance of personality traits to one's identity, early research paid little attention to other aspects of one's identity, such as personal values, attitudes, and beliefs, that might be subject to self-expression. Moreover, early research often conflated a need for self-expression with other needs, such as the need to self-enhance or to belong (Sirgy, 1982).

Relatively recently, more direct evidence for a need to engage in self-expression is possible due to the Internet's democratization of the ability to create and disseminate content. The emergence of the Internet has given rise to systematic investigations of the motives underlying individuals' engagement in self-expressive activity through both personal websites and social media. Schau and Gilly (2003) found that people's postings on personal websites were motivated by a desire to express themselves, including expressions of their personality and values. Likewise, Back and colleagues (2010) showed that Facebook profiles reflect individuals' actual personality traits (rather than their idealized traits), and Toubia and Stephen's (2013) findings suggest that Twitter posters are driven to post by intrinsic expression motives in addition to image concerns.

Other relatively direct evidence for a need for self-expression is research showing that individuals actively choose to express themselves on issues that are personally important to them, even when they do not expect positive change to arise from their self-expression (Gal & Rucker, 2010; Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003). Gal and Rucker (2011) find, in fact, that individuals often attempt to convey attitudes on issues that they are not asked about through the judgments and preferences they express in response to unrelated questions, a phenomenon they term response substitution. For example, they find that respondents asked to evaluate a candy bar judge it less favorably when informed that it was made by a company engaging in immoral, compared to moral, business practices. This difference is attenuated when participants are made aware that they will have a subsequent opportunity to share any open-ended thoughts they might have about the company, which suggests that this difference in evaluation is, at least in part, due to a need to express their attitude toward the company (and not simply because the company's moral conduct affects their judgment of the candy bar). Moreover, the effect documented by Gal and Rucker (2011) holds when individuals are informed that their response will not be shared with, and will have no effect on, the behavior of the company. Thus, this finding suggests that respondents want to express their negative views of the company's moral conduct and choose to do so through providing a poor evaluation of the company's product.

Further supporting the conclusion that respondents' behavior in Gal and Rucker's (2011) study is driven by a need for self-expression, the effect is strongest among respondents who view company moral behavior as personally important to them (see Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003, for additional findings showing the influence of attitude importance on attitude-expressive behaviors). Thus, these findings suggest that individuals have a need to express themselves, even in the absence of positive consequences that might result from their actions, and that individuals will attempt to express their values and attitudes even if they are not asked about them.

If individuals indeed have a need to express themselves, then it might be expected, as is true for many psychological motives, that fulfilling the need to engage in self-expression will diminish the need to engage in self-expression

subsequently. Consistent with this notion, recent work has examined how expressing preferences in one domain can influence preference expression in an unrelated domain (Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011). This work shows that expressing preferences for a self-expressive brand in one product category (e.g., computers) diminishes the valuation of self-expressive brands in unrelated product categories (e.g., shoes). This finding supports the view that self-expression, rather than being domain-specific or a chronic trait, is a general motivational force that can be temporarily satiated by fulfilling the need to engage in it. This finding also has important implications for brand management, as it suggests that brands compete not only with other brands within their own product category but across product categories for a share of the consumer's identity.

Why Do People Have a Need to Self-Express?

An even more fundamental question than whether people have a need to express themselves is why people might have a need for self-expression. Basic evolutionary motives have been put forth to explain the needs for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and self-enhancement (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), but it is not readily apparent how evolutionary motives would account for a need to engage in self-expression. However, at least two explanations have been put forth to account for a need for self-expression, namely (1) that self-expression fulfills a need for self-consistency and (2) that self-expression fulfills a need to view one's self in a positive light.

The first argument, that the need for self-expression stems from a need for consistency, stems from findings reflecting a need for consistency in greater recall for self-consistent (vs. inconsistent) information, less distortion of self-consistent (vs. inconsistent) information, and greater positive affect resulting from receipt of self-consistent (vs. inconsistent) information (Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994). It is posited that self-consistency is valued because people innately like the predictable and familiar and dislike uncertainty (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). By engaging in self-expression, this line of argument suggests, people are being consistent with their internal selves, thus fulfilling the need for consistency and certainty.

The second argument, that self-expression stems from a need to view the self in a positive light, is based on the established idea that people have a strong desire to view themselves positively (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), and thereby that they tend to construct positive self-concepts (Aronson, 1999). This line of argument suggests that self-expression tends to result in the expression of positive traits, which leads to pride and positive affect; on the other hand, for the same reasons, suppression of one's traits can lead to negative affect (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). At its core, this argument seems to blur the distinction between self-expression and self-enhancement, suggesting that the need to express one's individuality is really just a need to enhance one's self-concept. Although self-expression might indeed

be driven by self-enhancement motives in some cases, explaining all self-expressive behavior through a need to self-enhance seems to contradict the nature of self-expressive behavior as a need to display one's actual, inner self and is inconsistent with the idea that people display not only their positive qualities in self-expressive works (such as songs and poetry), but also their fears, personal tragedies, and imperfections (Dewey, 2005), and that people often express opinions or values of ambiguous valence (e.g., Gal & Rucker, 2011). Likewise, the logic behind the first explanation, that people engage in self-expression because of a need for consistency and certainty, is inconsistent with the idea that self-expressive behavior often includes the expression of emotions associated with uncertainty, such as sadness and fear (Tiedens & Linton, 2001), as depicted in self-expressive works of art and music (Dewey, 2005). If certainty and positivity were the goal, one might try to distract one's self from these emotions rather than to dwell on them and express them.

Further, both these arguments essentially dismiss the idea that people have an innate need to express their self and imply that the value of self-expressive behavior results from the cognitions attached to what is expressed rather than from the act of expression itself. Moreover, both these explanations focus on the expression of traits, but less on values, attitudes, beliefs, or emotions, that are the subject of much self-expressive behavior.

Thus, neither of the explanations posited to account for a need to engage in self-expressive behavior appears fully satisfactory. Perhaps another explanation is that, as fundamentally social beings, our individuality is fully realized only through the effects we have on others (i.e., on others' thoughts, actions, or behaviors). Indeed, the early-nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel argued that self-consciousness is fundamentally dependent on "recognition" of the self by others, and that without others' recognition, one's acts have no meaning. Thus, in order to prove the certainty of one's existence, individuals must exert an influence on others (Hegel, 1807). At present, of course, such explanations remain within the realm of speculation.

Need for Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement refers to people's motivation to enhance their self-worth (Sedikides & Strube, 1995).[1] Individuals are generally strongly motivated to maintain a positive self-image and to maintain and boost their self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004; Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Tesser, 2000). Identity-signaling behavior can function to enhance self-worth through at least two major pathways: it can lead to social approval and it can lead to the generation of social proof.

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[1] Self-protection, likewise, refers to individuals' motivation to maintain their self-worth, particularly in the face of threats, and is generally considered a form of the self-enhancement motive (e.g., Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

Social Approval

Social approval tends to boost self-worth (Schlenker, 1980). As a result, people aspire to be liked, valued, appreciated, admired, and respected by others. To this end, people tend to present themselves in a manner that will generate a favorable impression of themselves in others' eyes (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Schlenker, 1980). Flattery, mimicry, social conformity, and self-promotion are among the means by which individuals attempt to generate favorable impressions and thereby to enhance their self-concept (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Consumer researchers have shown that consumers also use identity-signaling behavior to fulfill self-enhancement motives. In particular, consumers use brands and possessions to signal an identity to others that they expect will result in social approval and thereby will enhance their self-concept. Aspects of identity consumers signal to generate favorable impressions, and thereby enhance their own self-image, include their cultural literacy, taste, and sense of style (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005; Twitchell, 2002).

The use of brands to signal an identity that will affect others' impressions, and thereby boost one's self-concept, can be traced to Veblen's (1899) idea of conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption refers to the notion that individuals use costly markers of questionable practical utility, such as luxury brands or other high-priced products, to signal social status and wealth. Recently, research has shown that signaling status through wearing high-status brands indeed affects others' perceptions of the individual wearing the brand in a favorable manner (Gillath, Bahns, Ge, & Crandall, 2012; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011).

In addition to (or in concert with) establishing status in the eyes of others, consumer researchers have also shown that individuals often use products and brands to establish their uniqueness and distinctiveness in the eyes of others (Ariely & Levav, 2000; Berger & Heath, 2007; Griskevicius et al., 2006; Gross, 1977; Snyder, 1992; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Consistent with the idea that signaling uniqueness enhances one's image, conformity can often be perceived as a sign of low social status (Berger & Ward, 2010; Feltovich, Harbaugh, & To, 2002; Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Mazzocco, Rucker, Galinsky, & Anderson, 2012), whereas uniqueness and lack of conformity can be viewed as a mark of status (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014).

A question that arises is how consumers reconcile the motive to belong to a group (discussed previously) with the desire to signal uniqueness and status through a lack of conformity. Chan, Berger, and Van Boven (2012) addressed this question in a series of experiments that found that individuals pursue assimilation and differentiation goals on different choice dimensions. Individuals tend to conform on dimensions that are strongly tied to their group identity (e.g., a particular clothing brand) and to differentiate on dimensions that are less tied to their group identity (e.g., a particular color of clothing).

Social Proof

Closely related to the idea that individuals engage in identity-signaling behavior to gain social approval and thereby enhance their self-concept is the idea that individuals engage in identity-signaling behavior to gain social proof for a positive self-image. Research shows that the self-concept is malleable rather than fixed (Linville & Carlston, 1994; Markus & Kunda, 1986). This suggests that people's identity is inherently ambiguous and uncertain. Thus, if an individual can signal to, and thereby convince, others that the individual has desirable qualities, then the individual will be more likely to believe he or she has the desirable qualities himself or herself. In other words, an individual can boost his or her self-concept through others' perceptions of the individual's qualities because others' perceptions and beliefs function as a form of social proof (see Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

To elaborate, in the physical world, proof for a particular position is obtained through physical evidence. However, in the social world, physical and definitive evidence of one's identity is typically lacking. As a result, people tend to rely on the beliefs of others to form and validate their own beliefs (Cialdini et al., 1999; Festinger, 1954). Thus, by choosing a healthy option (Gal & Liu, 2011), donating to charity (Glazer & Konrad, 1996), attending a prestigious university (Spence, 1973), wearing a high status brand (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2009), or conveying an exclusive piece of information (Berger & Schwartz, 2011), individuals can affect others' perceptions of themselves and thereby obtain social proof either to reaffirm their image of themselves (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Dolich, 1969; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985) or to boost their self-image (Ariely & Levav, 2000; Bellezza et al., 2014).

In addition to evidence from brand and product choice, research focused on consumer's dissemination of their beliefs provides relatively explicit evidence that individuals engage in identity-signaling behavior in order to obtain social proof and, in so doing, protect or boost their self-image. In a seminal case study in social psychology, Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) observed that members of a cult increased proselytization of their beliefs after an event that should have served to disconfirm their beliefs. Festinger and colleagues argued that this paradoxical effect occurred because the beliefs had become important to the cult members' identity. As a result, disconfirmation of the beliefs threatened the cult members' identity, inducing cult members to obtain social proof for their beliefs by convincing others as an attempt to protect their identity.

Bringing experimental scrutiny to this conclusion, Gal and Rucker (2010) found that individuals tend to express themselves on issues that are both important to them and in which their confidence is temporarily undermined. For example, Gal and Rucker (2010) found that Macintosh owners who believed in the superiority of Macs to PCs expressed greater likelihood of trying to persuade others to purchase a Mac when their confidence in the belief of the Mac's superiority was acutely undermined. Moreover, Gal and Rucker (2010)

found that individuals' propensity to attempt to convince others of their beliefs was higher the more important the beliefs were to the individual. These findings suggest that a motive for expressing one's beliefs is to obtain social proof for those beliefs and thereby to bolster beliefs that are important to one's self-concept.

Response to Threat

Individuals are particular likely to engage in self-enhancement when their self-concept is threatened (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Steele, 1988; Tesser & Cornell, 1991). In the context of consumer behavior, research shows that people tend to respond to threats by buying products that symbolically compensate for the threatened aspect of their identity, a phenomenon termed compensatory consumption (for reviews, see Lee & Shrum, 2013; Rucker & Galinsky, 2013). For example, people are more likely to buy high-status products when they are temporarily induced to perceive themselves as having low power (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2009), to buy products that signal their intelligence when their intelligence is threatened (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Kim & Gal, 2014), and to buy products that offer variety when a sense of personal freedom or choice is threatened (Levav & Zhu, 2009).

Signaling personal values has also been shown to protect individuals from threat. In particular, research on self-affirmation shows that when individuals express personal values, their self-concept is relatively protected from threats (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010; Steele, 1988; Townsend & Sood, 2012). For instance, Townsend and Sood (2012) showed that the purchase of aesthetically attractive products could protect individuals from self-threats because the choice of aesthetic products was an expression of a personal value of beauty. Similarly, Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois (2012) show status objects restore a damaged sense of power. Although the precise mechanism by which self-affirmation protects an individual from self-threats is not fully understood, it is generally believed that self-affirmation provides a boost to self-worth by highlighting an aspect of one's identity from which one derives self-worth; in comparison to the highlighted attribute, the threat does not seem to reflect significantly on one's overall value as a person (Sivanathan, Molden, Galinsky, & Ku, 2008; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000).

Unintended Consequences of Identity Signaling

As discussed in the preceding sections, social identity-signaling behavior is governed by a number of motives, among which this chapter has discussed three, namely belonging, self-expressive, and self-enhancing motives. However, recent research has documented that engaging in identity-signaling behavior can also yield downstream consequences other than those intended by the actor engaging in the behavior.

One such consequence is depletion of regulatory resources. In particular, research has established that engaging in self-enhancing behavior typically requires self-regulation (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Thus, identity-signaling behavior motivated by the desire to enhance one's self-image can yield similar consequences to engaging in other self-regulatory behaviors, namely depletion of regulatory resources (Gal & Wilkie, 2010) and anger (Gal and Liu, 2011). For instance, Gal and Wilkie (2010) found that when men chose products they perceived to be masculine in order to signal their manliness rather than because they intrinsically preferred the more "masculine" products, they became depleted. This depletion resulted in diminished performance on a subsequent task.

Other research has focused on the idea that signaling one's identity leads one to act in a manner consistent with the activated identity (Kettle & Häubl, 2011; Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009). Early research showed that simply expressing attitudes verbally increased the degree to which individuals believed in the expressed attitudes (Higgins & Rholes, 1978) as can simply repeating one's attitude multiple times (Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007). Similarly, early research showed that when individuals made their attitudes public, their commitment to their attitudes increased (Kiesler, Roth, & Pallak, 1974; Kiesler & Sakumura, 1966).

More recently, Kettle and Häubl (2011) showed that signing one's name activates consumers' identity and leads them to act in a manner congruent with their identity. Similarly, research has found that engaging in self-expression by providing one's opinions and beliefs about particular attitude objects can affect people's subsequent attitudes and behaviors toward the attitude objects (Liu & Gal, 2011). In particular, the act of expressing attitudes and beliefs about an attitude object can activate novel thoughts about the attitude object that can lead to subsequent behavior consistent with the activated thoughts (Liu & Gal, 2011). For example, Liu and Gal (2011) found that the form in which people provided their beliefs about how an organization could best achieve its goals influenced their perceived relationship with the organization, which in turn affected their likelihood of transacting with the organization. For example, giving advice to a nonprofit organization led individuals to adopt the perspective of the organization receiving their advice, which in turn made them feel closer to the organization and ultimately to increase their willingness to donate to the organization. Conversely, stating their expectations of an organization led individuals to adopt distance from the organization, which decreased the closeness that individuals felt to the organization and thereby the likelihood that individuals would transact with the organization.

Future Directions

So far, this chapter has described three significant drivers of identity-signaling behavior as well as unintended consequences of engaging in such

behavior. In so doing, the chapter has noted several unanswered or under-explored questions that might serve as potentially fruitful directions for future research. Among these, for example, were the possibility of generating a psychometric scale to measure self-expression as well as attempting to resolve the mechanism through which signaling one's values (e.g., self-affirmation) protects the self-concept. In this section, for the sake of brevity, the scope of discussion is limited to four additional potential opportunities for future research on identity-signaling behavior.

Disentangling Identity-Signaling Motives

Perhaps the key theme that has emerged from this review is that the various motives for identity-signaling behavior have been conflated in the literature. That is, any given behavior might be multiply determined or be susceptible to interpretation through multiple motives. This suggests that for identity-signaling behavior to develop as a research area, research is needed that disentangles the different motives underlying identity-signaling behavior and identifies the specific antecedents and consequences of identity-signaling behavior associated with the need to belong, the need to engage in self-expression, and the need to self-enhance, among others.

One important and related question that can be addressed by disentangling the various identity-signaling motives is that of when identity-signaling behavior serves as a means of self-expression (i.e., signaling an identity with the goal of expressing one's actual self) as opposed to as a means of self-enhancement (i.e., signaling an identity with the goal of generating a favorable impression). Self-determination theory, with its dichotomous conception of the motives underlying behavior, can help illuminate how these motives might be disentangled. In particular, self-determination theory suggests that choice tends to be either intrinsically motivated or extrinsically motivated (i.e., motivated by a need to conform to rigid or coercive internalized norms or demands; Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006; see also Laran & Janiszewski, 2011). Moreover, self-determination theory suggests that these motives can be disentangled experimentally through their different consequences, with intrinsically motivated behavior being cognitively energizing and extrinsically motivated behavior being cognitively depleting. Based on this theorizing, as noted previously, Gal and Wilkie (2010) showed that men's choices of masculine products were likely not always a form of self-expression but often a form of self-enhancement and conformity.

This paradigm, focused on whether identity-signaling behavior is energizing or depleting, can likely be extended to disentangling whether different forms of identity-signaling behavior reflect self-expressive or self-enhancing motives. For example, research might identify when prosocial behavior (e.g., composing an appeal for an environmental nonprofit organization) is self-expressive versus self-enhancive by examining the circumstances under which prosocial behavior is energizing versus depleting. Likewise, as other differences in consequences

associated with different identity-signaling motives are identified, new para-
digms for disentangling the motives underlying specific forms of identity-
signaling behavior can emerge.

The Role of Culture

Another potentially fruitful area for future research is identifying the degree to
which different identity-signaling behaviors are universal versus culturally
determined. In particular, some researchers have argued that the need for self-
expression (Kim & Sherman, 2007) and self-enhancement (Heine, Lehman,
Markus, & Kitayama, 1999) might be culturally determined. In Western cul-
tures, where consumers predominantly have an independent sense of self, choice
tends to be viewed as a sign of individual freedom, and thus individuals are
thought to use choice to express their inner self so as to realize this individuality
(Bellah et al., 1985). Likewise, individuals are thought to use choice to enhance
the self-concept (e.g., Heine et al., 1999). However, the majority of consumers
in Asian cultures tend to hold an interdependent sense of self, meaning that the
self tends to be viewed in relation to others (Kim & Sherman, 2007; Markus &
Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). In these cultures, the individual's sense of self
is both guided and constrained by social roles, obligations, and relationships
(Kim & Sherman, 2007). Thus, it has been argued, Asian consumers might view
choice more as a means of fitting in with the group than as a means to express
their individuality or to enhance their self-concept (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus,
& Nisbett, 1998; Kim & Drolet, 2003; Kim & Sherman, 2007).

Markus and Schwartz (2010) summarized the cross-cultural choice literature
and reached the conclusion that whereas choice is a form of positive self-
expression in Western cultures, in Eastern cultures, self-expression is less
valued, and choice is more likely to signal one's social relationships, roles,
memberships, norms, and obligations. Similar challenges were made to the
universality of a self-enhancement motive, with researchers arguing that indi-
viduals from Eastern cultures, given their interdependent sense of self, tend not
to have self-enhancement motives (Heine et al., 1999). This was a serious
challenge to the foundations of social psychology since the universality of a
self-enhancement motive has been central to the development of the field
(Aronson, 1992).

However, in response to such challenges, it has been argued that people
universally self-enhance on personally important dimensions, and that people's
sense of self simply determines what dimensions are important to them. Those
with an independent sense of self tend to view individual attributes as more
important to their identity, and hence they tend to enhance on individual
attributes, whereas interdependents tend to view collectivistic attributes as more
important to their identity and hence tend to self-enhance on collectivistic
attributes (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Likewise, the argument can
be made that those with an interdependent sense of self still have a need for self-
expression, but that such self-expression is more likely to take the form of

signaling a group identity. Such arguments can be subject to increasing experimental scrutiny as distinctions between the different identity-signaling motives are clarified and the specific antecedents and consequences associated with the different identity-signaling motives are ascertained.

Unexamined Forms of Identity-Signaling Behavior

Whereas the predominant focus of identity-signaling behavior research has been on product and brand choice, limited research has also examined other forms of identity-signaling behavior, including survey responses (e.g., (Gal & Rucker, 2011), online content generation (e.g., Schau & Gilly, 2003), and word-of-mouth communications (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). Future research might identify other forms of identity-signaling behavior not as yet examined. For example, some research has argued that willingness-to-pay measures for the protection of public goods, such as to preserve a park or lake, used in contingent valuation studies are not truly reflective of individuals' willingness to pay to protect the goods, but of individual's attitudes toward the public good (Kahneman & Knetsch, 1992). However, whether such measures indeed reflect attitudes rather than participants' willingness to pay for the goods has received little empirical attention and is thus ripe for research attention.

Moreover, research might examine whether willingness to pay (and purchase likelihood) for private goods, such as new products and services, reflect identity-signaling motives rather than people's true willingness to pay for these goods. For example, a person's expression of his or her willingness to pay for a novel product might serve to signal that they are a hip, exciting person rather than reflecting their true willingness to pay for the product. Thus, future research might examine willingness to pay and other potential forms of identity-signaling behavior, including charitable giving and tipping behavior, that have to date been little explored in the context of identity-signaling research.

Other Motives for Identity-Signaling Behavior

This chapter has reviewed three broad motives for engaging in identity-signaling behavior, but many others likely exist, both identified and unidentified. For instance, research shows that people engage in identity-signaling behavior not only to enhance their self-concept but to verify it (Swann, 1983). Other research has shown that people engage in identity-signaling behavior because they believe signaling a particular identity will help them acquire things they desire from others. For instance, research has shown that signaling status can help people obtain favorable treatment (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) as well as assist in mate acquisition (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Sundie et al., 2011) and that signaling anger can help people obtain a better outcome in a negotiation (Andrade & Ho, 2009). How such a motive interacts with the other motives described in this chapter is a potentially interesting question for future research.

Likewise, identifying previously unexamined motives for engaging in identity-signaling behavior seems to be a promising area for future research. For example, the section "Unintended Consequences of Identity Signaling" discussed the notion that engaging in identity-signaling behavior tends to lead to behavior congruent with the signaled identity. A question that arises is whether people proactively signal particular identities in order to regulate their own actions in a manner consistent with the signaled identity.

Conclusion

Despite a long history of research on identity-signaling behavior, the notion of identity-signaling behavior as a distinct area of study is still in its infancy. Indeed, until now, only limited reviews of the topic have appeared in the consumer psychology literature. Whereas some motives that drive identity signaling behavior, namely self-enhancement motives and the need to belong, have been the subject of extensive research, others that are perhaps most relevant to consumer psychology, such as self-expression motives, are surprisingly poorly explored. Moreover, the distinctions between and interactions among these different motives have received little attention. As such, the present chapter represents an initial attempt to survey the emergence of identity-signaling behavior as a coherent area of study not limited to consumer psychology, but one that spans economics, sociology, psychology, and consumer research.

Although identity-signaling behavior as a well-defined area of study is still developing, the number of papers that can be categorized as focusing on identity-signaling behavior is growing. Advancing identity-signaling research seems to be particularly well-suited to consumer psychologists, as identity-signaling behavior has not been extensively tackled by researchers in the closely related discipline of social psychology, and, at the same time, the topic is highly relevant to consumption. Indeed, identity-signaling behavior can be considered central to consumption given the view that much consumption is symbolic rather than functional (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Thus, there is little doubt that the topic presents many opportunities for novel research, and it is expected that identity-signaling behavior will continue to develop as a topic area in consumer psychology and yield important new insights in the coming years.

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