The conflicting choices of alternating selves

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A B S T R A C T

Participants made choices after the salience of their social identities was manipulated. Choices assimilated to the salient identity, whether that identity stemmed from a person’s role (e.g., student, family member) or culture (e.g., Chinese, American). Thus, the preferences that participants expressed depended on the identity that happened to be salient at the moment of choice, with participants expressing preferences when one identity was salient that conflicted with the preferences they would express were another identity salient. These effects only arose for those who held and identified with the evoked identity. Studies further revealed that such identity-congruent choices influence post-choice satisfaction and regret: participants were less satisfied with their prior choices when the identity salient during post-choice evaluation or consumption was different from the identity salient during choice, compared to when the “choosing” and “consuming” identities were the same. Implications of the findings are discussed.

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Introduction

People alternate among different roles and identities. A working woman might think of herself as a mother while with her children, but may see herself as a professional while at work. At other times she may consider herself a woman, a wife, a daughter, or a member of a political group. The list of potential identities can be extensive, with some of a person’s identities (e.g., “mother”) conjuring up strikingly different values and ideals from others (e.g., “CEO”). Although one might hope that one’s decisions would reflect a coherent preference ordering that corresponds to the wishes of the self as a whole, the co-existence of such conflicting identities raises the possibility that one may express noticeably different preferences depending upon which identity happens, at the moment of decision, to be most salient. For example, a woman whose professional identity is salient might use a bookstore gift certificate for professionally oriented books, even though she may have chosen children’s books had her maternal identity been evoked instead. Furthermore, her subsequent satisfaction with her new books might critically depend on whether her professional identity is salient when she contemplates her purchase (in which case the purchase may seem like a good idea), or whether her maternal identity is salient instead (in which case the purchase may seem, in hindsight, like an unfortunate use of the gift certificate).

This paper examines how the relative salience of conflicting identities affects choices and subsequent satisfaction with those choices. We show that choices assimilate to the momentarily salient identity, even when that identity entails preferences that conflict with one’s other identities. We further show that one must hold and identify with the elicited identity for it to alter choice. Finally, we investigate how post-choice satisfaction and regret are affected by post-choice fluctuations in identity salience.

Context effects on choice

Although classical theory posits a stable, consistent preference ordering, much research suggests that fleeting and logically inconsequential changes in context can greatly alter expressed preferences. For example, despite being logically equivalent, procedures such as choosing, pricing, and rating frequently do not elicit equivalent preference orderings: people reveal one ordering when they state their maximum willingness to pay, but indicate a different ordering when they choose (Lichtenstein & Slovic, 1971). Similarly, preferences elicited via an isolated evaluation of options can reverse when those options are directly compared (Hsee, 1996). Observed preferences are even affected by logically inconsequential changes in description (e.g., highlighting the chance of gain vs. loss, Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Such findings suggest that preferences are not always fixed, but rather are, at times, constructed during elicitation (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1992; Slovic, 1995) and thus heavily influenced by the elicitation context.
Contextual influences on preferences need not only arise via "external" changes in option description or elicitation procedure: fleeting internal states of the decision maker, such as mood (Lerner & Keltner, 2001) and goal activation (Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, & Tanner, 2008; Novemsky & Dhar, 2005) may also serve as a context for, and an influence on, choice. In what follows, we explore a different type of internal context that may affect choice: the momentarily salient identity. We hold choice descriptions and elicitation procedures constant, and we manipulate instead the salience of respondents' social identities, thereby presumably altering their most vivid values and, consequently, their choices. We thus argue that even when decision scenarios are left intact, the momentarily salient self-concept can nevertheless be altered to expose malleable preferences.

Multiple social identities

The current studies are predicated on the notion that people have various identities, or selves. Research suggests that the self-concept, rather than being stable and monolithic, is malleable and multifaceted, with different aspects surfacing at different times (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Turner, 1985). For example, self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) holds that the self-concept includes a person's many social identities, which can reflect nationality, ethnicity, sex, occupation, or virtually any other self-relevant category (Deaux, 1993; Turner, 1987). Although a person may have many such identities, it is not thought that all are constantly salient; rather, identity salience is presumed to fluctuate in response to situational cues (Turner, 1987). When a situation renders an applicable identity salient, people are thought to "self-stereotype," adopting the traits and values of the momentarily salient identity (Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996; Turner, 1985, 1987; see also Akerlof & Kranton, 2000, 2002, 2005).

This view of the self-concept suggests how identity salience might influence decision making. We specifically propose that the value fluctuations associated with identity-salience shifts will affect expressed preferences, with the momentarily salient identity serving as an influential internal context that shapes choice. Hence, a working mother may adopt maternal values and express maternal preferences when her "mother" identity is salient, but may display different—even contradictory—preferences when her professional identity surfaces instead.

Tests of related ideas in the domain of attitudes have been encouraging. One study capitalized on conflicting identities among undergraduate science majors whose identities as socializing-oriented college students or as intellectual scientists-in-training were rendered salient by telling them that the researchers recruited "a group of students (scientists)...to study how students (scientists) view" various issues (Reicher & Levine, 1994). Those with salient scientist identities were more likely than their "student" counterparts to express favorable attitudes towards practices, such as animal vivisection, stereotypically supported by scientists (see also Levine & Reicher, 1996). These results are consistent with preference assimilation to the salient identity, but because participants were explicitly told that researchers were interested in the views of particular groups, it is unclear whether values truly fluctuated with identity salience, or whether participants instead complied with a perceived demand to report stereotypical group attitudes.

Such concerns about experimental demand can be allayed by using a different, subtler methodology. Specifically, one can use priming to raise the salience of a social identity in an initial task; one can then measure preferences in a second, ostensibly unrelated task. Prior research suggests that priming can indeed increase the accessibility of certain constructs to affect responding (e.g., those primed with "rudeness" act more rudely, Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Priming also seems to be effective in heightening identity salience in particular: for example, priming a respondent's ethnicity has been shown to increase subsequent liking of a same-ethnicity spokesperson (Forehand, Deshpandé, & Reed, 2002; see Morris, Carranza, & Fox, 2008, and Reed, 2004, for further examples).

Although such research is intriguing, the existing research on identity salience and priming has typically examined the impact of priming one identity at a high vs. low level. Thus, the question raised above—whether evoking one held identity vs. another conflicting held identity leads to conflicting choices—remains largely unanswered; research has not yet systematically examined the implications of the fact that people often hold identities that entail conflicting preferences. For example, although Reed (2004) found that people are more interested in a family-oriented product (specifically, in a personal digital assistant advertised as allowing one to stay in touch with family) when a family identity is made salient vs. when family seems less important, this preference (for a PDA) may not conflict with the values of other, non-family identities. It is thus not clear whether preferences would be different were another identity elicited. Along similar lines, prior research does not conclusively illuminate how identity salience affects choices for which the potentially salient identities (e.g., the family vs. occupational identity) entail opposing preference orderings. Will people make choices in line with the preferences of the salient identity, even if those choices are inconsistent with the choices they would make were another, important identity salient instead?

This paper examines what happens when an individual who simultaneously holds identities entailing opposing values (e.g., "mother," "lawyer") chooses between options that embody these opposing values (e.g., "attend child's soccer game" or "meet with client") while one vs. another identity is salient. One possibility is that heightening the salience of any identity (and thus, bringing the self to the fore during decision making) may increase involvement and prompt people to reflect upon the true self's real wishes, so that decisions made while any identity is salient will reflect similar values. However, another possibility, suggested by research on the malleability of the self-concept, is that people will make fundamentally different choices, implying fundamentally contrasting preferences and values, depending upon which identity is momentarily salient. Such a tendency could lead not only to inconsistency in choice, but also to profound implications for post-choice satisfaction, as discussed next.

Post-choice satisfaction and regret

Thus, one contribution of this paper is to examine whether people express conflicting preferences as their conflicting identities are evoked. A further contribution is to explore the consequences of such identity-salience effects for post-choice satisfaction and regret. That is, many choices are evaluated at multiple points in time: after deciding, one may re-evaluate the options at the moment of consumption or even post-consumption. Prior research has uncovered many factors that alter a decision maker's satisfaction with his or her choices. For example, satisfaction is affected by the quality of the chosen item: people are more satisfied when that item exceeds expectations (Oliver, 1980; Szymanski & Henard, 2001) and less satisfied when a forgone option outperforms the chosen one (Tsios, 1998). Satisfaction is also affected by how the choice was made, with satisfaction being influenced by the level of personal responsibility one felt for the choice (Botti & McGill, 2006), by whether the decision was made following prolonged conscious deliberation (Dijksterhuis & van Olden, 2006), by the number or variety of items in the choice set (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Mogilner, Rudnick, & Iyengar, 2008; Sag & Friedland, 2007), and by whether the choice involved an unjustifiable departure from the status quo (Inman & Zeelenberg, 2002; Mannetti, Pierro, & Kruglanski, 2007), among other things.
The current research

In what follows, we first examine whether eliciting conflicting identities leads to conflicting choices. Specifically, we compare the choices of those for whom one identity is evoked to the choices of an equivalent group for whom another, conflicting identity is evoked. If evoking an identity prompts value alignment with that identity, and if participants use those values to construct their preferences, we would expect choices to assimilate to the momentarily salient identity, people may find themselves bound to an option chosen under one identity when other identities, with conflicting preferences, emerge. We specifically predict that people will be less satisfied with their earlier choices when the identity salient during post-choice evaluation entails preferences that conflict with the preferences of the identity salient during choice. Identity-congruent choices thus have the potential to generate predictable instances of regret and to have far-reaching effects on well-being, especially if people’s “choosing” and “evaluating” identities systemically differ.

Study 1a: role identities

We first examined the effects of eliciting conflicting identities with college students, who are often caught between two conflicting identities (cf., Reicher & Levine, 1994): on the one hand, they are novice scholars engaged in intellectual pursuits, but on the other hand, they are in a milieu that promotes socializing and frivolous activities. Capitalizing on this tension, we manipulated the salience of students’ scholar and socialite identities; we then assessed preferences in a separate, ostensibly unrelated task. We predicted that, even when all respondents faced the same choice task, with options described in the same way, choices would shift to correspond to the identity rendered salient.

Method

Participants

Undergraduates (N = 150) at a northeastern university participated for course credit.

Materials and procedure

To elicit the scholar identity, randomly assigned participants (n = 74) completed a brief survey about world issues of importance to students at that university; this was intended to evoke their identities as scholars concerned with political issues and world affairs. To evoke the socialite identity, the remaining participants responded to parallel questions about how men and women feel about campus issues. This was designed to evoke thoughts associated with campus socializing.

Preferences were assessed by a separate survey (see Appendix A), which asked participants to make hypothetical choices between several consumer items, order counterbalanced. Each choice pitted an item relatively congruent with the scholar identity (the item listed first below) against an item more compatible with the socialite. Three choices were between periodicals; participants chose The Economist or Cosmopolitan, The Wall Street Journal or USA Today, and Newsweek or Sports Illustrated. The fourth choice was between two films (Before Night Falls and Chocolat). Most (n = 107) participants received all four choices; the rest saw only the first and the third. To mask the connection between the elicitation and the choices, both were embedded within a larger set of unrelated questionnaires. Furthermore, in this and the following studies, salience manipulations and dependent measures bore separate titles and instructions and differed in font and format. Upon completion, participants were debriefed and asked if they had suspected a connection between the two critical questionnaires. None had.

Results and discussion

Neither sex nor question order interacted with the salience manipulations in any study in this paper; hence, these factors will not be considered further.

To assess the impact of the identity-salience manipulation, we created an index score for each participant by summing the number of scholar-congruent choices he or she made and dividing by the total number of choices he or she made. This score thus represents the overall proportion of a participant’s choices that were consistent with the scholar identity; scores could range from 0 (choices entirely socialite-congruent) to 1 (choices perfectly scholar-congruent). Supporting our predictions, the average score was .50 when the scholar was salient, but was a less scholarly .38 when the socialite was evoked, t(148) = 2.56, p = .01, see Table 1. Identity salience reliably affected decisions, with scholar-salient participants choosing scholarly options more frequently than participants for whom the conflicting socialite identity was salient.

We replicated these results in a follow-up study that used an arguably more natural identity elicitation: in a laboratory study ostensibly examining “language use in email,” we asked students to compose responses to email messages, with message content manipulated to elicit the scholar or socialite. Subsequent choices among a new set of consumer items again were more scholarly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholarly option</th>
<th>Salient identity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Economist (%)</td>
<td>40.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Wall Street Journal (%)</td>
<td>39.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newsweek (%)</td>
<td>63.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before Night Falls (%)</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Scholarly Index</td>
<td>.50</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1

Percent choosing the scholarly option, Study 1a.
when the scholar (vs. socialite) identity was salient. It appears that choices assimilate towards the identity that happens to be salient at the moment of choice, even when the choice task and options are held constant, and even if this assimilation entails expressing preferences that conflict with other held identities.

Study 1b: cultural identities

Study 1b extends Study 1a’s results in two ways. First, one might argue that the “scholar” and “socialite” identities used in Study 1a are in fact relatively loosely held identities that may be newly acquired and only held temporarily. Perhaps the successful manipulation of the salience of such identities to produce conflicting preferences ought not to be taken to imply that one can similarly manipulate the salience of identities that are more deeply entrenched and all-encompassing to produce similarly conflicting preferences. Culture, inasmuch as it shapes everything from basic thought processes to complex decisions (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001), is one such potentially more “encompassing” identity. Study 1b thus examines whether even the salience of cultural identities can be manipulated to affect choice.

Specifically, Study 1b built on the fact that a host of studies have found differences between Eastern and Western cultures (Nisbett et al., 2001). One over-arching finding is that East Asian cultures tend to place a greater emphasis on collectivism and social groups than do more individualistic Western cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, Western respondents tend to prefer unique or unusual items (to establish individuality), whereas East Asian respondents tend to select items that “blend in” (Kim & Markus, 1999). Furthermore, members of Eastern cultures tend to strive for the common good more than do Westerners by, for example, cooperating more often in prisoner’s-dilemma-type scenarios (Parks & Vu, 1994; see also Wong & Hong, 2005). In Study 1b, we therefore recruited participants who held both an Eastern (Chinese) and a Western (American) identity. We manipulated the salience of those identities and measured preferences for uniqueness and cooperation, predicting that participants would express more individualistic preferences when the American (vs. Chinese) identity was evoked.\(^2\)

Study 1b further addresses a possible concern about semantic overlap between the identity elicitations and choices in Study 1a. That is, elicitation questions about world affairs may have increased choices of The Economist (for example) not indirectly via increased salience of the scholarly identity, but perhaps directly, by highlighting (identity-unrelated) concerns about politics and economics. In Study 1b, however, the salience manipulations made no reference to themes of uniqueness or conformity (and the choices made no reference to America or China); thus, effects on choices would not be attributable to direct, semantic priming, but would instead be downstream consequences of a particular identity’s salience.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty adults (M\(_{\text{age}}\) = 43.4 years, SD\(_{\text{age}}\) = 8.3 years), recruited from local Chinese–American community organizations, participated in exchange for a souvenir pen. Although participants were born in Asia and raised in China or Taiwan, they had lived in the United States for an average of 15.7 years (SD = 6.4 years), thus making it likely that they would hold both Chinese and American identities.

Materials

Identities were elicited through short survey questions. To make salient the Chinese identity (n = 61), we asked brief questions such as, “Where were you born?” and “What is your favorite Chinese holiday?” To make salient the American identity (n = 59), we asked parallel questions such as, “Where do you live?” and “What is your favorite American holiday?”

Four scenarios then assessed preferences for conformity and cooperation (see Appendix A). The first asked whether participants preferred a uniquely or a traditionally colored car. The next inquired if, while dining with friends, participants would order a new, exotic dish in lieu of the traditional meal. A third investigated participants’ proneness to reciprocate a favor, and the last assessed willingness to cooperate in a prisoner’s dilemma game.

To enhance the manipulation, all materials were presented in Chinese for the Chinese-identity condition and in English for the American-identity condition. To test the translation, 176 American undergraduates responded either to the original (English) choice scenarios or to English back-translations of the Chinese scenarios. Scenario type (original vs. back-translated) did not alter responses to any question (ps > .51), suggesting that translation did not create substantive differences in the scenarios. (Translators were blind to the hypotheses.)

Procedure

Participants were approached by a Chinese–American experi- menter and were given a randomly selected questionnaire packet. Each packet contained an identity elicitation, the choice scenarios, a few unrelated questionnaires, and a page requesting demographic data. To maintain the salience of the elicited identity, “re-elicitation” questions (similar to the initial questions) appeared midway through the packet. Random assignment determined whether the choice scenarios appeared directly after the initial elicitation or after the re-elicitation. Six participants who did not complete all of the choice scenarios were excluded from the analysis.

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1 Specifically, male undergraduates (N = 33) at a northeastern university were asked to compose replies, via computer, to five messages purportedly written by a few unrelated questionnaires, and a page requesting demographic data. To maintain the salience of the elicited identity, “re-elicitation” questions (similar to the initial questions) appeared midway through the packet. Random assignment determined whether the choice scenarios appeared directly after the initial elicitation or after the re-elicitation. Six participants who did not complete all of the choice scenarios were excluded from the analysis.

2 In a similar vein, Wong and Hong (2005) found that bicultural students cooperated more in a prisoner’s dilemma after viewing Chinese (instead of American) icons. However, Wong and Hong’s participants made their decisions about cooperation after having met the other students with whom they were playing the game, raising the possibility that nonverbal cues (e.g., from one’s partners) might have augmented the effects of the manipulations. (Of note, cooperation was only affected when all participants in a given group were friends [vs. strangers], further suggesting the possibility of implicit group coordination.) In Study 1b, we not only expand the generality of Wong and Hong’s conclusions (by investigating three scenarios in addition to the prisoner’s dilemma), but participants make their decisions without meeting a partner, thereby allowing us to isolate the effects of the cultural-salience manipulation.
whether these effects are contingent on evoking an evoked higher-order concept might similarly affect choice or any lead to conflicting choices, but an important question is whether then shaped decisions.

were not an artifact of semantic overlap between the manipulations for work and family activities.4 Respondents all had similar either a family or an occupational identity and then assessed preferences for family-oriented options.

tions were expressed, when the American, rather than Chinese, identity was evoked, t(112) = 3.78, p < .001.

Thus, established cultural differences may emerge in the choices of one individual through the mere alteration of the salient identity: when simple questions triggered an American identity, bicultural respondents chose significantly more individualistic options than when a Chinese identity was evoked. Notably, these results emerged even though the salience manipulations made no reference to individuality or conformity, suggesting that the results were not an artifact of semantic overlap between the manipulations and the choices, but rather that an identity was activated that then shaped decisions.

Study 2: on not holding an evoked identity

Studies 1a and 1b suggest that eliciting conflicting identities can lead to conflicting choices, but an important question is whether any evoked higher-order concept might similarly affect choice or whether these effects are contingent on evoking an identity. Indeed, the precise role of identity in the current effects has both conceptual and practical implications.

Studies 2 and 3 investigate this issue. In Study 2, we examined whether a decision maker must actually hold the elicited identity for it to affect choice. Specifically, we evoked for our participants either a family or an occupational identity and then assessed preferences for work and family activities.4 Respondents all had similar occupations, but only some had families (a spouse and children), and thus, active family identities. If evoking any familiar construct can alter choices, then all participants should be responsive to the family-identity elicitation (since one might expect that everyone in a society is aware of the preferences associated with having a family). However, if one must actively hold an identity for one’s choices to be influenced by it, the family elicitation should mainly alter the decisions of those with families of their own.

Method

Participants

Employees of a Greek corporation (N = 167) participated voluntarily.

Materials

Participants received questionnaire packets in Greek. Those in the family-salient condition (n = 76) were first asked, “How does your family make you who you are?” and, “What do you like about the time that you spend with your family?” They were later asked to comment on the quote, “Family is like a harbor, always there to protect one from rough seas,” which appeared in a re-elicitation page midway through the packet. We purposely left the term “family” ambiguous, so that even those without immediate families could respond. Those in the occupation-salient condition (n = 91) were asked, “How does it feel to be successful at work?” and, “What do you like most about your job?” They later commented on, “Work saves us from three great evils: boredom, vice, and need.”

Preferences were assessed via five vignettes pitting a work-related activity (e.g., a presentation at work) against a family-related activity (e.g., a family vacation, see Appendix A). Participants indicated a choice for each vignette on a four-item scale ranging from definite preference for the work-oriented activity to definite preference for the family-oriented activity.

Procedure

An experimenter blind to the hypothesis contacted participants at work, assuring them of anonymity. Those willing to participate were given a randomly chosen questionnaire packet, ostensibly involving several studies. The packet contained a brief introduction, the initial identity elicitation, half of the vignettes, the re-elicitation, the remaining vignettes, and several demographic questions. Vignette order was counterbalanced.

Results and discussion

As predicted, participants selected individualistic (i.e., unique and non-cooperative) options to a greater extent when the American, as opposed to Chinese, identity was evoked (see Table 2). An overall index constructed as before and ranging from 0 to 1 assessed the proportion of stereotypically “American” choices that each participant made across the four scenarios. Average index scores were reliably higher, indicating that more American preferences were expressed, when the American, rather than Chinese, identity was evoked, t(112) = 3.78, p < .001.

| Percent choosing the “American” option, Study 1b. |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| American option                                | Salient identity |                 |
|                                                 | American        | Chinese         |
| Unique car (%)                                 | 31.6            | 24.6            |
| Special restaurant meal (%)                    | 71.9            | 40.4            |
| Non-cooperation of favor (%)                   | 86.0            | 80.7            |
| Non-cooperation in prisoner’s dilemma (%)      | 31.6            | 12.3            |
| Overall American index                         | .55             | .39             |

5 Originally, six vignettes were administered to participants, but follow-up testing in which a new set of participants (N = 81) rated the vignettes in terms of how much each required “people to make a tradeoff between work and family” revealed that one vignette was rated reliably lower than the others. Study 2 only reports the results of the five more highly rated vignettes, but even with the sixth vignette included, the results are similar. The decisions of those holding family identities were more family-oriented when the family identity was evoked (M = 2.74) than when the occupational identity was evoked (M = 2.28), t(99) = 3.71, p < .001. However, the decisions of those without families were not reliably affected by the salience manipulation (Mfamily = 2.27 vs. Moccupation = 2.27), t(64) = −.01, p = .99.

Eliciting a family, compared to an occupational, identity led to the expression of more familial preferences among those with immediate families (who were assumed to hold a family identity). A similar elicitation did not affect those without immediate families. This pattern emerged even though those without families...
were undoubtedly familiar with the family identity and its associated preferences. It is noteworthy that these no-family participants did not express profoundly anti-family, pro-work preferences; for example, 35% of them had index scores above the scale midpoint of 2.5. Thus, it seems that, rather than simply making wholly work-oriented choices, participants without families genuinely considered (and found meaningful) the work-family tradeoffs, but arrived at decisions that were largely independent of the salience manipulations. Of further note, the family and no-family groups made virtually identical decisions when the occupational identity was evoked (M(occupied family) = 2.28 vs. M(no family) = 2.27, t(89) = 0.10, p = .92); the difference in their decisions was only apparent when the family identity was salient (M(occupied family) = 2.74 vs. M(no family) = 2.27, t(74) = 3.07, p = .003). This pattern suggests that simply holding a particular identity (in this case, the family identity) will not necessarily alter one's decisions. Instead, it seems that the identity also must be salient for it to affect preferences.

Study 2 thus suggests that choices are affected by salient identities but are not similarly responsive to all familiar salient constructs; “identity” is indeed a vital part of the effects explored here. We revisit this finding in ‘General Discussion’, but next, we further explore the role that identity plays in the current effects.

Study 3: the role of identification

Study 2 suggested that the decisions of those who do not hold an identity are unaffected by its elicitation. However, even those who technically hold an identity can differ in their level of identification with it: any given identity is likely to prove significant for some people, whereas others who hold that identity may consider it to be fairly irrelevant (or even burdensome).

In Study 3, we thus measured respondents’ identification with the evoked held identities to explore another way in which an identity’s connection to the self-concept might moderate the current effects (and thus, to further examine the role that identity plays in these effects). Level of identification has been shown to have important consequences in related domains. For example, relative to “low identifiers,” “high identifiers” with a group are more likely to purchase products targeted to that group (Deshpandé, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986), to self-describe in line with group stereotypes (Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002), and to form behavioral intentions that are sensitive to group norms (Terry & Hogg, 1996). Given these findings, we predicted that identification would moderate the incidence of identity-congruent choice, with identity-congruent choice depending not just on holding, but also on identifying with, the elicited identity. Those who view that identity as important to the self-concept may exhibit identity-congruent choices when that identity is evoked. However, those who have “dis-identified” with that identity may feel burdened by this applicable but disavowed identity. They may reject the identity’s values, and, when that identity is evoked, their decisions may be unaffected by—or even contrary to—that identity. To examine these predictions, we evoked scholar and socialite identities and examined the choices of those high and low in identification with these identities.

Method

Participants

Undergraduates (N = 239) at a northeastern university participated for payment or course credit.

Identity-salience manipulations

To elicit the relevant identity (scholar or socialite), participants responded to questionnaires about college. Within each salience condition, we elicited the target identity in two distinct ways to explore different elicitation techniques. Specifically, to elicit the scholar identity, participants (n = 115) were queried about aspects of academic life. Some (n = 31) were asked: “Please list several things…most [University X] students enjoy about their classes,” “Please list a few of the reasons why…learning is so important to students [here],” and “Please briefly describe one of the most positive learning experiences that you have had [here].” Others (n = 84) were asked to briefly discuss this quote:

College is about much more than getting “A”s on exams. It’s about stretching your mind, exploring new fields of inquiry, and becoming a well-read, educated person. Only a small part…is actually measured by the grades you see on your exams and papers.

To evoke the socialite identity (n = 124), some participants (n = 32) were asked: “Please list several things…most [University X] students enjoy about the social situation and the friends they make here.” “Please list a few of the reasons why…socializing and friendships are so important to students [here],” and “Please briefly describe one of the best experiences that you have had…[here]…in some type of social setting.” Others (n = 92) read and discussed this quote:

College is about much more than what you learn in classes. It’s about finding out who you are, spending time with your friends, and learning how you respond to all sorts of new and different situations. Only a small part…is really about “book learning.”

The results were unaffected by the variations in elicitation technique within the salience conditions, and so data were collapsed across elicitation technique for analysis.
Their overall index scores were unaffected by identity salience, cases proved slightly incongruent with the elicited identity, and their (M scores were reliably higher under the scholar (the scholar, rather than socialite, was elicited, and overall index scores were unaffected by identity salience, in between the critical tasks. None had.

To examine the moderating role of identification with the scholar as factors, revealed that salience and identification interacted, F(1, 207) = 4.11, *p* = .05. The effect of identity salience was reliable when identification was high [one standard deviation above the mean], b = .07, *p* = .007, but not when it was low [one standard deviation below the mean], b = −.002, *p* = .93.) Identification with the socialite played a similar moderating role (right side of Table 3). Participants were first labeled "high" or "low" identifiers based on a median split of socialite-identification scores. (Those who scored at the median, n = 24, or who did not complete the identification scale, n = 6, were excluded from the analysis.) An ANOVA on the choice index scores, with salience condition and level of socialite identification as factors, revealed only an interaction between the factors, *F*(1,205) = 8.01, *p* = .005. For those highly identified with socializing, choices assimilated to the salient identity, t(112) = 2.69, *p* = .008, but for low identifiers, choices tended to be unaffected by, and even slightly but non-significantly to contrast from, the salient identity, t(93) = −1.38, *p* = .17. (Again, a separate analysis treated socialite identification as a continuous variable: a regression of index scores on salience condition, socialite identification, and their interaction revealed a reliable interaction, b = .008, *p* = .05. Salience had a reliable effect when identification was high [one standard deviation above the mean], b = .07, *p* = .01, but not low [one standard deviation below the mean], b = −.006, *p* = .81.)

Finally, to provide another perspective on the results, participants were split into three groups: those above the median for both scholar and socialite identification ("dual high identifiers"), those below the median for both ("dual low identifiers"), and those above or at the median for one but at or below the median for the other ("mixed identifiers"); the analysis excluded participants who fell at the median for both identities, n = 3, and participants who completed neither identification scale, n = 6. A 3 (identification level) × 2 (salience condition) ANOVA on the choice index scores revealed only a significant interaction between the factors, F(2,224) = 5.44, *p* = .005. Dual high identifiers and mixed identifiers made choices that assimilated to the salient identity (effect of salience: t(59) = 1.69, *p* = .10, and t(110) = 2.63, *p* = .01, respectively, see Fig. 2), but dual low identifiers showed a reliable contrast effect, making more scholarly choices when the socialite rather than scholar was evoked, t(55) = −1.99, *p* = .05.7

### Level of identification

We measured each participant’s identification with the scholar and socialite identities, using two parallel versions of the four-item Importance to Identity sub-scale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale. This scale measures the centrality of an identity to a person’s self-concept (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). For example, to assess identification with the socialite (socialite identity), participants rated, on a seven-point scale, their agreement with statements such as, “Being an academic (being social) is an important reflection of who I am.”

### Procedure

The materials were embedded in a 1-h session. The identity-salience manipulation (randomly assigned) and the ensuing choice questionnaires occurred early in the session, and the two level-of-identification scales appeared approximately 40 min later, with unrelated tasks interspersed in between. Upon completion, participants were asked whether they had suspected any connection between the critical tasks. None had.

### Results

T-tests revealed that levels of identification with the identities were unaffected by the identity-salience manipulations (*p* > .50). As before, we computed choice index scores for each respondent, ranging from 0 (all socialite choices) to 1 (all scholar choices). To examine the moderating role of identification with the scholar identity (left side of Table 3), participants were coded as “high” or “low” in scholar identification by a median split of scholar-identification scores. (Those who scored at the median, n = 24, or who did not complete the identification scale, n = 6, were excluded from the analysis.) An ANOVA on the choice index scores, with salience condition and level of scholar identification as factors, revealed only an interaction between the factors, *F*(1,207) = 4.11, *p* = .04: identification with the scholar identity moderated the impact of its salience. (This interaction qualified a marginally reliable effect of identity salience, *F*(1,207) = 2.70, *p* = .10, and an effect of scholar identification, *F*(1,207) = 6.28, *p* = .01.)

To parse the interaction, consider first the high scholar identifiers. For each decision, scholarly choices were more frequent when the scholar, rather than socialite, was elicited, and overall index scores were reliably higher under the scholar (M = .56) than socialite (M = .41), t(95) = 2.43, *p* = .02. The pattern was quite different among the low scholar identifiers; their choices in three of four cases proved slightly incongruent with the elicited identity, and their overall index scores were unaffected by identity salience, t(112) = −.29, *p* = .77. (Similar conclusions emerged when scholar identification was treated as a continuous variable instead of dichotomized: a regression of index scores on salience condition [1 = scholar, −1 = socialite], scholarly identification, and their interaction revealed a reliable interaction, b = .008, *p* = .05. The effect of identity salience was reliable when identification was high [one standard deviation above the mean], b = .07, *p* = .007, but not when it was low [one standard deviation below the mean], b = −.002, *p* = .93.)

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholarly option</th>
<th>Low scholar identification</th>
<th>High scholar identification</th>
<th>Low socialite identification</th>
<th>High socialite identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scholar salient</td>
<td>Socialite salient</td>
<td>Scholar salient</td>
<td>Socialite salient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookstore gift cert. (%)</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighters (%)</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakespeare’s plays (%)</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Opera (%)</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall scholar index</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 The two largest subgroups in the “mixed identifier” category are participants high in identification with the scholar identity (but at or below the median in identification with the socialite identity) and participants high in identification with the socialite identity (but at or below the median in identification with the scholar identity). The choices of both groups assimilated to the salient identity (effect of salience: t(34) = 1.74, *p* = .09, and t(31) = 1.99, *p* = .05, respectively). Also, note that, consistent with the ANOVA reported in the body of the paper, a regression of index scores on salience condition, socialite identification (continuous), scholar identification (continuous), all possible two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction revealed a reliable three-way interaction between salience condition, social identification, and socialite identification, b = −.001, *p* = .04.
Discussion

Identification moderates identity-congruent choice. Those who considered the scholarly or socialite identity to be important to their self-concept expressed more scholarly preferences when the scholar (rather than socialite) was evoked. However, those who considered neither identity to be important selected items incongruent with the identity—but unendorsed—identity. Whereas respondents in Study 2 who did not hold an identity were unaffected by its salience, those in Study 3 who held but dis-identified with the evoked identities displayed contrastive choices, suggesting that the desire to distance oneself from an applicable identity may lead one to reject the identity’s associated values and preferences when the identity is made salient. Studies 2 and 3 together suggest that the relationship between the target identity and the self-concept is a crucial determinant of the effects of identity salience.

Study 4: consequences of identity-congruent choices for post-choice satisfaction

Choices seem to align with the most recently evoked identity. However, although identity salience is inherently fluid, choices, once made, tend to be fixed. An option chosen while one identity is salient may be consumed or evaluated later, after another, potentially conflicting, identity has arisen and evoked a competing set of values. For example, a woman may subscribe to *Cosmopolitan* while a feminine identity is most salient, but may view that decision scornfully if the magazine arrives at work, where an occupational identity dominates. One may thus observe predictable fluctuations in satisfaction with identity-congruent choices as congruent vs. conflicting identities surface. In Studies 4 and 5, we examine whether people evaluate their choices less favorably when the identity salient during post-choice evaluation conflicts with the identity salient during choice, compared to when those identities match.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate business majors (N = 155) at a southeastern university participated for course credit.

Design, materials, and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (choice identity: serious business student or sociable university student) x 2 (post-choice evaluation identity: serious business student or sociable university student) design.

Participants were told they would complete several unrelated computer-based experiments. The first task evoked their identities as serious-minded business students or as sociable members of the larger university. To elicit the business identity, the business school’s logo was displayed on the screen while students rated their interest in extra-curricular business-related activities, indicated which business courses they had taken (discussing the most interesting), and rated their interest in business graduate programs (discussing the most interesting). To elicit the university identity, a logo featuring the university’s mascot was displayed, and the students rated their interest in various university sports teams.

Students then completed a survey of consumer preferences, making five hypothetical choices (see Appendix A). They selected one of four movies, one of four books, one of four magazines, one of four small gifts to receive, and one of two prizes to win. Half of the alternatives in each choice set were congruent with the business identity (e.g., *BusinessWeek, Fortune*), whereas the others (e.g., *Cosmopolitan, People*) were more congruent with the sociable university identity.

Next, participants completed a 15-min filler task, after which they were exposed to another identity elicitation which evoked either the same identity as before or the contrasting identity. To evoke the business identity, the business school logo was displayed, participants rated issues relating to business education and then listed three positive aspects of being a business major. Parallel procedures elicited the university identity: the mascot logo was displayed, participants rated issues such as the football ticket allocation system, and participants listed three positive aspects of being a student at the university.

Finally, we collected the experiment’s critical ratings. Participants were told that we were interested in their current feelings about their prior choices. For each of the five choices, participants were shown the previously available alternatives and were reminded which they had chosen. They were then asked to rate, on two nine-point scales, their satisfaction with this prior choice and the likelihood that they would make the same choice if facing similar alternatives in the future.

Results and discussion

We predicted that people would evaluate their choices less favorably when the identity salient during post-choice evaluation contrasted with the identity salient during choice, compared to when those identities matched. This prediction was supported. Specifically, we averaged the final satisfaction ratings across the five choices and found that participants for whom the post-choice evaluation identity differed from the choice identity were less satisfied with their choices (M = 7.52) than were participants for whom the evaluating and choosing identities were the same (M = 7.92), t(153) = -2.39, p = .02. This pattern emerged for each of the five choices. Thus, satisfaction with prior choices is affected by the relationship between the choosing and evaluating identities.

We next examined whether the match between choice and post-choice identities might similarly affect participants’ professed likelihood of choosing a similar item in the future. Indeed, across the five choices, participants reported being less inclined to choose similar items in the future when the evaluation identity conflicted
with the choice identity (M = 7.05), compared to when the choice and evaluation identities were the same (M = 7.52), t(153) = −2.50, p = .01. Again, this pattern emerged for each of the five choices.

As predicted, people view their choices less favorably when the identity salient after choice conflicts with the identity salient during choice. Future purchase intentions are similarly affected by these identities conflicting instead of matching. These results suggest that post-choice satisfaction is not only affected by factors such as the performance of the chosen and forgone items (Oliver, 1980; Szymanski & Henard, 2001; Tsirbas, 1998) or the number and type of items in the choice set (Lyngar & Lepper, 2000; Mogilner et al., 2008; Sagin & Friedland, 2007). Even holding these important factors constant, post-choice satisfaction fluctuates along with the decision maker's conception of who he or she is.

### Study 5: consequences of identity-congruent choice for consumption experience

Study 4 revealed that when people reflect upon earlier choices, their satisfaction is affected by the congruence between the identity salient during post-choice reflection and the identity salient during choice. Participants in Study 4, however, considered their earlier choices only in the abstract (e.g., they were reminded that they chose BusinessWeek); their actual experiences of consuming the chosen items were not measured. It is possible, after all, that actual consumption experiences, being relatively rich, might overwhelm any influence that the congruence of the choice and post-choice identities could have on enjoyment of those experiences. Thus, to extend Study 4’s results, in Study 5 we had participants make a choice following an identity elicitation, and we measured their experiences of actually consuming the chosen item after either the same or a different identity was elicited. This allowed an examination of whether post-choice fluctuations in identity salience influence actual consumption experiences.

### Method

**Participants**

Undergraduate business majors (N = 155) at a southeastern university participated for course credit.

**Design, materials, and procedure**

As in Study 4, participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (choice identity: serious business student or sociable university student) × 2 (consumption identity: serious business student or sociable university student) design.

Participants were told that they would complete several unrelated experiments. The first task evoked their identities as serious-minded business students or as sociable members of the larger university, using the same materials used in Study 4.

In an ostensibly unrelated study, participants next learned that they would watch and evaluate a video clip at the end of the experimental session. Participants then read a description of two equal-length video clips and chose the one that they preferred to watch later in the session. Both clips addressed the topic of persuasion, but one did this in a way more congruent with the business student identity (“Dr. Robert Cialdini, a professor who studies persuasion at Arizona State University, talks about how to use persuasion in advertising...”), and the other did this in a way more congruent with the university identity (“A clip from an episode of ‘Friends’ where Ross uses a key principle of persuasion when he tries to get an apartment...”).

Next, participants completed several unrelated filler tasks, lasting approximately 15 min, after which they were exposed to another identity elicitation which evoked either the same identity as before or the contrasting identity, using the materials of Study 4.

Finally, we collected the experiment’s critical ratings. Participants were reminded of the video clip they had chosen to watch, and they watched the clip, which lasted approximately 2.5 min. After watching the clip, participants were asked to evaluate it by answering the following questions on 7-point scales: “How much did you enjoy the video clip that you just watched?”; “How much did you dislike the video clip that you just watched?”; “You chose to watch (chosen clip) instead of (unchosen clip). How satisfied are you with the choice you made?”; and “You chose to watch (chosen clip) instead of (unchosen clip). How much do you regret the choice you made?”

### Results and discussion

We predicted that people would enjoy watching the video clips less when the identity made salient at consumption contrasted with the identity salient at choice, and that they would enjoy the clips more when those identities matched. This prediction was supported. When the consumption and choice identities were different instead of the same, participants reported reliably less enjoyment of the clip (M_{identities inconsistent} = 5.07 vs. M_{identities consistent} = 5.61, t(153) = −1.99, p = .05) and reliably more dislike of the clip (M_{identities inconsistent} = 2.26 vs. M_{identities consistent} = 1.76, t(153) = 1.96, p = .05). Participants also reported reliably less satisfaction with their choices (M_{identities inconsistent} = 5.06 vs. M_{identities consistent} = 5.85, t(153) = −2.82, p = .005) and marginally reliably more regret of their choices (M_{identities inconsistent} = 2.22 vs. M_{identities consistent} = 1.78, t(153) = 1.76, p = .08) when the choosing and consuming identities were different instead of the same. A composite of these four evaluations (with items reverse-coded where appropriate, so that higher numbers indicate more favorable evaluations) was reliably lower when the identity salient during consumption conflicted with the identity salient during choice (M_{identities inconsistent} = 5.41 vs. M_{identities consistent} = 5.98, t(153) = −2.40, p = .02).

Thus, post-choice fluctuations in identity salience influence the evaluation of earlier choices both prior to (Study 4) and after (Study 5) consumption. Choosing an item while one identity is salient but consuming it while a conflicting identity is salient leads to less satisfaction with the chosen item (and with the choice itself) than when the same identity is salient during both choice and consumption. Taken together, Studies 4 and 5 have intriguing consequences not only for satisfaction and regret, but also for planning, reliability, and dynamic inconsistency: people may act inconsistently with prior commitments or decisions not always because of hypocrisy or “weakness,” but because identities dormant during choice may become prominent post-choice, giving rise to new, potentially contradictory, values and priorities.

### General discussion

The above experiments altered identity salience and thereby altered choices, with the elicitation of conflicting identities yielding conflicting choices. The salient self-concept seems to have suggested a relevant (though fleetingly accessible) set of values, which respondents then used to construct identity-congruent preferences, even though those preferences were incompatible with other (less salient) held identities. The status of the evoked construct as an identity was shown to be crucial: salience manipulations had a significant impact when people held and identified with the evoked identities, but had a null, or reversed, impact on those who did not hold, or who dis-identified with, the evoked identities.
This paper showed that these effects have significant consequences for post-choice satisfaction, with particular implications for inconsistency and intertemporal choice. Identity salience is, by its very nature, a transient state, but choices can be binding and will often be re-evaluated even after the identity governing choice has receded. One may consequently observe predictable and systematic regret of prior choices as other, conflicting identities surface. Consider, for example, the potential disappointment awaiting the executive who plans a short, businesslike vacation while an ambitious corporate identity is salient, but who experiences that brief vacation while a more relaxed family identity dominates. Studies 4 and 5 demonstrate that such fluctuations in the evaluation of prior choices do, in fact, emerge. Research in this vein might shed light on apparent self-control and commitment the evaluation of prior choices do, in fact, emerge. Research in this vein might shed light on apparent self-control and commitment difficulties (cf., Schelling, 1984; Thaler & Shefrin, 1981), as well as on unethical behavior (cf., Schweitzer, DeChurch, & Gibson, 2005) and decision patterns that otherwise appear negligent or hypocritical.

**Relation to prior research**

These findings extend prior research on the multifaceted nature of the self-concept (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Turner, 1985) by showing how the salience of social identities influences decision making. Whereas others have shown that eliciting one particular held identity (vs. eliciting no other held identity) affects responding (e.g., Morris et al., 2008), the current paper compares responding under two obviously conflicting identities and shows that expressed preferences assimilate to the salient identity even when that assimilation leads people to make choices that are inconsistent with the wishes and values of other, important parts of themselves.

These findings also extend prior research on satisfaction and regret by identifying a new influence on post-choice satisfaction. Even when the quality of the chosen and forgone options is held constant (Szymanowski & Henard, 2001; Tsiros, 1998), the number and type of options in the decision set remain the same (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Mogilner et al., 2008; Sagiv & Friedland, 2007), and everything else about how the decision is made is unchanged, satisfaction with a prior choice will be lower when the identity salient during post-choice evaluation or consumption is inconsistent with the identity that was salient when the choice was made.

The current effects are also related to the automatic-behavior literature, which has also examined how the accessibility of various constructs affects behavior (e.g., Bargh et al., 1996; Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998; Haddock, Macrae, & Fleck, 2002; see also Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000, who investigate how the accessibility of a culture affects how one interprets the world). One interesting difference between that literature and the current findings is that, whereas research in the automatic-behavior tradition has shown that priming non-held identities can influence certain behaviors (e.g., priming young participants with “the elderly” causes them to walk more slowly, Bargh et al., 1996), this paper finds that an individual apparently must hold and identify with an identity for it to affect choices. One may naturally wonder about the reasons for these different results. We tentatively suggest that one important distinction is that research involving non-held identities in the automatic-behavior tradition has often examined continuous behaviors, whereas the current paper examines discrete choices. Reversals in choice (which entails conscious comparisons between options) may require more drastic changes in the activation levels of concepts and values than do subtler behavioral effects. Such enhanced activation, in turn, may be more likely with held, as opposed to non-held, identities (cf., Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Shih, Ambady, Richeson, Fujita, & Gray, 2002; Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2005; Wheeler & Petty, 2001).

This is not to say that choices will never assimilate to non-held identities or other primed constructs. Research has shown, for example, that choices can be affected by priming constructs other than identities (e.g., “shopping,” Wheeler & Berger, 2007) and by activating goals (e.g., “seek prestige,” Chartrand et al., 2008). However, choices may less frequently assimilate to identities that are not part of the self-concept, in part because people tend to actively reject and abandon preferences associated with many outgroups (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; White & Dahl, 2006, 2007). For choices to assimilate to non-held identities, one may need to overcome this aversion to outgroup-associated preferences. More contrived or heavy-handed triggers may be required, and different mental processes may be involved, compared to when the elicited identities are part of the self-concept. Beyond this, sources of identity salience will likely be more varied, plentiful, and effective among identity holders than non-holders, leading choices to more commonly assimilate to held rather than to non-held identities.

A related connection to the prior literature arises from the fact that, although we generally found that choices assimilated to the salient identity, choices contrasted from that identity when participants were low in identification with it. Prior work has identified many determinants of when behaviors and judgments will assimilate to instead of contrast from accessible mental content: for example, contrast is more likely when comparisons to the accessible content are made (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998; LeBoeuf & Estes, 2004; Stapel, Koomen, & van der Pligt, 1997) and when dissimilarity, instead of similarity, is the focus of processing (Haddock et al., 2002; Mussweiler, 2003). The current findings suggest that when the accessible content is an identity, the level of identification with that identity is another determinant of the pattern of ensuing behavior. Dis-identification with a held identity may lead to contrast because people may dislike such identities (and behavioral contrast can help one avoid members of a disliked category, Cesarrio, Plaks, & Higgins, 2006) or because people may come to view such identities as outgroups from which they want to distance themselves (see Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; White & Dahl, 2006, 2007).

**Implications and future directions**

Future research on identity-congruent choice might develop in a number of directions. For example, the fact that identity-congruent choices seem predicated on the evoked identity being important to the self suggests that one may alter choice not only by evoking an identity, but also by manipulating whether that identity is seen as important, favorable, or prestigious instead of trivial, negative, or embarrassing. Manipulating how people view their various identities may thus have important consequences for choice. One might also examine whether the reverse might be true—whether making identity-congruent choices might change how people view their identities. That is, if one makes many choices congruent with an identity because that identity has been (perhaps artificially) made salient, one might change one’s self-view, concluding that the target identity must be important to the self because so many of one’s decisions reflect the identity’s values (cf., Andrade & Ariely, 2009; Bem, 1972).

One might also examine when identities might be activated: are there certain environments in which identity-congruent choices might be more likely to arise? It is quite likely that the prevalence of cues that elicit specific identities will fluctuate across situations (cf., Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008); for example, the “parent” identity may be less likely to be cued in the boardroom than at the grocery store. That is not to say that identity-congruent choice will not
emerge in the boardroom, but that the identity to which boardroom decisions assimilate will likely be the corporate one. Indeed, there may often be a systematic correspondence between the decisions that must be made and the identities that are salient while one is making them: generals typically make strategic decisions in military surroundings, investors make investment decisions in financial settings, surgeons make medical decisions in hospitals, and so forth. Such decisions may exhibit a certain extremity, inasmuch as they may only reflect the wishes of one, possibly polarized, “self.” People’s weighting of dimensions when making, say, important professional decisions may thus differ systematically from weightings that arise later, outside the professional milieu. Such discrepancies may entail systematic inconsistency, post-choice regret, and dissatisfaction.

Future research might similarly examine the time course of identity activation, exploring, for example, whether activation typically persists until another identity is evoked (Higgins, Bargh, & Lombardi, 1985), or whether it decays back to a default state even in the absence of competing activation (Higgins & Brendt, 1995). The persistence of identity activation may depend on many things, including the strength and complexity of the initial activating cue and the presence of other identity-congruent cues in the environment. In this paper, participants made decisions immediately after an identity had been activated; thus, our data do not speak to the potential persistence of identity-salience manipulations. That said, the identity-salience manipulations used here were likely relatively impoverished compared to the rich and meaningful cues that people encounter in daily life. Furthermore, as noted above, some environments will likely be replete with cues to a given identity. Thus, identity-salience effects on everyday decisions may, in fact, be stronger and longer lasting than those observed here.

Such issues have potential implications for the efficacy of persuasive appeals that link particular items to particular identities. Persuasive appeals, whether for politicians, policies, or products, often target people in terms of specific identities, appealing to mothers, husbands, sports fans, and so on. Although the current findings suggest that such appeals should increase liking of identity-congruent products or issues, the impact of such targeting may be tempered by the fact that the self evoked by such messages may not be salient at the moment of choice (e.g., in stores or voting booths). This raises interesting questions. If a persuasive appeal successfully establishes a strong link between the item in question and the associated identity, will encountering the item later, in an unrelated context, evoke the erstwhile dormant identity (thus bolstering the evaluation of that item)? Alternatively, will such appeals only be successful to the extent that the choice environment contains cues that independently evoke the targeted identity (cf., Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008; see also Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007 who raise similar questions about the lasting nature of incidental changes in the self-concept)? In a world of ever-fluctuating selves, the key to influence may not only be to alter a decision maker’s perspective, but to do so at or near the moment of decision (so that a particular identity guides choice) and even after the decision (so that the same identity evaluates that choice).

A final elaboration on the present work may stem from reversing the logic of our studies. Working from the premise that choices tend to be congruent with a salient endorsed identity, one may observe choice to gain insight into an identity’s nature. We explored this idea in a pilot study that examined changes in identity throughout students’ undergraduate careers.8 We evoked gender or scholar identities for students ranging from incoming freshmen to graduating seniors, and we then had them rate the appeal of several arts and science courses.

Intriguing interactions of identity salience and seniority emerged. Among male freshmen, arts courses were rated as less appealing when the scholar was salient than when either gender or no identity was elicited. The reverse was true among male upperclassmen, whose ratings of arts courses peaked as “scholars.” This pattern hints at a possible transformation of the scholar in the eyes of male students, from freshmen whose prototypical scholar shuns the arts, to upperclassmen whose view of scholarship is more inclusive. The results were the mirror image for women rating science. Female freshmen were more positively inclined towards science courses when a scholar, as opposed to a gender, identity was evoked, but more experienced students rated the sciences more negatively as “scholars” than as “women.” Apparently, the female freshman scholar is attracted to science, but female upperclassmen tend to avoid science when their scholar identity is evoked. Although further study is needed, these findings illustrate the possibility of studying identity content—and its change over time—through the ongoing observation of identity-congruent decisions. Such a paradigm could also extend recent research that has explored how priming a given concept can have different effects for different people, depending on the associations they have with that concept (Wheeler & Berger, 2007).

Conclusions

When cues evoke one of a decision maker’s important identities, his or her choices reflect that identity’s values, even if the identity is evoked relatively fleetingly and even if those values conflict with values entailed by another of the person’s identities. This leads to inconsistency in decisions and can also lead to fluctuations in post-choice evaluation, as other identities may surface after choice and give rise to different preferences and wishes. Beyond this, the current results suggest that inconsistent preferences are likely to emerge not just from explicit changes in choice presentation, but also from identity-salience fluctuations that occur naturally and frequently as decision makers navigate and balance their many roles.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix A

Dependent measures for Studies 1–4.

A.1. Study 1a

1. Imagine that you were about to take an airplane flight and you forgot to bring something to read on the plane. You stop by a newsstand to buy a magazine or newspaper.

If the only two choices were Sports Illustrated or Newsweek, which would you choose?

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8 Full details of the procedure and results are available from the first author.
A.2. Study 1b

1. It is time for your family to buy a new car. After much deliberation, you are able to find one you like at the right price. The dealer has the car in two different colors. You like both colors, but they are quite different from each other. One color is fairly traditional and classic; in fact, 60% of cars are made in this color. The other color is very new and unique; only 5% of cars are made in this color. All else being equal, which color would you choose?

   - The more traditional color
   - The more unique color

2. You and your friends all love the same restaurant, and whenever you go there, you each order the same thing. One day, however, the waiter mentions a new, somewhat exotic dish that sounds quite good to you. To your surprise, your friends do not find the special dish as interesting as you do. In fact, one of them says it sounds “weird.” This makes you somewhat nervous about the meal, but still, you find it appealing. The time comes to place your order. What do you think you would do?

   - Order the traditional meal that I always order
   - Order the new, special meal, regardless of what my friends say

3. For your birthday, a friend invited you over for dinner and cooked you a great meal. It is now a few weeks later, and your friend’s birthday is coming up. However, it is a bad time for you, as you have a lot of work to do and you are facing a big deadline. You feel somewhat obligated to repay the kindness your friend showed you, and you know that your friend loves your cooking. Still, you worry that you will not be able to get your work done if you spend the day preparing a meal. Any birthday celebration needs to be on the actual birthday, as your friend is leaving town for an extended business trip and will not be back for several weeks. What do you think you would do?

   - I would cook dinner for my friend. Regardless of how much work I have, it is the right thing to do.
   - I would take my friend to dinner at a restaurant. Though it is not the same as a home-cooked meal, it will save me a lot of time.

   I would not do anything special for my friend’s birthday this year. Hopefully next year will be better.

   (Note: We coded only those who would cook dinner as reciprocating the favor; only five participants opted for the third “do nothing” response.)

4. Imagine that you are playing the following game… The goal of this game is to earn points so that you can redeem them for small prizes at the end of the game. You and another player are in separate rooms, and you cannot talk to each other while you are playing this game. The game is simple: you are both faced with a choice between “cooperating” and “not cooperating.” The number of points you earn depends on your choice as well as the other person’s choice. The point payoffs are represented in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>If the other player cooperates:</th>
<th>If the other player does not cooperate:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>You cooperate:</strong></td>
<td>You receive: 75 points</td>
<td>You receive: 15 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other player receives: 75 points</td>
<td>Other player receives: 95 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>You do not cooperate:</strong></td>
<td>You receive: 95 points</td>
<td>You receive: 30 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other player receives: 15 points</td>
<td>Other player receives: 30 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To summarize: if you both cooperate, you both gain 75 points. If one person does not cooperate, that person will gain more points, and the other person will gain fewer points. But, if both do not cooperate, you both only gain a few points. Remember, you and the other player must make your choices without knowing what the other chose. Which option would you choose?

   - Cooperate
   - Not Cooperate

A.3. Study 2

1. Two months ago you bought a new car together with your spouse. This automatically put you in a lottery that offered a safari trip to South Africa as a prize. Today, you were notified that you were the winner. Going through the package contents (tickets, hotel reservations, etc.), you realize that the dates of the trip are fixed and cannot be changed. Furthermore, you remember that your presentation to the company’s biggest client will be taking place during that same week and you realize that if you do well, possible promotion could follow. You decide to:

   - definitely go on the trip
   - probably go on the trip
   - probably do the presentation
   - definitely do the presentation

2. Your spouse is being awarded a prize and has asked you to go to the award ceremony. Meanwhile, you are informed that, at the time of the award ceremony, you need to take out a prospective candidate for the head of the Research and Development department who just flew in from India. You are specifically instructed to convince the candidate to take the offer. You decide to:

   - definitely go to the ceremony
   - probably go to the ceremony
   - probably go to the dinner
   - definitely go to the dinner

3. You are finally being offered a dream job, but it entails you moving to Hong Kong. Even though the transfer is not a problem for you, you foresee that your wife (as well as your teenage daughter) would have a very hard time adjusting to the different culture. You decide to:

   - definitely take the offer
   - probably turn down the offer
   - probably accept the offer
   - definitely turn down the offer

4. Imagine that the company’s project director has asked you to head a new project with a pharmaceutical company in Japan, taking a first step to develop a market in the East. This would be a real opportunity to excel, challenge yourself, and finally obtain recognition. The presentation of the project would take place in the company’s main headquarters in Tokyo for one week. However, the trip dates coincide with your child’s graduation. You decide to:

   - definitely accept the offer
   - probably accept the offer
   - probably go to the graduation
   - definitely go to the graduation
5. Your daughter has been excelling in tennis. She has been practicing very hard the past few months, and her final tournament, which you promised to attend, is this coming Friday. You have requested and been granted a day off for the competition. Two days before the match, a colleague becomes ill. Your boss requests that you replace him on Friday in a very important presentation to a possible client of the company. You decide to:

- definitely go to the match
- probably go to the match
- definitely do the presentation

A.4. Study 3

For each pairing below, please circle the item that you would prefer.

1. A chance to win a $50 gift certificate to your favorite restaurant vs. a chance to win a $50 gift certificate that could be redeemed for textbooks
2. A set of highlighters (valued at $3.50) vs. Packages of your favorite candy (valued at $3.50)
3. A hardcover volume that contains three of Shakespeare's plays vs. Your choice of three paperbacks from the New York Times' best-seller list
4. A chance to win 4 tickets to Great Adventure (a local amusement park) vs. A chance to win 4 tickets to the Metropolitan Opera House (in New York City)

A.5. Study 4

Note: The business-student congruent alternatives are listed before the university-student congruent alternatives below. In the actual experiment, the order of alternatives was randomized.

1. Participants were asked to imagine waiting in a dentist's office where the following magazines were available and to select the one they would be most likely to read:
   Business Week Fortune Cosmopolitan People
2. Participants were asked to select one of the following books to receive as a gift:
   - Investing Basics: Make Smart Decisions Without Being an Expert
   - Why Smart People Make Big Money Mistakes and How to Correct Them: Lessons from the New Science of Behavioral Economics
   - Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix
   - The Complete Book of Hold 'Em Poker
3. Participants were asked to select a movie that they would like to see on the upcoming weekend. (Each movie was followed by a brief synopsis):
   - The Emperor's Club
   - Stand and Deliver
   - Dude, Where's My Car?
   - Road Trip
4. Participants were asked to select which of the following they would prefer to receive as a free gift during a grand-opening celebration:
   - A set of highlighters and pens
   - A three-ring binder
   - A multi-pack of your favorite candy
   - A University of "X" key-chain
5. Participants were asked to indicate which prize they would rather receive for completing a survey:
   - $25 gift certificate for textbooks
   - $25 in tickets to a movie theater

References


