

The Effects of People's Identities on Their Choices of Products

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Abstract: Three studies tested whether people's identities can affect their choices when purchasing products. People's relationships and their thoughts create different perspectives of their identities, and their perception of their identities causes different choices when purchasing products in the same genre. The three studies have proven that the assumption was right: people's identities would have effects on their choices when selecting products to purchase. When people see "young/old" as their identities, their choices of clothes have different styles based on their identities. When people have identities as "partners/parents," they would tend to choose traveling plans around their families' preferences. And when people's identities were "an ACGN work or character lover," they would choose the related merchandise of that specific work or character. The main purpose of the studies is to raise the sales volume of the different products by understanding the connection between people's identities and the choices that they are more likely to make.

Keywords: Identity, Product, Choice, Customer

1. Introduction

There are always customer reviews on online shopping websites showing the reasons why the customers purchased that product, which is usually connected to the customers' identities. For example, on the web page of an electric oven Taobao (the biggest online shopping website in China), most of the customer reviews showed that the reason they purchased the electric oven was "to cook for their children/families," and most of their identities are "mothers" according to their reviews. However, there is no customer review from "children" on this page. Some customers whose identities are "mothers" even bought this electric oven instead of buying the smaller oven with more colors because the eclectic oven which is bigger can be more suitable for their families according to their reviews. On the contrary, there are almost no reviews saying that they "purchased this oven for their families" on the page for that smaller oven with more colors. Most reviews are from "single females/males," who bought that oven for themselves or their friends as gifts. Similarly, on the web page of some figures of anime characters, the customers' identities are all "the same character/work lovers," or "ACGN lovers (or another word with a similar meaning, 'otaku')" according to their reviews. Interestingly, there is no review saying that the customer "purchased the product for their families" on this web page. All the customers purchased the figures for themselves. The customer reviews on the page of short skirts, or clothes in similar styles or with similar elements, are always from young females who are students or just got their first job; on the page of suits or brands with

higher prices, most reviews are from professional females or people who are older (28+). Based on the reviews and the identities shown by the customers, will people change their minds and make another choice based on their identity? In other words, will people's identities affect their choices when they make a purchase, as "identity is 'people's concept of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others.'" [1] The result of this question could be helpful to the sellers or companies to understand their target customers better and build connections between their products and their customers' needs through their identities because the "strategies of their decisions could affect what is chosen, while the strategies are affected by the goals [2]," which means knowing the target customers and their needs (goal products) better through their identities could affect their decision strategies as well.

2. Clothing in Two Different Styles

According to Nancy Etcoff, director of the Program in Aesthetics and Well-Being at MGH and Harvard Medical School, people's choices of different styles of clothes "is unquestionably a social experience and mode of self-expression." [3] People's "preferences in their everyday clothing across each of these styles were associated with the colour preferences and the self-reported traits (e.g., personality) of study participants." [4] How about the relationships between their identities and preferences in clothing? The first study mainly explored the participants in different age groups' choices (which means different identities' choices) when seeing clothes in two different styles.

The participants in Study #1 were 266 females ages 16 to 43. They were recruited from the nearby high schools, communities, and companies of Zhengzhou, China. During the study, the participants were shown two groups of clothes in two different styles. They need to make their choice after 60 seconds of consideration. The first group of clothes included clothes like short skirts, baby tees, jeans, T-shirts, dresses, and cardigans. The main elements of these clothes included laces, flowers, hearts, angel and devil wings, cute animals, and desserts. The second group of clothes included clothes like sweaters, suits, long skirts & dresses, blouses, satin dresses & blouses, cashmere scarves, and trousers. The main elements of the second group of clothes were diamonds, plaids, knitted patterns, laces, the logos of the brands of the clothes, and feathers.

This study was an online study (a questionnaire of 30 questions). The participants needed to make their choices for every question in 60 seconds.

The result of this study has revealed that females between 16 and 25 would tend to choose the clothes of group one, which was more fashionable and more suitable to the popular style of the "young females" including high school students, university students, and students who have just graduated and become an employee. On the contrary, females who are older than 25 tend to choose the clothes in the second group, which would make them look more professional, mature, or just suitable for their job and age group. And this paper can see that most participants in Study 1 would choose their clothes based on their identities: young females, or older females who are professional or have had a job for a few years (usually company employees, teachers/professors, or bank Clerks).

3. The Preferences in Spare Times

The second study was mainly about the participants who were in the same age group's choice when they had some free time. If people are viewed as "embodied social actors, who not only inhabit but also contribute to shaping his/her physical, social and wider cultural environment [5]," then the "adequate accounts of people's identities construction must consider the interplay of personal, interpersonal, group and cultural processes [6]." This study has connected the participants' identities in the social environment together with the choices they made and came to the conclusion whether

their choices have been affected by their identities based on the social environment or group they were in or not.

The participants in Study #2 were 200 employees (112 females, 88 males), ages from 28 to 37. They were recruited from a company in Zhengzhou, China. Among all the participants, there were 81 females and 65 males who had already married and had their children. The other participants were single. In this study, the participants needed to answer a question “What do you want to do in your spare time?”

The study was an online study.

Based on the different answers of the participants, this research found that participants who have already married or have their children would be more likely to choose “stay with their family,” “go traveling with their children/family,” or “go out (shopping/taking a walk/visit parents) with their children.” But single participants had more different answers to this question, for example, “Stay at home and play video games/sleep/watch TV drama/cook for themselves,” “go out with friends,” “Visit parents,” and “Do something about their hobbies (fishing/sporting/taking photos/etc).” Participants who have married and had children have these answers because they are not only “themselves.” They also have identities including wife/husband or mother/father. In other words, when they make their choices of what to do during their spare time, they would first think about their family members and choose them. However for single participants, they did not need to consider their partner/children, and for this reason, they would have more different kinds of answers.

When the participants who have married/children and answered that they “go traveling with their children/family” were asked to make choices about the traveling locations together with their partner or children, 52% of them would change their choice directly if they had the different answer from their partner or children (for example, the participant chose the seaside while the child chose Disneyland). According to Willman-livarinen, these decisions were “automatic (or nearly so),” while the other decisions were “semi-automatic.” [7] There were 24% of participants who changed their choices after their children or partner emphasized their identities to them (like pleading or acting coquettishly).

4. Product Options for a Group of People with a Specific Identity

The third study explored participants with a specific identity choice when they only have few chances to get their favorite product.

The participants in Study #3 were 31 people (17 females, 14 males), ages 18 to 25. All of the 31 participants are ACGN lovers. Most participants have their favorite work (including anime, comics/manga, video games and mobile games, novels and light novels), the favorite character from the same work, and had the experience of purchasing the goods (meaning merchandise of the works, usually includes pin badge, acrylic stands/key holders, postcards and stickers) of their favorite characters. Most participants call themselves their favorite character lover—which means that character is their favorite and they always only purchase the merchandise of that character. This kind of identity usually “arises from the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles.” [8] And besides these participants, other participants in this study do not have their favorite work or character. They have little interest in every work or character, but they would not call themselves “work or character lovers.”

This study included two steps, and each step has one lottery and its connected jackpot. In the first step, each participant had two chances to draw lotteries from the jackpot that included the popular and their favorite ACGN works (a total of 23 works). And if the participant did not get the lottery with their favorite work in the first step, they can exchange their lotteries for others’ lotteries. The participants could only keep one lottery ticket after exchanging or not. And with the lottery ticket, the

participants got in the first step, they could draw the lottery that connected to their first lottery ticket in the second step. The jackpots in the second step were connected to the works that the participants kept in the first step (for example, if the participant kept the ticket of “Demon Slayer” from the first jackpot, the jackpot in the second step for him/her would be characters in Demon Slayer); and the participants had 3 chances to draw a lottery ticket of their favorite character in that work and try to get the merchandise of that favorite character (average 15% possibility). The participants could also exchange the goods of the characters with other participants if they did not get the goods of their favorite characters, but the others did. And of course, the participants could use all 3 characters’ goods to trade his/her favorite character’s goods if no one got the lottery ticket of his/her favorite character [9].

The study happened in the meeting room of a hotel.

And the result of this study revealed that when participants have specific favorite works and characters, they would tend to exchange their lottery tickets with others when they do not get the ticket with their favorite works or characters. And even if some participants needed to use all the 3 goods of 3 other characters, they would do it to get the goods of their favorite character. But when the participant did not have his or her favorite work or character, the participant would be more likely to keep the lottery ticket from step one [10]. (For example, one of the participants’ favorite work and characters was Genshin Impact and HuTao, so in the first step he exchanged his lottery ticket of SPY×FAMILY with another participant to Genshin Impact, and exchanged the 3 goods of other characters to HuTao in step two.) In this study, the participants’ identities were XXX (their favorite character’s name) lovers, and with this identity, they would try their best to get the merchandise of their favorite character, even if this action seems beneath to other people.

5. Conclusion

The 3 studies showed that people’s identity can affect their choices on the products they need/want: in the first study, the participants made their choices on different styles of clothes based on their identity which was also related to their age — young female (girl) or older (mature/professional) female. In the second study, the participants who have married and already have children, which means they have other identities (partner or parent) besides themselves, would be more likely to make choices around their family members, or in other words, their identities; and in the Follow-up study of Study 2, participants who have the other identities (partner or parent) would also be more likely to change their choice if their choices were different to their partners or children. Just like Erikson’s theory of identity, “identity is not only individual but also collective and social.” When the participants have another identity of “partner/parent” besides their original identity, the identity under the social environment would affect their choices — both to keep their social or group environment harmonious and be responsible for their identities. The participants in study 3 have also verified that people who have the identity of “(a work/character) lover” have a very high possibility of choosing the merchandise of their favorite work or character, even if they need to try their best to exchange the lottery ticket with strangers or use 3 merchandise to exchange one merchandise of their favorite character. Their identities of “a work/character lover” became their “identity motives” in this study, which could be seen as “‘culturally flexible universals,’ which link the individual’s psychological functioning to his/her sociocultural and historical context.” On the contrary, participants without their favorite work/character would be more likely to keep the lottery ticket regardless of what work or character was on it.

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