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Solving dissociative group effects using construal level theory

Purpose - Consumers usually respond favourably to ingroups but negatively to dissociative groups or products linked to dissociative groups, termed the dissociative group effect. Despite important implications for branding, advertising and celebrity endorsement, little is known about how to attenuate the effect. The current research draws on construal level theory to introduce a mechanism which attenuates the dissociative group effect.

Design/methodology/approach – An experimental approach was utilized which included two-part between-subjects designs.

Findings – High identifiers prefer products linked to their ingroup over ones linked to a dissociative group, however, the opposite is true for low identifiers. The difference in preference is attenuated for high and low identifiers when they are placed in an abstract mindset. The underlying mechanism of this effect is similarity focus.

Practical implications – This research offers practical recommendations on how to manage multiple customer segments in increasingly diverse marketplaces. By inducing an abstract mindset in customers, for example via advertising copy, website architecture or contextual factors such as pitch of the music, marketers can increase the effectiveness of identity-linking marketing for consumers high/low in identification.

Originality/value - This is one of the first empirical studies to evidence the applicability of construal level theory within identity marketing and offers a novel mechanism to attenuate the dissociative group effect. The findings shed new light on how low identifiers relate and respond to identity-linked marketing.

Keywords: dissociative groups, outgroups, construal level theory, social identity

Introduction

Crafting desirable brand imagery associations and effective advertising appeals is integral to the continuing success of a brand. Consumers respond asymmetrically to messages directed at their ingroup (i.e. groups they belong to) versus outgroups (i.e. groups they do not belong to; Aaker *et al.,* 2000) or dissociative groups (i.e. groups they do not wish to be misidentified with; Berger and Heath, 2008). In other words, consumers respond favourably to marketing strategies explicitly targeting them, but respond negatively to messages targeting customer segments they regard as dissociative groups (termed the dissociative group effect), especially if they identify strongly with their ingroup (White and Dahl, 2007). This dissociative group effect arises because people want to have a positive and distinctive self-view and hence seek to distance themselves from products, brands or behaviours that would mis-represent them. The current research introduces a mechanism to mitigate the negative dissociative group effect.

Understanding how to attenuate the dissociative group effect is important from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a practical perspective, this research offers important insights into how to manage multiple customer segments in an increasingly diverse marketplace, as the dissociative group effect may occur in various instances. A brand may wish to reposition itself by attracting new customer segments which may conflict with the existing target audience. For example, Sketchers initially sold shoes to teenage girls, later targeting young boys, likely a dissociative group for teenage girls (White and Dahl, 2007). Brands offering meat alternatives (e.g., Quorn) are currently facing a similar conundrum, when targeting meat eaters and vegans. To vegans, eating 'fake meat' is hypocritical and associated with meat eaters – arguably a dissociative group – while initial research indicates that some beef lovers regard vegetarians as a dissociative

group (Earle and Hodson, 2017). Brand managers must therefore overcome dissociative group associations for consumers on either side of the spectrum.

Dissociative groups are also a concern for advertisers, who must cope with rising multiculturalism and diversity between consumers across most countries (Jamal, 2003). One strategy is to target different segments of the population by developing multiple adverts. For example, Toyota produced a series of adverts in the US for the same car but tailored each to resonate specifically with one of four customer segments (Maheshwari, 2017). The sheer number of different adverts aired simultaneously, and the ease of marketing leakage to the 'wrong' audience (Dahlén *et al*., 2013), raise the question of how consumers respond to a version not targeted at them. While marketing managers could once ignore how any non-target audience responded to their marketing communications, the emergence of social media means this is no longer possible. Out of marketers' control, consumers comment on and share marketing communications online with a diverse set of friends/followers. Negative comments by non-targeted audiences may therefore damage the brand image for a large number of (potential) customers. Alternatively, companies may adopt a one-brand strategy, incorporating multiple target segments within a single advert. Coca-Cola's 2014 'It's Beautiful' campaign included a variety of American subcultures singing *America The Beautiful* in different languages. This campaign provoked a backlash among some consumers, who disagreed with the depiction of 'American' as gay or multilingual, presumably reacting against the presence of dissociative groups in the advert (Poniewozik, 2014).

What the above examples have in common is the need to overcome the damaging effect of the brand being linked with a dissociative group. Recent research noted the difficulty of attenuating negative dissociative group effects for high identifiers and called for further research (Grohs *et al*.,

2015). From a theoretical perspective, our research is important as it draws on construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2010) to introduce a new mechanism which attenuates the dissociative group effect. Specifically, an abstract mindset should help broaden social category perceptions and thereby reduce high identifiers' need to distance themselves from the dissociative group. Four experiments offer empirical evidence to support this theorizing. By placing consumers into an abstract mindset, the dissociative group effect is eliminated for high identifiers. Our studies help answer the call for research on conditions under which consumers shift their views about dissociative groups (White and Dahl, 2007). Given the ease with which level of construal can be manipulated in practice, for example through the choice of advertising copy (e.g., asking consumers to 'think about reasons' induces an abstract mindset, White *et al*., 2011), this is a fruitful strategy for marketers to avoid a potential backlash effect. Crucially, the application of construal level theory within consumer identity literature is nascent, making this one of the first empirical studies to evidence the applicability of construal level theory within identity marketing.

A secondary contribution rests on providing novel insights into how low identifiers respond to messages targeting their ingroup versus a dissociative group. Studies 1 and 2a indicate that low identifiers experience greater dissociative concerns following messages targeting their ingroup than targeting an outgroup or dissociative group, with downstream effects onto product attitude and choice. To date, low identifiers have received little attention, as the general assumption is that they respond to stimuli in a similar fashion as high identifiers (or not at all; Crisp *et al.,* 2006). Thus, our research begins to address when identity-linked communications can be less fruitful for marketers.

Literature review

Dissociative groups

Social identity is an important driver of consumers' attitudes and behaviours. Consumers engage in identity-congruent behaviours and evaluate products associated with groups they belong to more favourably (for an overview see Reed *et al*., 2012), interpret information through the lens of their identity (procedural readiness; Oyserman, 2009), and have higher recall of identity-linked marketing promotions (Dalton and Huang, 2014). These effects are exacerbated for consumers who identify strongly with the group, for whom the identity is central to their sense of self and chronically salient (e.g., Dimofte *et al*., 2003; White and Dahl, 2007), or if the relevant identity has been situationally primed (e.g., Forehand and Deshpandé, 2001).

Consumers' behaviour is also shaped by outgroups, which individuals do not feel they belong to (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; 2005). A dissociative group is a special type of outgroup, where ingroup members are motivated to avoid being misidentified as a member of that (dissociative) group due to self-presentation or identity-signalling concerns (Berger and Heath, 2008; Berger and Rand, 2008; Englis and Solomon, 1995; White and Dahl, 2006). For example, men consider ladies a dissociative group (White and Dahl, 2006), whereas online gamers are a dissociative group for undergraduate students (Berger and Rand, 2008). Initial findings suggest that consumers respond negatively to products aimed at dissociative groups (White and Dahl, 2006), especially if they strongly identify with their ingroup (White and Dahl, 2007). This effect is driven by dissociative concerns, whereby consumers dislike the products' associations (White and Dahl, 2006). This dislike arises from underlying self-presentation concerns (White and Dahl, 2006) or identity signalling concerns, as consumers wish to ensure their identity is correctly recognized by others (Berger and Heath, 2007; 2008; Berger and Rand, 2008). Strong identifiers

should therefore evaluate a product linked to a dissociative group less favourably than one linked to their ingroup.

Initial findings from past research indicate that high and low identifiers differ in their attitude towards outgroups. In particular, Grohs *et al.* (2015) found that football fans, who identified moderately with their football team, evaluate sponsors linked to the rival team more favourably than high identifiers do. However, previous research, including Grohs *et al*., has not focused on understanding why low identifiers do not react against products associated with a dissociative group. White and Dahl (2007) found that dissociative concern (which they term private self-disidentification) mediates the effect of group-association onto attitude differently depending on strength of identification. Specifically, these authors found high identifiers to experience higher dissociative concern, in the dissociative group condition than in the neutral control condition, which depresses their evaluation. However, no significant difference was found when comparing an outgroup to the neutral control condition. In contrast, low identifiers do not differ in their dissociative concern, and subsequently evaluate the product equally favourable across both conditions. However, White and Dahl did not compare their dissociative group condition against an ingroup, thus missing an opportunity to fully illuminate such intergroup comparisons, particularly with regards to low identifiers.

People who profess themselves to be low identifiers with regards to their ingroup would have little motivation to acquire symbols to signal, to themselves or to others, that they are strongly identified with their group. In line with Reed and Forehand's (2016) process of identity dilution, low identifiers are likely to be motivated to dilute the importance/centrality of the ingroup for their sense of self. Therefore, products associated with the ingroup have little utility for self-definition/affirmation. Moreover, low identifiers might have concerns regarding such

products because of the potential for re-enforcing ingroup affiliation that is contrary to their sense of self. In contrast, low identifiers likely have lower self-representation concerns than high identifiers with regards to dissociative groups, as they are less motivated to express and verify their ingroup social identity (Wolter and Cronin, 2016). As such, they should be more open to products associated with outgroups or dissociative groups, and perceive such products more positively than those associated with the ingroup (see Branscombe *et al*., 1999 for a related discussion). In particular, low identifiers' evaluation of products linked to a dissociative group is likely even more favourable in situations where a valence transfer takes place (i.e. when products associated with outgroups or dissociative groups are advertised with positive messages/taglines).

Summarising our discussion regarding low identifiers, the lack of self-presentation and identity signalling concerns mean that low identifiers should feel less dissociative concern towards a dissociative group (vs. the ingroup) and thus should not exhibit the negative dissociative group effect for the advertised product. Further, given the positive valence of the advertising message, a valence transfer regarding the outgroup or dissociative group likely takes place to the product (Grohs *et al.,* 2015; MacKenzie *et al*., 1986) leading to a more positive evaluation of the product linked to the outgroup or dissociative group.

Drawing together our discussions for low and high identifiers, we posit the following:

H1. The effect of advert target (ingroup vs. dissociative group) onto attitude toward the advertised product is moderated by strength of identification. Specifically, high identifiers will respond more favourably to an ingroup-linked product than a dissociative group-linked product. Whereas, low identifiers will respond less favourably to an ingroup-linked product than a dissociative group-linked product.

H2. The effect outlined in *H1* is mediated by dissociative concern.

Very little research has explored instances in which consumers do not respond negatively to dissociative groups. In social marketing, individuals were found to engage in more positive public behaviour (recycling) after learning that a dissociative group is known to recycle (White *et al*., 2014). However, this behavioural assimilation is not due to the above negative dissociative group effect having been reversed but is driven by consumers' concern for their ingroup's image in the eyes of others. Individuals therefore recycle – in public – to present the ingroup in a positive light (White *et al*., 2014). To our knowledge only one article examined conditions under which the dissociative group effect might be mitigated. Choi and Winterich (2013) found that priming a moral (vs. ingroup) identity leads to less negative evaluations of brands associated with outgroups. However, Choi and Winterich (2013) did not statistically compare attitudes toward the brand associated with the dissociative group versus the ingroup. These authors nevertheless reported mean values that strongly suggest a difference remains across dissociative and ingroup evaluations, despite moral identity having been primed ($M_{\text{dissociative group brand}} = 3.14$, $M_{\text{ingroup brand}} = 6.10$; Choi and Winterich, 2013, Study 2). Moreover, moral identity offers a narrow scope for advancing theoretical understanding of the dissociative group effect. The current research contributes more broadly to the consumer identity literature, through construal level theory, by proposing that level of construal (abstract vs. concrete mindset) mitigates the negative dissociative group effect by broadening consumers' perceptions of the boundaries of the social groups.

Moderating role of construal level

Construal level theory explains how mental construal affects people's perception of objects or events. The theory is built on the premise that an object/event can be mentally construed at varying levels of abstraction, ranging from concrete representations of an object/event (e.g., as a

mobile phone) to a relatively abstract representations of the same object/event (e.g., as a communication device; Trope and Liberman, 2010). Construal level theory further suggests that more psychologically distal stimuli are represented more abstractly (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance refers to the perceived distance of a target event/object to the self on one of four dimensions: spatial (e.g., nearby vs. far away), temporal (e.g., now vs. in the future), social (e.g., gift to self vs. to a stranger), and hypothetical distance (e.g., real vs. imaginary tiger; Trope and Liberman, 2010). At higher levels of construal, the object/event is represented in terms of its central, enduring, and superordinate features (e.g., a friendly dog); whereas at lower levels of construal, the object/event is construed using detailed, subordinate, and context-specific features (e.g., a Labrador puppy licking your palm; Trope and Liberman, 2010).

Changes in the level of construal have implications for processes, including categorization and person perception (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Specifically, research has found that individuals categorize objects into broader categories when they imagine the objects in the distant rather than near future (Liberman *et al*., 2002), or in a low-probability (likelihood of rain: 95% chance of sunny skies) versus a high-probability scenario (likelihood of rain: 95% chance of rain; Wakslak *et al*., 2006). People further use wider response categories when judging distal/abstract compared to proximal/concrete stimuli (Krüger *et al*., 2014). Level of construal also affects individuals' self-perception. When describing their distant-future self, individuals do so using broader, more superordinate categories, with less incidental features (e.g., woman), than describing their present self (e.g., woman in her early 20s; Wakslak *et al*., 2008).

The above effects are due to the abstract mindset encouraging a similarity focus in individuals. Abstraction refers to the "process of identifying a set of invariant central characteristics of [things, objects, or events]" (Burgoon *et al*., 2013; p. 502), in other words

seeking similarities. To that effect, construal level theory proposes that consumers who construe objects in abstract terms focus less on incidental, context-specific features, but instead on few important features that tie these objects together. For example, a group of young female and male Africans, Asians, and Latinos who attend university could be described more abstractly as a group of students. Further, individuals who chronically represent events/objects at a more abstract level perceive greater similarities between social targets (Levy *et al*., 2002). Similarly, when choosing from a large assortment, consumers in an abstract mindset perceive the options to be more similar, which reduces choice difficulty (Henderson, 2013). In fact, one way of manipulating construal level is by focusing participants' attention on similarities (see Burgoon *et al*., 2013).

Drawing together the above discussion, consumers in an abstract mindset, when faced with a message targeting a dissociative group, should focus on superordinate features and overall similarities when processing the message. These consumers should perceive social groups to be broader and more inclusive, thus reducing their concern about the advertised product's group association and consequences for their self-image. Therefore, under abstract construal, high identifiers likely experience a perception shift regarding the dissociative group, perceiving greater similarity between themselves and the dissociative group. This similarity focus means they no longer feel compelled to distance themselves from the product by evaluating it less favourably. The negative dissociative group effect onto attitude should therefore be attenuated for high identifiers in an abstract mindset (vs. a concrete mindset).

As argued earlier, low identifiers are expected to respond less favourably to an ingroup-linked product than a dissociative group-linked product. However, the broadening of social categories and the similarity focus induced by an abstract mindset should reduce the signalling

concerns of an ingroup-linked product because of the increase in similarity perceptions, between the self and other ingroup members, as well as between the social groups. Therefore, level of construal is expected to alter low identifiers' attitude toward the product linked to the ingroup. Taken together, a three-way interaction effect is predicted between advert target (ingroup vs. dissociative group), strength of identification, and level of construal onto attitude toward the advertised product. Thus,

H3. The effect outlined in *H1* is moderated by level of construal. Specifically, the difference in attitude for high identifiers, whereby the ingroup-linked product is evaluated more favourably than the dissociative group-linked product, is attenuated when in an abstract mindset. The difference in attitude for low identifiers, whereby the ingroup-linked product is evaluated less favourably than the dissociative group-linked product, is attenuated when in an abstract mindset.

H4. The attenuation of the dissociative group effect onto attitude when placed in an abstract mindset is mediated by similarity focus.

Choice of identity and products used throughout studies

In line with past research (White and Dahl, 2007), all studies used participants' nationality as the ingroup and the product being evaluated was a mug. Nationality is well suited for a marketing context, as it is broad enough to apply to a wide audience and relatively stable over time (Lickel *et al*., 2000). A mug was chosen for several reasons. Most importantly, a mug is a 'public necessity' product, meaning the individual will be seen using it. The influence of the reference group on consumers' choice of brands is particularly strong for public necessity products (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). To reinforce this, the study instructions to participants, before they were shown the advert

of the mug, stated "Imagine you are looking to buy a mug to use in your workplace, where you work in a team". The adverts for the mug also included the by-line "Inspired by the colors of [country's] beautiful National Parks". This ensured that the colours, product, and taglines were tied together more naturally. The by-line is applicable and believable across all conditions, as all countries used in the studies have national parks and mugs do not generally have country-associations. Finally, mugs have been used in previous studies on identity-linked marketing (e.g., White *et al.,* 2012; 2018).

There have been many calls for more replication studies in marketing literature (e.g., Evanschitzky *et al*., 2007; Kwon *et al.,* 2017; Park *et al*., 2015), especially exact replications. Further, when replication studies produce inconsistent findings, this is often attributed to common design flaws such as non-equivalent manipulations (Park *et al*., 2015; Shimp, Hyatt, and Synder, 1991). As Study 2a tests a boundary condition of the dissociative group effect (Study 1), it is important to rule out potential confounds by replicating Study 1 as closely as possible. In using the same manipulation as in Study 1 we therefore hope to overcome this concern. However, to ensure our findings are not a design artifact and indeed generalizable, we further replicate the Study 2a findings using a different social group and consumption context. These findings are reported in the General Discussion.

Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was fourfold. Firstly, it is important to ensure that the dissociative group effect is evident in the chosen context, as the key contribution of this research lies in attenuating it. Study 1 allows us to rule out context effects as potential confounds, meaning it is an important backdrop to the remaining studies. Secondly, Study 1 replicates prior research on the dissociative group effect for high identifiers and shows that it differs from how these consumers respond to a

general outgroup. This difference is driven by varying levels of dissociative concern. Replication is important to ensure the reliability and objectivity of research findings (Kwon *et al.,* 2017). Thirdly, Study 1 evidences the dissociative group effect in a more natural context, which has greater managerial implications. Arguably consumers are more likely to learn about a brand's other (including dissociative) customer segments through the brand's marketing communications, rather than the product being named explicitly after a dissociative group (as seen in White and Dahl, 2007 who used 'Belgian Pen' in their study). By showing that the dissociative group effect can be attenuated when the dissociative group is referred to in an advert increases the practical relevance of our findings. Finally, Study 1 offers an opportunity to examine if our theorising regarding low identifiers is supported.

Study 1 tests the proposed interaction effect of advert target and strength of identification onto attitude (*H1*) and the mediating role of dissociative concern (*H2*). To ensure the examined effect was uniquely attributed to a dissociative group (Canadians) rather than a general outgroup, a neutral outgroup (Swiss) was included. To increase the practical utility of the findings, participants' actual choice was captured at the end of the survey. In this and all following studies no participant failed the suspicion probe question.

Pretests

Four pretests were undertaken using four different samples of US participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The first pretest (N = 31) was conducted to test if US participants consider Canadians a dissociative group. In line with Berger and Rand (2008) participants were asked, among two filler identities, "How much do you like Canadians?" and "Would you want to be thought of as a Canadian?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Participants liked Canadians (M_{like} = 5.65, significantly above the scale midpoint; $M_{like} > 4$, $t(30) = 7.83$, $p <$

0.001) but did not want to be mis-identified as a Canadian ($M_{dissociate}$ = 3.10, significantly below the scale midpoint; $M_{dissociate} < 4$, $t(30) = -2.81$, $p < 0.01$). This means that Canadians constitute a dissociative group for Americans and was thus used in the subsequent studies. A separate pretest (N = 31) examined participants' perceptions of five nationalities (Austrian, Belgian, Greenlander, Swedish and Swiss) to choose a neutral outgroup, using the same two items as in the first pretest. A repeated measures ANOVA showed that all countries were evaluated equally favourably ($p = 0.47$) and participants did not differ in their desire to dissociate from them ($p = 0.29$). Swiss was chosen as the neutral outgroup ($M_{like} = 5.68$, $M_{dissociate} = 4.06$). An additional analysis was undertaken comparing the data from both pretests. An independent samples t-test showed that participants liked Canadians and Swiss people equally ($p = 0.83$) but considered Canadians to be more of a dissociative group than the Swiss ($t(60) = 2.17$; $p < 0.05$). A third pretest (N = 53) was undertaken to ensure each advert was believable. Each participant saw three adverts for a mug (branded MLE) with the taglines ("For Americans -"; "For Canadians -"; "For Swiss people -") coupled with "Every day is an opportunity". A repeated measures ANOVA showed the adverts to be equally believable (M's > 4.23; $p = 0.30$, see Appendix for item). A final pretest (N = 29) assessed the attractiveness of four different mugs to be used in a choice task ("The product shown is …": 1 = highly unattractive, 7 = highly attractive). A repeated measures ANOVA showed that the mugs were rated equally attractive (M's > 4.76; $p = 0.57$).

Participants, method and design

One hundred and twenty US MTurk workers (68% female, $M_{age} = 36.8$) took part in a between-subject experiment, with three levels of advert target (coded 0 = Americans vs. 1 = Swiss vs. 2 = Canadians) and saw an advert with the associated pretested tagline. To reduce demand effects, strength of identification with being American was captured for these participants in a separate

study one week earlier using fourteen items (α = 0.96; Leach *et al*., 2008, see Appendix for all measurement items used in studies) under the guise of assessing different personalities of Americans. MTurk is suitable for longitudinal, or panel, designs due to the ability to contact participants and invite them to subsequent studies (Chandler *et al.,* 2014). Participants were informed at the onset that they would have to complete two separate studies, and that a bonus of US$1 would be paid upon completion of the second study, which was to be completed after one week (following the tutorial by Wessling *et al.,* 2017). This design also followed Stoycheff's (2016) recommendations on how to avoid attrition, as using bonus payments and informing participants about subsequent study waves builds a social contract. The responses across the two studies were matched using participants' unique MTurk Worker ID.

In the subsequent (second) study, participants were asked to rate the focal advert (mug), which was sandwiched between two filler adverts (mobile phone cover and chair) by indicating how realistic and believable each advert was. Participants were randomly allocated to the ingroup (Americans), outgroup (Swiss), or dissociative group (Canadians) condition. After seeing the last filler advert, attitude toward the product (mug) shown in the focal advert was captured using five items (α = 0.90; adapted from Pham, 1996). Participants' dissociative concerns regarding the product was measured using three items (α = 0.90; White and Dahl, 2006). At the beginning of the study participants were informed that they would be entered into a lottery with a chance to win a free gift. At the end of the study participants were reminded of this and asked to indicate which gift they would like to receive should they win. They could choose from four mugs – the mug shown in the focal advert (branded MLE) and the three alternatives that were pretested to be equally attractive.

Results and discussion

Out of the total sample, 38 participants saw the ingroup condition (Americans), 44 participants saw the outgroup condition (Swiss) and 38 participants saw the dissociative group condition (Canadians). Across the three conditions, the adverts were equally realistic (M's > 5.75, p > 0.85) and believable (M's > 5.7, p > 0.60). Hayes' macro PROCESS (Version 3 unless indicated otherwise, Hayes, 2017; Model 1) was used to assess *H1* whereby the effect of advert target on attitude is moderated by strength of identification. Given the multicategorical nature of the independent variable, indicator coding was used to compare the ingroup to the outgroup condition and the ingroup to the dissociative group condition respectively (Hayes and Montoya, 2017). The ingroup condition (Americans) was coded as the reference group. Results showed a significant interaction effect of advert target (ingroup vs. outgroup) and strength of identification onto attitude (B = -0.42, t = -2.16, p < 0.05). Low identifiers (16th percentile: 3.81) evaluated the product more favourably in the outgroup than the ingroup condition (B = 1.06, t = 2.65, p < 0.01). No significant difference was found for high identifiers (84th percentile: 6.71; p > 0.65).

When comparing the ingroup to the dissociative group, the interaction effect of advert target and strength of identification onto attitude was significant (B = -0.83, t = -3.83, p < 0.001). Specifically, high identifiers preferred the product when it was linked to the ingroup (B = -0.99, t = -2.49, p = 0.01). However, low identifiers preferred the product when it was linked to the dissociative group (B = 1.42, t = 3.40, p < 0.001). Figure 1 illustrates the observed interaction effects. Thus, *H1* is supported.

- Insert Fig. 1 around here -

PROCESS (Model 7; 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95%CI) was used to test the proposed conditional indirect effect (*H2*) whereby the interaction of advert target and strength of

identification onto attitude was mediated by dissociative concern. The proposed interaction effect onto dissociative concern was significant when comparing the ingroup to the outgroup (B = 0.50, $t = 2.77$, $p < 0.01$) and to the dissociative group (B = 0.70, $t = 3.49$, $p < 0.001$). Dissociative concern further had a direct effect onto attitude (B = -0.55, t = -6.11, $p < 0.001$). Follow-up analysis showed a similar pattern of effects onto dissociative concern as those previously reported for attitude. The above conditional effect was mediated onto attitude as the index of moderated mediation was significant when comparing the ingroup to the outgroup (index = -0.27, CI: -0.58 to -0.001) and the ingroup to the dissociative group (index = -0.38, CI -0.74 to -0.07). Neither direct effect (ingroup vs. outgroup; ingroup vs. dissociative group) was significant (p's > 0.57). More specifically, for low identifiers the decrease in dissociative concern observed when faced with the outgroup/dissociative group, relative to the ingroup, stimuli affected their attitude for the outgroup-linked product (B = 0.85, CI: 0.19 to 1.62) and dissociative group-linked product (B = 0.68, CI: 0.02 to 1.48), as the conditional indirect effect was significant in both cases. This means that low identifiers reported lower levels of dissociative concern and preferred the product when it was linked to the Swiss or Canadians, relative to Americans. In further support of *H2*, high identifiers reported higher levels of dissociative concern and evaluated the product less favourably in the dissociative group compared to the ingroup condition, as the conditional indirect effect was negative (B = -0.43, CI: -0.91 to -0.004). This last finding is in line with past research, showing that high identifiers react negatively against products associated with a dissociative group.

Recall that participants were asked to indicate which of the four mugs they would like to receive should they win the lottery. To assess the practical relevance of the above finding, participants' response was coded '1' if they chose the mug shown in the advert or '0' if they

chose any of the other three mugs. PROCESS Version 2[1] (Hayes, 2013; Model 7, 5000 bootstrap samples, 95%CI) was used to analyse the conditional indirect effect, whereby the conditional effect of advert target and strength of identification onto choice was mediated by attitude. Due to the macro's requirements, separate comparisons were undertaken of the ingroup vs. outgroup condition and the ingroup vs. dissociative group condition. When comparing the ingroup to the dissociative group condition (coded Americans = 0 vs. Canadians = 1), the interaction effect onto attitude was significant (B = -0.83, t = -3.93, $p < 0.001$); attitude further had a direct effect onto choice (B = 0.68, $p < 0.01$). More importantly, the index of moderated mediation was significant (index = -0.56, CI: -1.15 to -0.16), while the direct effect of advert target on choice was not ($p = 0.99$). Low identifiers (-1SD: 4.14) were more likely to choose the advertised mug in the dissociative group than the ingroup condition (B = 0.78, CI: 0.16 to 1.89). High identifiers (+1SD: 6.55) were less likely to choose the advertised mug when it was associated with a dissociative group (B = -0.58, CI: -1.37 to -0.15). A slightly different pattern of effects emerged when comparing the ingroup (coded Americans = 0) to the outgroup (coded Swiss = 1) condition. The interaction effect onto attitude was significant (B = -0.42, t = -2.11, p = 0.04) and attitude had a direct effect onto choice (B = 0.67, $p < 0.01$). The proposed conditional indirect effect was supported, with a significant index of moderated mediation (90%CI: -0.70 to -0.04), while the direct effect was not ($p = 0.25$). Low identifiers (-1SD: 4.08) were more likely to choose the advertised mug in the outgroup condition (B = 0.64, 90%CI: 0.11 to 1.46) but the likelihood of high identifiers (+1SD: 6.68) choosing the advertised mug did not differ across the (ingroup vs. outgroup) conditions (90%CI: -0.52 to 0.22).

Discussion

Study 1 offered support for the moderating role of strength of identification onto attitude (*H1*), as well as the proposed mechanism underlying the dissociative group effect (*H2*). The results replicated previous findings that high identifiers dislike products linked to a dissociative group but evidenced the dissociative effect in an advertising context. Further, the findings for high identifiers support those of White and Dahl (2007), evidencing that the dissociative group effect only occurs for dissociative outgroups, not neutral outgroups. Moreover, including an outgroup and ingroup in Study 1 ensured the validity of the dissociative effect evidenced in the dissociative group condition.

While past research has found limited support that low identifiers respond differently to an ingroup- and outgroup-linked stimuli (e.g., Grohs *et al.*, 2015), the current results showed that low identifiers prefer products in the outgroup or dissociative group condition, relative to the ingroup condition. As expected, low identifiers experience greater dissociative concern in the ingroup relative to the dissociative group or outgroup condition, resulting in a relatively less favourable evaluation of the product in the ingroup condition. Study 2 extends the above findings by attenuating the negative dissociative group effect for high identifiers, thus increasing product evaluations, and regarding ingroup-linked products for low identifiers. The same context as in Study 1 was utilized in Study 2 to ensure contextual factors did not account for changes in the findings reported.

Study 2

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to offer an initial test of whether construal level influences how individuals relate to social groups. Specifically, individuals in an abstract mindset should see

groups more broadly and inclusively, thereby reducing the extent to which Canadians are perceived to be a dissociative group. To test this, 87 US MTurk workers (56% female, M_{age} = 39.1) took part in a single-factor between-subjects design, with level of construal being manipulated (coded 0 = how/concrete vs. 1 = why/abstract) in line with Freitas *et al.* (2004). These authors showed that when individuals are primed to think repeatedly in terms of "why" (as opposed to "how"), superordinate, abstract thoughts are activated. Whereas, subordinate, concrete thinking is activated under the "how" condition. Participants assigned to the abstract (concrete) construal condition were asked to consider why they would want to (how they would) maintain and improve their health. Participants then answered two questions developed by Berger and Rand (2008; see Pretest 1 Study 1) capturing the extent to which Canadians are a dissociative group.

As a manipulation check, an independent judge, unaware of the conditions, coded each participant's level of construal based on the abstractness of their responses to the why/how manipulation, following the detailed procedures outlined in Fujita *et al.* (2006). Specifically, if a participant's response was a subordinate means to the original statement, the response was coded with a score of -1. If the response was a superordinate end served by maintaining or improving good health, the response was coded with a score of 1. If a participant's response fit neither criterion, the response was coded as 0. Ratings of each participant's four responses were then summed to create an index of level of construal with a potential range of -4 to 4; whereby higher scores indicate higher levels of construal. As expected, participants in the abstract construal condition generated responses that reflected higher levels of construal (M = 3.66, SD = 0.60) compared with those in the concrete condition (M = -3.65, SD = 0.99, $t(85) = -38.00$, $p < 0.001$). Level of construal was therefore successfully manipulated.

Participants were less likely to want to be thought of as Canadians when placed in the concrete (M = 2.96, SD = 1.91) than the abstract mindset (M = 3.88, SD = 1.96, $t(85) = -2.13$, $p < 0.05$). When placed in an abstract mindset, participants no longer considered Canadians a dissociative group, as a one-sample t-test showed that the mean value did not differ from the scale midpoint ($p > 0.70$). Importantly, participants' liking of Canadians did not differ across the conditions (M's > 5.6, $p > 0.60$). Taken together, level of construal has the potential to remove the dissociative effect found for high identifiers, who perceived Canadians more as a neutral outgroup when placed in an abstract mindset. Study 2a formally tests *H3* and Study 2b tests the proposed mediating role of similarity focus (*H4*).

Study 2a

As the main focus of this research is on attenuating the dissociative group effect, Study 2a compares the ingroup to the dissociative group, without including a (neutral) outgroup condition. Further, people tend to, by default, approach and make decisions based on low level concrete representations (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000; Malkoc *et al*., 2010). Thus, the pattern of effects in Study 1 is expected to be replicated for participants placed into a concrete mindset. However, the negative dissociative group effect experienced by high identifiers observed in Study 1 should be attenuated when they are placed into an abstract mindset. Study 2a manipulated construal level to be high (abstract) or low (concrete) to test *H3*. Study 2a also aimed to rule out two potential alternative explanations (ethnocentrism and self-stereotyping).

Participants, method and design

In total, 284 US MTurk workers (57% female, M_{age} = 47.6) took part in a 2 (advert target: Canadians coded 0 vs. Americans coded 1) × 2 (construal level: concrete coded 0 vs. abstract coded 1) between-subjects experiment with strength of identification (measured). The same

adverts and taglines were used as in Study 1. Two days before the main study, strength of identification with being American (α = 0.96, Leach *et al.,* 2008) and consumer ethnocentrism (α = 0.93; four items adapted from Reardon *et al*., 2005) were captured. Finally, a single item (Postmes *et al*., 2013) capturing strength of identification with Americans was included in both parts of the study.

In the main study, level of construal was manipulated as in the Pilot Study (Freitas *et al*., 2004). Participants' responses were coded using the same procedure as in the Pilot Study. Participants were then asked to rate the target advert, supposedly selected randomly from a large bank of adverts. Attitude toward the advertised product (mug) was captured using four items (α = 0.92; adapted from Pham, 1996). After rating the advert's realism and believability (as in Study 1), participants indicated which out of four mugs they would choose if they wanted to buy a mug. The mugs shown were the same as in Study 1.

Results and discussion

Out of the total sample, 132 participants saw the ingroup condition (Americans) and 152 participants saw the dissociative group condition (Canadians). One hundred and forty participants were in the concrete construal condition and 144 were in the abstract construal condition. The construal level manipulation was successful, as participants in the abstract condition generated more abstract responses (M = 3.65, SD = 0.64) compared to those in the concrete condition (M = -3.91, SD = 0.34; $t(217.59) = -124.61$, $p < 0.001$). An ANOVA showed that the adverts were perceived equally realistic and believable across all conditions, with no main or interaction effects (M's > 4.78; p's > 0.2).

PROCESS (Model 3) was used to analyse the three-way interaction effect proposed in *H*3 between advert target, strength of identification, and construal level onto attitude. The results

showed a simple effect of advert target onto attitude (B = -3.57, t = -3.46, $p < 0.001$), in addition to a two-way interaction between advert target and strength of identification (B = 0.67, t = 3.39, $p < 0.001$) and between advert target and construal level (B = 3.89, t = 2.81, $p < 0.01$). More importantly, the predicted three-way interaction was significant (B = -0.80, t = -3.00, $p < 0.01$). Spotlight analysis showed a significant effect of advert target onto attitude when strength of identification was low (16th percentile: 3.71) and participants were placed in a concrete mindset (B = -1.07, t = -2.96, $p < 0.01$). There was also a significant effect for high identifiers (84th percentile: 6.36) when placed in a concrete mindset (B = 0.71, t = 1.98, $p < 0.05$). This means that in a concrete mindset, low (high) identifiers rated the product associated with Canadians (Americans) more favourably. These findings are in line with Study 1[2]. Under abstract construal, no differences were found across strength of identification and advert target (p's > 0.15). Taken together, the results support *H3*. See Figure 2 for a visual depiction of the findings.

- Insert Fig. 2 around here -

Additional follow-up analysis showed a significant ($t(26)$ = -2.07, $p < 0.05$) increase in high identifiers' (+1SD) attitude toward the product associated with Canadians in the abstract mindset (M = 5.70, SD = 1.13) versus the concrete mindset (M = 4.79, SD = 1.19). Low identifiers' attitude toward the product associated with Canadians did not differ across levels of construal ($p > 0.65$). Further, there was a significant ($t(20)$ = -2.31, $p < 0.05$) increase in low identifiers' (-1SD) attitude toward the product associated with Americans in the abstract mindset (M = 4.30, SD = 1.94) versus the concrete mindset (M = 2.56, SD = 1.13). High identifiers' attitude toward the American-linked mug did not differ across the levels of construal ($p > 0.17$).

PROCESS Version 2 (Model 11; 5,000 bootstrap samples, 95%CI) was used to analyse the conditional indirect effect of advert target, strength of identification, and construal level onto

choice, mediated by attitude. Choice was a binary variable (coded 1 = advertised mug vs. 0 = other mug), as was advert target (coded 1 = ingroup vs. 0 = dissociative group), and construal level (coded 0 = concrete vs. 1 = abstract). The moderated moderated mediation analysis revealed a significant three-way advert target × strength of identification × construal level interaction onto attitude as previously reported. Attitude had a direct effect onto choice (B = -0.26, t = -5.99, $p < 0.001$). As expected, the conditional indirect (mediating) effect was present in the concrete (index = -0.17, CI: -0.30 to -0.08) but not in the abstract condition (CI: -0.06 to 0.15). Therefore, the effect of advert target on choice, mediated through attitude, took place in the concrete condition for low (-1SD: 3.70; B = 0.27, CI: 0.09 to 0.51) and high identifiers (+1SD: 6.32; B = -0.18, CI: -0.36 to -0.02). This means that low (high) identifiers in a concrete mindset were less likely to choose the advertised mug if it was associated with Americans (Canadians) rather than Canadians (Americans). These findings replicate the pattern of effects found in Study 1. No difference was found in the likelihood to choose the advertised mug when in an abstract mindset.

Alternative explanations

Consumer ethnocentrism refers to the preferential judgments made by consumers about products made in their own rather than a foreign country (Fischer and Zeugner-Roth, 2017). This preference is based on a moral obligation toward one's own country and contempt toward (culturally) dissimilar others (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). Consumer ethnocentrism causes individuals to purchase domestic products due to patriotic duty, whereas social identification is a broad construct influencing many behaviours, not limited to the choice of domestic goods. Finally, consumer ethnocentrism is driven by strong anti-outgroup motives (Shimp and Sharma, 1987), whereas consumers who strongly identify with their nation may express an ingroup bias

without explicit reference to an outgroup (Brewer, 1999). We capture ethnocentrism to rule out that this narrower construct is driving the dissociative group effect. To test the alternative explanation whereby ethnocentrism – rather than strength of identification – moderated the interaction of advert target and construal level onto attitude, PROCESS (Model 3) was used. The results showed neither main effects nor two- or three-way interactions (p's > 0.1), ruling out this alternative explanation.

According to McCrae *et al*. (2012), strength of identification changes as a result of level of construal. Specifically, they argued that an abstract (concrete) construal increases (decreases) self-stereotyping, resulting in an increase (decrease) in strength of identification. This would lead to an increase in the dissociative group effect when placed in an abstract mindset. Setting construal level aside, a repeated measures ANOVA found no change in strength of identification across the two data collection periods ($F(1, 281) = 2.29$, $p > 0.13$), based on the single item measure. However, there was a significant interaction effect between time of collection and construal level on strength of identification ($F(1, 281) = 10.41$, $p < 0.01$). Follow-up analysis showed that participants' strength of identification did not change when they were placed in an abstract mindset ($p > 0.3$). However, a modest increase was found when they were placed into the concrete construal condition ($M_{pre} = 5.23$, SD = 1.52, $M_{post} = 5.51$, SD =1.45; $t(140) = 3.67$, $p < 0.001$). These findings thus do not support McCrae *et al*.'s (2012) argument.

Discussion

The results of Study 2a were consistent with *H1* and *H3,* as the dissociative group effect is attenuated for high identifiers in an abstract mindset. This attenuation arises because an abstract construal yielded a beneficial, but differential, effect across strength of identification. In particular, high identifiers evaluated the product linked to the dissociative group more favourably

in the abstract (vs. concrete) condition. In comparison, low identifiers in the abstract (vs. concrete) condition evaluated the product more favourably in the ingroup condition.

The positive effect observed for low identifiers in the abstract condition is consistent with the contention that abstract construal increases similarity focus and the inclusiveness of social categories. When manipulated to be in an abstract mindset, consumers focused more on similarities, on features that tie objects together, and they applied broader categories. Low identifiers likely saw the ingroup in terms of broader social categories, perhaps making it easier to relate to the group. This does not mean that low identifiers identify more strongly with the ingroup as a result. Instead the construal level manipulation likely led to a momentary perception shift, so that low identifiers perceived more similarities between themselves and the group alluded to in the advert. This likely reduced their dissociative concern regarding their ingroup, resulting in the observed elevated attitude. A limitation of Study 2a is that it did not evidence the underlying mechanism - similarity focus - and therefore Study 2b examined this mechanism.

Study 2b

Hypothesis *H3* argued that the dissociative group effect can be attenuated for individuals who have been placed into an abstract mindset. Specifically, an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset should result in higher levels of similarity focus when consumers process an advert (*H4*). To test this mechanism, a follow-up study tested the proposed mediation process through similarity focus onto attitude at different levels of construal for the dissociative group advert.

Participants, method and design

In total, 72 US MTurk workers (47% female, M_{age} = 39.4) took part in a single-factor between-subjects experimental design with two levels of construal level (coded 0 = concrete vs. 1 =

abstract). Each participant saw the dissociative group advert, used in previous studies, as well as a filler advert (water bottle). Level of construal was manipulated as in previous studies. After the construal level manipulation, participants rated their overall liking of the filler advert and the focal advert, followed by five items on attitude toward the focal product (captured as in Study 1; $\alpha = 0.97$). Similarity focus was captured using two items ($\alpha = 0.85$; adapted from Liviatan *et al*., 2008).

Results and discussion

Thirty-one participants were randomly assigned to the concrete condition and 41 to the abstract condition. A manipulation check of the construal level manipulation was undertaken in line with the previous studies. As expected, participants in the abstract construal condition generated responses that reflected higher levels of construal ($M = 3.34$, SD = 0.63) compared with those in the concrete condition ($M = -3.52$, SD = 0.73), $t(70) = -41.99$, $p < 0.001$). Level of construal was therefore successfully manipulated. PROCESS (Model 4; 5000 bootstrapping samples, 95%CI) was used to test whether similarity focus acted as a mediator. Results showed that construal level has a direct effect onto similarity focus (B = 0.80, $t = 2.51$, $p < 0.05$), and similarity focus had a direct effect onto attitude toward the product (B = 0.45, $t = 3.39$, $p < 0.01$). There was no direct effect of construal level onto attitude ($p > 0.48$). Importantly, the effect of construal level onto attitude was mediated by similarity focus (B = 0.36; CI: 0.05 to 0.83). This means that relative to those in a concrete mindset, participants in an abstract mindset evaluated Canadians as more similar to themselves, resulting in a more favourable evaluation of the Canadian product. Thus, Study 2b offers support for the arguments underlying *H3* and *H4*, as similarity focus explained the process through which the dissociative group effect was attenuated when in an abstract mindset.

General discussion

Linking a product/brand to consumers' social groups is a commonly observed strategy in marketing. However, consumers' response to social 'others' referenced in such marketing strategies depends on whether the social others are a member of the consumer's ingroup, outgroup, or dissociative group. Coca-Cola fell afoul of the dissociative group effect where they saw an unexpected sales drop in China, when male consumers boycotted the brand, following a campaign in which a famous pop singer endorsed the brand (Du *et al*., 2009). The negative effect arose because young men wished to distance themselves from the androgynous pop singer and her mostly female fanbase. As illustrated in the introduction, the dissociative group effect is a concern in fragmented marketplaces, as well as for companies wishing to expand beyond their historic target audience.

The current research contributes to two streams of literature. Firstly, it adds to work on reference groups (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2005; White and Dahl, 2006). The studies extend White and Dahl's (2007) finding that high identifiers respond negatively to dissociative groups. The findings contribute to research on the dissociative group effect by evidencing that it can occur even when the dissociative group is portrayed in a positive – rather than neutral – light. The dissociative group effect may therefore occur as a response to brand positioning, sponsoring, or advertising.

Most importantly, the current research contributes to social identity literature by drawing on construal level theory to introduce a new condition under which the dissociative group effect is attenuated. This answers the call for further research on conditions under which consumers shift their view about a dissociative group (Grohs *et al.,* 2015; White and Dahl, 2007). At present, only moral identity has been shown to attenuate the dissociative group effect to a limited

degree (Choi and Winterich, 2013). Moral identity is important in corporate social responsibility contexts (He *et al.*, 2016) but may not be appropriate for all product categories (e.g., utilitarian products, FMCGs) or positionings (e.g., luxury brands). Further, Choi and Winterich (2013) asserted that psychological distance would not make a difference to the evaluation of ingroup-linked products. However, these authors did not take strength of identification into account. Our research provides a nuanced account of the role of construal level and reveals that an abstract construal can shift consumers' perception of intergroup distinctiveness (i.e. similarity focus) and subsequently affect product evaluations.

The current research confirmed that high identifiers prefer the product associated with their ingroup over one associated with a dissociative group. Further, high identifiers were shown to be concerned about the product's association with their dissociative group. Dissociative concern in turn mediated the effect of advert target onto attitude, as high identifiers preferred the product when it was linked to the ingroup rather than the dissociative group. This preference was attenuated in an abstract mindset (Study 2a) where high identifiers rated products associated with their ingroup and dissociative group equally favourably. Moreover, Study 2b evidenced that similarity focus is the underlying process by which the dissociative group effect was mitigated. These findings are in line with the construal level theory literature whereby abstract mindsets lead to greater similarity between social targets (Burgoon *et al*., 2013; Levy *et al*., 2002).

It is important to consider whether the findings of Study 2a can be generalised to contexts and social groups other than those reported above (namely, nationality and mug). To begin to answer this question, we undertook an additional study with a design analogous to that of White and Dahl (2006). We relied on White and Dahl's (2006) findings that women represent a dissociative group for men, to the extent that men are less likely to choose a "Ladies' cut steak"

in public. For this additional study, 147 US MTurk participants (58% female, M_{age} = 40) took part in a 2 (construal level: abstract vs. concrete) × 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) between subjects experiment, in which construal level was manipulated as in Study 2a (how/why would you go about maintaining and improving your general well-being). Participants were shown a menu for a steak restaurant in a hotel and asked to choose a starter, main course, and dessert. Similar to the scenario painted by White and Dahl (2006, Study 2) participants were told that they had eaten a late lunch, but would be going for dinner in the steak restaurant with some colleagues. The main course options were counter-balanced and consisted of a choice between a House cut steak (12oz) and a Ladies' cut steak (10oz). When placed in an abstract mindset, men were expected to be more likely to choose the Ladies' cut steak, relative to men with a concrete mindset. Females' choice of steak should not differ across level of construal. Finally, strength of identification with gender was measured using two separate items, which captured the degree to which they felt masculine and feminine (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; Brough *et al.,* 2016).

A manipulation check of the construal level manipulation was undertaken. As expected, participants in the abstract construal condition generated responses that reflected higher levels of construal (M = 3.51, SD = 0.75) compared with those in the concrete condition (M = -3.74, SD = 0.53), $t(128.98) = 67.96$, $p < 0.001$). Level of construal was therefore successfully manipulated.

Gender identity is an integral part of individuals' self-concept and serves as the fundamental scaffolding that allows individuals to process information about themselves and the world around them (Bem, 1981; Brough *et al*., 2016; Fischer and Arnold, 1994; Palan, 2001; Spence, 1985). As such it is not surprising that respondents consistently identified strongly with their respective gender ($M_{feminine}$ = 5.78, $SD_{feminine}$ = 1.17 for females, $M_{masculine}$ = 5.95, $SD_{masculine}$ = 1.09 for males). We therefore excluded strength of identification in our analysis. Women

preferred the Ladies' cut steak (83% chose the Ladies' cut vs. 37% the House cut steak), but their choice did not differ across the mindset conditions ($p = 0.19$). More importantly, Chi-square analysis showed that 93% of men placed in a concrete mindset chose the House cut steak but only 7% chose the Ladies' cut steak. In comparison, 73% of men placed in an abstract mindset chose the House cut steak with 27% choosing the Ladies' cut steak ($\chi^2 (1) = 4.31$, $p < .05$). No differences were found for the starter or dessert options across the mindset conditions nor across gender (p's > 0.10). These results therefore suggest that priming an abstract mindset helps attenuate the dissociative group effect for different types of dissociative groups and contexts.

Finally, past research has paid limited attention to low identifiers who are likely to respond less favourably to identity-linked marketing. Low identifiers preferred products associated with an outgroup/dissociative group rather than their ingroup. Low identifiers felt relatively less dissociative concern regarding the outgroup/dissociative group than regarding their ingroup (Studies 1 and 2a). This lack of dissociative concern, combined with the positive valence of the tagline, drives low identifiers' relative preference for the outgroup/dissociative group-linked product. Furthermore, the differential preference was attenuated when an abstract mindset was induced. Low identifiers may be in the process of diluting the centrality of their ingroup identity (Reed and Forehand, 2016) and therefore wish to distance themselves from products that would reinforce this identity. This does not mean that low identifiers did not regard America as an ingroup. Being American does not constitute a transitory identity but an objective (ascribed) identity that varies in terms of how central it is in defining the self. In support, low identifiers' strength of identification was relatively high (e.g., Study 2a: M=3.71). Low identifiers have received little attention in the past as they are believed to mirror high identifiers,

be it to a lesser degree. Our findings indicate the need for further research regarding identity-linked marketing strategies for low identifiers.

Managerial Implications

To date there is limited awareness of the importance of the dissociative group effect for practitioners and ways to overcome its negative effect on consumer choice. As outlined, a brand may wish to cater to new (conflicting) customer segments, or to reposition itself from a niche to a mainstream brand. It is crucial that the original target audience does not abandon the brand because it no longer feels like the intended target audience. Finally, brands may become linked to a dissociative group against their will. Over many years Apple's 'Get a Mac' campaign linked Microsoft to a dissociative group, by depicting Apple as young, hip and unflappable whereas Microsoft was depicted as old and out of touch. As this example shows, brands such as Microsoft sometimes need to overcome externally imposed dissociative group associations.

Given that an abstract mindset leads to beneficial effects for consumers (low and high identifiers) with no evidence of any detrimental effects, practitioners should employ tactics to induce an abstract mindset in their audiences where possible. Online, marketers might induce an abstract mindset through the choice architecture built into their website design. Specifically, Lamberton and Diehl (2013) showed that a benefit-based (vs. an attribute-based) grouping of products induced an abstract mindset. Further, presenting options with non-alignable attributes (i.e. lacking common attributes) leads to more abstract thinking than options with alignable attributes (Malkoc *et al.,* 2010), which could easily be implemented in the website architecture.

The 'How' versus 'Why' manipulation used in Study 2a can be adapted for marketers too. White *et al*. (2011) showed that consumers asked to 'think about reasons' (vs. 'think about ways')

led to an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset. By incorporating such rhetorical questions consumers may be encouraged to focus on the similarity between the current (i.e. ingroup) and novel target audience (i.e. dissociative group), ensuring a more favourable attitude. Further, marketing communication may also be framed in terms of concrete product attributes/benefits (e.g., lack of added sugar in cereals) or abstract benefits (e.g., cereals' contribution to a healthy lifestyle). If the above approaches are not applicable, novel methods such as music might be possible. For instance, low (vs. high) frequency music leads consumers to adopt an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset (Sunaga, 2018). Perhaps the high frequency pitch of the song in Coca-Cola's 'It's Beautiful' campaign exacerbated the dissociative group effect. Thus, companies wishing to adopt a one brand strategy can utilise the above mechanisms to induce an abstract mindset in their audiences.

The above examples outline how practitioners may overcome the dissociative group effect. However, Study 2a finds that the unfavourable attitude held by low identifiers towards brands linked to their ingroup is also attenuated when in an abstract mindset. Practitioners should take note as low identifiers appear to reject advertising specifically targeting them. The above strategies may therefore also help improve the effectiveness of identity-linked marketing among the target audience. Customers have many identities and a large segment of the target audience can be expected to identify weakly or moderately with the respective social group. The findings therefore pertain to a large portion of the target audience.

Counterintuitively, some companies may wish to actively encourage – rather than attenuate - dissociative group effects. The 2015 'Are you beach body ready?' campaign by Protein World sparked much outrage, with more than 40,000 people signing a petition to get it banned for body shaming women. However, the message clearly resonated with those who

wanted to distance themselves from the (dissociative) group implied by the advert, as Protein World earned 5,000 new customers within four days of the advert going live. For brands who thrive on adversity (or who are particularly bland) the dissociative group effect might actually be beneficial as it allows customers to differentiate themselves.

Limitations and further directions

A number of limitations need to be taken into consideration. We chose to use the same product and dissociative group in our main studies to ensure that construal level theory rather than contextual factors accounted for the findings reported. However, the key finding of Study 2a was replicated using an established dissociative group and consumption context (men ordering Ladies' cut steak in a restaurant). This offers initial support for the generalizability of the findings (see Uncles and Kwok, 2013 for a discussion). Nevertheless, future work should replicate the findings across different product categories and social groups to further test the generalizability of our findings. Gender and nationality are examples of 'social categories' as defined by Lickel *et al.* (2000), which are characterised by their long duration, intermediate entitativity, large size, and low permeability. It is unclear what dissociative groups may exist that relate to other social groups, such as intimacy groups or task-oriented groups (Lickel *et al.*, 2000). Further research should therefore explore how consumers' response to such (dissociative) groups may differ. Additionally, strength of identification was measured several days prior to the main study to reduce demand effects. However, future work may wish to manipulate participants' strength of identification rather than measure it.

Further, all studies relied to MTurk workers. Past research has shown MTurk to be a reliable source of high-quality and relatively representative data (e.g., Berinsky *et al.,* 2012; Goodman and Paolacci, 2017; Paolacci and Chandler, 2014) and MTurk has been used to

successfully replicate findings of published studies in experimental psychology (Crump *et al*., 2013). Further, MTurk workers are just as honest, consistent, and conscientious as traditional samples (Shapiro *et al.,* 2013). Throughout best practice recommendations were followed: High reputation MTurk workers (i.e. minimum approval ratings of 95%) were used as they produce high quality data (e.g., Matherly, 2019; Peer *et al.,* 2014). To reduce the risk of self-selection biases, the studies were described very generally, to avoid revealing details that would make the study more/less attractive to certain subsections of MTurk workers (Goodman and Paolacci, 2017). To minimise attrition, participants received a bonus payment after completing the second of the two linked studies, and were informed at the onset about the need to complete the (second) main study. This helps build a social contract and contributes to an expectation of reciprocity and subsequent trust (Stoycheff, 2016). Another concern is MTurk workers might misrepresent themselves to qualify for a study thus biasing the results (e.g., Wessling *et al.,* 2017). However, misrepresentation is not a concern, as location – the only qualifier - was ensured using MTurk's own filter and participants' IP addresses. To avoid non-naiveté the studies did not use classic paradigms which participants might have come across previously and a suspicion probe was included in all studies (Chandler *et al*., 2014).

Given the paucity of research focusing on low identifiers, further work is needed to shed light on how they process information pertaining to different reference groups. Limited research has begun to explore different levels of identification and its consequences. For instance, Wolter *et al*. (2016), examined predictors of consumer brand disidentification (i.e. self-brand dissimilarity, brand disrepute, brand indistinctiveness). However, disidentification is not the same as low strength of identification, leading these authors to distinguish between brand disidentification, non-identification, and ambivalent identification. Overall, research has focused

mainly on high identifiers and the needs driving their behaviours, but a similar taxonomy for low identifiers has yet to be developed.

Construal level was consistently manipulated using an established manipulation, by asking repeated 'Why' or 'How' questions. Future research may wish to test other manipulations of construal level, such as manipulating psychological distance. As the distant future is represented more abstractly, Liberman *et al*. (2002) found that individuals group objects into fewer and broader categories when they imagine the objects within a distant (vs. near) future scenario. Similarly, Wakslak *et al*. (2006) argued that low probability of an event occurring leads individuals to represent the event in an abstract way (high-level construal). In support, they found that individuals use broader, more inclusive categorizations of objects when asked to imagine scenarios that were highly unlikely to occur. Further research should establish whether the observed attenuation of the dissociative group effect holds across these manipulations.

Further research should also examine the role of construal level within identity marketing. Research has found consumers to focus on the feasibility of a near-future task (concrete construal), but emphasize its desirability when the same task or outcome lies in the distant future (abstract construal; Trope and Liberman, 2003). As such, consumers in an abstract mindset are expected to be more responsive to and persuaded by an aspirational advert, which links a product to consumers' ideal self – as may be the case with luxury goods or aspirational identities such as athletes. Finally, more research is needed to identify additional moderators of the dissociative group effect. Such moderators may not only be useful in an advertising context, but may also be applied within a social or intergroup context, to help reduce (implicit) stereotyping or discrimination of dissociative groups.

Endnote

[1] PROCESS Version 2 is used as Version 3 does not allow binary dependent variables.

[2] Replicating the Study 1 findings, dissociative concern was found to mediate the conditional effect of advert type × strength of identification onto attitude when in a concrete mindset. As concrete level of construal is the default mindset this is comparable to Study 1. Low identifiers experienced more dissociative concern in the ingroup vs. dissociative group condition, leading to a preference for the dissociative group-linked mug. High identifiers experienced greater dissociative concerns in the dissociative vs. ingroup condition and preferred the ingroup-linked mug. The full results are available from the authors on request.

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Appendix. Measurement items used across studies

Strength of identification (Leach *et al*., 2008; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

- I feel a bond with Americans.
- I feel solidarity with Americans.
- I feel committed to Americans.
- I am glad to be American.
- I think that Americans have a lot to be proud of.
- It is pleasant to be American.
- Being American gives me a good feeling.
- I often think about the fact that I am American.
- The fact that I am American is an important part of my identity.
- Being American is an important part of how I see myself.
- I have a lot in common with the average American.
- I am similar to the average American.
- Americans have a lot in common with each other.
- Americans are very similar to each other.

Product attitude (adapted from Pham, 1996)

Overall, my attitude toward the MLE mug is…

- 1 = Bad … 7 = Good (not included in Study 2a)
- 1 = Dislike … 7 = Like
- 1 = Unfavorable … 7 = Favorable
- 1 = Unattractive … 7 = Attractive
- 1 = Unappealing … 7 = Appealing

Dissociative concern (White and Dahl, 2006; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

- I dislike the associations of this product.
- I want to avoid being associated with this product.
- This product reflects who I do not want to be.

Realism of advert (1 = unrealistic, 7 = realistic)

- How realistic is the advert?

Believability of advert (1 = not believable, 7 = very believable)

- How believable is the advert?

Choice (Study 1)

- If you win the free gift, which of the following mugs would you like to receive? [a picture of four mugs was shown, each branded MLE]

Hypothetical choice (Study 2a)

- If you were to buy a mug for work, which of the following mugs would you choose? [a picture of four mugs was shown, each branded MLE)

Consumer ethnocentrism (Reardon *et al*., 2005; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

- American products, first, last, and foremost.
- Americans should not buy foreign products, because this hurts American businesses and causes unemployment.
- American consumers who purchase products made in other countries are responsible for putting their fellow Americans out of work.
- A real American should always buy American products.

Identification with Americans (Postmes *et al*., 2013; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

- You identify with Americans.

Similarity focus (adapted from Liviatan *et al*., 2008)

- How similar are Canadians to you? (1 = not at all similar, 7 = very similar)
- How close are Canadians to you? (1 = not at all close, 7 = very close)

Overall liking of advert (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)

- Overall, how much do you like the advert?

FIGURES

Figure 1. Attitude as a function of advert target and strength of identification (Study 1)

SoI=strength of identification; Low SoI = 16th percentile; High SoI = 84th percentile.

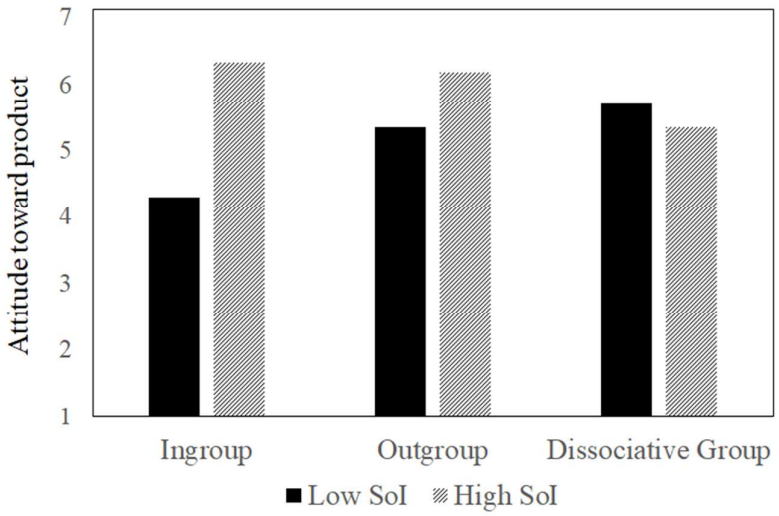
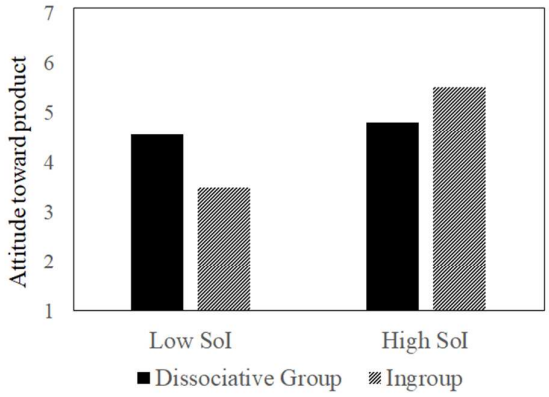


Figure 2. Attitude as a function of advert target, construal level, and strength of identification (Study 2)

SoI=strength of identification; Low SoI = 16th percentile; High SoI = 84th percentile.

a. Concrete mindset



b. Abstract mindset