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Why We Like the Old Spice Guy: Consumer Identity and Product Preferences

Consumers may embrace products linked to a social identity such as gender or university affiliation when that identity is threatened by negative information, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Past research suggests that identity-based strategies may backfire as consumers will tend to dissociate from products linked to a threatened identity,” write authors Katherine White (University of British Columbia), Jennifer J. Argo (University of Alberta), and Jaideep Sengupta (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology). “In contrast, our findings offer a more optimistic view: a social identity threat may actually lead certain consumers to embrace identity-linked products.”

Companies often try to link their brand and products with a particular social identity and assume that consumers will favor their products if they are part of the group. For example, recent *Old Spice* commercials appeal to male consumers to “Smell like a man, man” whereas *Secret* links its brand of deodorant to female identity with the tagline “Strong like a woman.”

Previous research has found that consumers generally will avoid products linked with an aspect of their social identity when it is threatened by negative information such as a newspaper article claiming that women have inferior math abilities or that one’s university has fallen in ranking. However, the authors found that consumers who identify closely with a particular social identity may actually embrace products associated with that identity when it is threatened.

“Consumers who are more independent are particularly concerned with viewing themselves in a positive light so they tend to shun products linked to a threatened identity. In contrast, those who identify closely with a particular group actually heighten their preference for products linked to the threatened identity. They ward off the threat by activating and reinforcing their sense of belonging,” the authors conclude.

Katherine White, Jennifer J. Argo, and Jaideep Sengupta. “Dissociative Versus Associative Responses to Social Identity Threat: The Role of Consumer Self-Construal.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2012. For more information, contact Katherine White (Katherine.White@sauder.ubc.ca) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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