It’s Not Me, It’s You: How Gift Giving Creates Giver Identity Threat as a Function of Social Closeness

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Prior research has established that consumers are motivated to purchase identity-consistent products. We extend consumer identity research into an important consumer context, gift giving, in which individuals may make product choices that run counter to their own identities in order to fulfill the desires of the intended recipient. We find that purchasing an identity-contrary gift for a close (vs. distant) friend who is an integral part of the self can itself cause an identity threat to the giver. Four experiments in a gift registry context show that after making an identity-contrary gift choice for a close (vs. distant) friend, givers subsequently engage in behaviors that reestablish their identity such as indicating greater identity affiliation with the threatened identity and greater likelihood to purchase identity-expressive products. This research highlights the opposing forces that product purchase may exert on consumer identity as both a potential threat and means of self-verification.

The issue of identity threat has not been a major focus of the consumer behavior literature. Extant constructs describe a consistent, monolithic self that influences and defines consumers’ choices (Birdwell 1968; Levy 1959). More recently, identity threat research has shown that when an individual feels constrained from accurate self-expression or challenged by discrepant feedback, s/he compensates by intensifying his efforts to choose highly symbolic items in order to reassert his/her precarious self-concept (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). However, inverse effects have not been explored in depth. Specifically, can purchases that do not verify one’s personal identity actually threaten the self-concept, and what are the resultant outcomes?

In this research we consider an occasion that may necessitate that an individual make a choice or perform a task that is contrary to his/her identity: gift giving. When choosing a gift, a giver is sometimes faced with making a purchase that opposes his/her own identity in order to fulfill the needs and desires of the intended recipient. We examine how such a choice can influence the giver’s own identity certainty and the subsequent behaviors that verify the giver’s sense of self.

We contribute to the identity threat literature in several ways. To our knowledge, this is the first research that identifies a common consumer self-induced identity threat resulting from an individual putting a gift recipient’s product desires and preferences in front of his/her own. Second, we identify the important moderating role of social closeness in an identity threat resulting from a gift purchase. Specifically, we show that choosing an identity-contrary gift for an individual who is an integral part of self poses more of...
an identity threat than purchasing the same product for a
recipient who does not play a large role in the self. In re-
sponse to this identity threat, we propose that the gift giver
will be more inclined to reassert his/her identity and choose
an identity-expressive (vs. -nonexpressive) product for him/
herself in a subsequent choice.

We consider the gift registry context for our inquiry as
it presents a circumstance in which the purchaser (i.e., the
gift giver) may choose an item that is not reflective of his/
her identity in order to honor the recipient’s explicit pref-
erences. The results of a pilot study and four lab experiments
support our theses and shed insight on how consumer pur-
chases for others may affect givers’ identities and subse-
quently purchases for themselves.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Identity Threat

While people try to avoid acting in ways that oppose their
self-views, there are occasions in life when a person’s ac-
tions necessarily contradict these views. To examine how
actual gift givers manage such a situation, we conducted a
qualitative investigation of these processes and their mean-
ings among gift givers of both genders between the ages of
19 and 65 via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk, http://
www.mturk.com/) for small compensation. Thirty partici-
pants answered a short questionnaire asking them about their
recollection of a gifting situation in which they had felt
compelled to choose a gift that was at odds with their own
identity. Ninety percent (27 out of 30) of the participants
could describe an instance in which they had made such a
gift choice. Below is a selection of their responses describing
their feelings and reactions to this type of gift choice:

[Participant 1, aged 54, female] My daughter-in-law is now
devout Christian. I have sent her presents with religious
leaning...I’m an atheist. I don’t feel good about buying
these gifts but I’m not going to have to look at or
read the religious book. It’s in her house.

[Participant 3, aged 24, male] I bought a girlfriend a Red
Sox Cap when I’m an Oakland A’s fan (and actively dislike
the Red Sox). I felt a little weird buying a Red Sox hat but
it was nice to get something for my girlfriend.

[Participant 4, aged 24, female] I always am in this situation
when I go shopping for my best friend. She is a fur freak
and I don’t see the point of buying real fur for any reason.

[Participant 5, aged 55, female] I bought a friend a gift cer-
tificate to a steak house and I am a vegetarian. I didn’t feel
good about it but I knew she would enjoy it.

As these examples illustrate, givers experience discomfort
when choosing a gift that is at odds with their own identity
but are motivated to do so to please their friends. Further,
when one’s self-views are momentarily shaken, his/her me-
tacognitions signal that something is wrong (Gao et al.
2009), resulting in an identity threat. Since individuals desire
to maintain a stable sense of self, they will subsequently be
strongly motivated to restore their shaken self-views (Gao
et al. 2009).

We add to this literature by showing how choosing an
identity-threatening product inversely affects identity. In
particular, we extend the identity-threat research into a con-
sumer context and focus on a situation in which individuals
may make product choices that run counter to their own
identities, thereby creating an identity threat: the gift-giving
context.

Gift Purchases: Self versus Other

Consumer spending on gifts for family and friends ac-
counts for approximately 10% of the total retail market in
the United States, amounting to $300 billion spent annually
(Unity Marketing Gifting Report 2007). Besides its obvious
economic significance, gift giving is instrumental in main-
taining social ties and serves as a means of symbolic com-
unication in relationships (Belk 1979; Caplow 1982). Ac-
cording to Schwartz (1967), gifts develop and maintain
identity. Gifts become “containers for the being of the donor
who gives a portion of that being to the recipient” (Sherry
1983). Since the gift imposes an identity on both the giver
and the receiver, the acceptance of a gift is acknowledg-
ment by both people that the identity imposed is accepted
(Schwartz 1967). Indeed, the giver’s self-identity may be
confirmed by presenting it to others in the objectified form
of a gift (Belk 1979).

The choice of the right gift is more complex than choosing
something for oneself because of the tension inherent in
selecting a product that is appropriate for the recipient while
still reflective of the giver’s own identity and the relationship
between the individuals. However, the literature has shown
that a giver’s identity often exerts a dominant force, whether
explicitly or implicitly, in their gift purchases. Aron et al.
(1991) found that when making the choice of an item for
a close other, individuals often mix elaborate knowledge of
the other with information about the self, thus conflating
the recipient’s preferences with the givers’ own tastes. These
mispredictions often lead givers to choose gifts that are not
liked or well received by the recipient (Gino and Flynn 2010;
Teigen, Olsen, and Solas 2005).

Gift recipients are increasingly turning to gift registries
to explicitly declare their product preferences: annually, in
the United States, a staggering $19 billion of gifts are reg-
istered for and more than $5 billion are purchased (Mintel
2008). Compiled by the recipient, gift registries formally
catalog an assortment of products that s/he desires for an
upcoming event or holiday (e.g., wedding, baby shower, or
birthday), which are available for purchase at a specific
retailer. This mechanism increases the likelihood that the
recipient will receive what s/he desires.

Registries provide perfect information about a recipient’s
preferences and expectations for an occasion. Ideally, a giver
choosing from a gift registry could make a choice that is
mutually satisfactory to him/her and to the gift recipient.
However, for a myriad of reasons (e.g., purchasing after the preferred gifts already have been chosen by other givers, having different tastes than the recipient, being constrained to less preferred gifts due to price point), the giver is often obliged to purchase something contrary to his/her own identity when choosing from a prescribed list of gifts. Given the important role that gifts play in expressing the giver’s self-concept to the recipient, we contend that the purchase of an identity-contrary gift may threaten the giver’s identity and that this will be especially true when the giver and recipient have a close relationship.

Indeed, research suggests that close relationships are especially likely to influence one’s notions of self and resulting behavior. Maslow (1967, 103) took it for granted that “beloved people can be incorporated into the self.” The related notion of “possessing” the other (you are mine; I am yours) has been part of classical discussions of love (Berl 1924; Freud 1921/1951) for more than a century. The principle is that in a close relationship, individuals act as if some or all aspects of the close other are partially the person’s own. Aron and Aron (1986) emphasized that in close relationships the individual may perceive the self as including resources, perspectives, and characteristics of the other. For instance, individuals who include a close relationship partner in the self are less likely to differentiate between the self and the other in allocating resources, tend to vicariously share the other’s characteristics, and tend to think about the other as much as they think about the self (Aron et al. 1991). Moreover, individuals in close relationships may perceive themselves to be more similar than they actually are (Gershoff and Johar 2006; Lerouge and Warlop 2006). They are also motivated to agree with liked others and conversely are uncomfortable in situations in which they feel at odds with a close other (Zajonc 1968). When an individual is faced with differences between him/herself and a close friend, the dissimilarity is often a stronger threat to the individual’s identity than holding opposite attitudes within oneself (Priester and Petty 2001). People feel strong conflict and discomfort to the degree to which they perceive their attitudes to be in disagreement with those of important others, and they actively seek to rectify these situations once identified (Priester and Petty 2001) and to reassert their challenged self-views (Cast and Burke 2002).

In sum, relationships define and influence individuals’ behavior. While people are naturally inclined to be attuned to the needs and desires of those around them, they are especially sensitive to those with whom they have close relationships, as these relationships are integrated into the self and are particularly important in defining one’s self-concept. Further, individuals are motivated to present themselves accurately to close others and feel threatened when they engage in incongruous behaviors, such as presenting a gift that is not self-reflective.

**HYPOTHESES**

Our main thesis centers on the idea that the social closeness between the giver and recipient influences the extent to which the giver feels the need to self-verify after choosing an identity-contrary gift. We posit that choosing such a gift for a close friend is more of an identity threat than purchasing the same item for a recipient who does not play a large role in the self. This is because the giver is self-imposing an identity threat resulting from presenting a false self (in the form of a gift) both to the recipient whom s/he perceives as integral to his/her self-concept and him/herself. In response to the threat, we predict that the giver will subsequently want to verify his/her identity with an identity-expressive behavior or choice. Conversely, when the giver purchases an identity-contrary gift for a distant friend, we do not predict an identity threat nor a difference in the giver’s propensity to purchase an identity-expressive product in a subsequent choice, as the recipient is not self-relevant to the giver. Our formal hypotheses are:

**H1:** Purchasing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend will lead to greater identity threat.

**H2a:** Purchasing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend will lead to greater identity verification behavior, including product choices.

**H2b:** Identity threat will mediate the relationship between purchasing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend and greater identity verification behavior.

Below, we outline five studies that support this perspective. A pilot study and study 1 support hypothesis 1 that givers are more likely to experience an identity threat after choosing from a close (vs. distant) friend’s gift registry. In studies 2 and 3, the data reveal that choosing an identity-contrary gift for a close (vs. distant) friend necessitates that the individual subsequently self-verify in order to restore his/her identity (hypothesis 2a). Further, in study 3, we show that subsequent choice of the self-verifying products is mediated by the giver’s feelings of threat (hypothesis 2b). Finally, in study 4 we extend our examination to a different identity and find that the self-verification effects still hold when the products are less symbolic.

**PILOT STUDY**

We conducted a pilot study on MTurk asking 56 participants to describe either an identity-contrary or identity-verifying gift registry purchase and then assessed the social closeness of the gift recipient. Specifically, 28 (28) participants in the identity-contrary (identity-verifying) condition were asked to recall an instance in which buying a gift from a friend’s gift registry was a difficult (easy) task because the recipient’s tastes and preferences were misaligned (aligned) with the giver’s own. After describing the gift they chose and their feelings about the
choice, participants rated the social closeness of the gift recipient on a (1 = distant friend, 7 = close friend) scale.

Consistent with our expectations, participants who were asked to describe choosing an identity-contrary (vs. identity-verifying) gift indicated that the recipient was a closer friend ($M_{ID \text{ Contrary}} = 5.57$ vs. $M_{ID \text{ Verifying}} = 4.50$; $F(1, 55) = 7.80, p < .0073$). These results lend initial support to the idea that choosing a gift for a close (vs. distant) friend is a highly self-relevant decision and, as such, is more likely to pose a threat to the giver’s own identity. In the following four studies, we will further investigate this finding in a laboratory setting.

**STUDY 1**

In the first study, we provide evidence that givers do feel a threat to their identity when they choose an identity-contrary gift. The stereotype threat literature has established that individuals unconsciously put greater physical distance between themselves and persons who threaten their in-group (Goff, Steele, and Davies 2008). Study 1 tests whether givers respond similarly to a gift that threatens their identity. Specifically, we examine whether choosing an identity-contrary gift for a close (vs. distant) friend will cause the giver to feel threatened and subsequently physically distance him/herself from the offending item.

**Design and Procedure**

In a 2 (product identity congruence: contrary vs. verifying) × 2 (social closeness of recipient: close vs. distant) experimental design, 50 participants from the University of Texas chose a gift for a friend from a gift registry. We manipulated the social closeness of the giver to the recipient by instructing participants to “Imagine your close (vs. distant) friend is about to have a birthday.” Participants then were provided certain information about the recipient, including his/her hobbies, personal tastes and school allegiance in order to mimic a real gifting situation in which the giver would know some information about the person for whom s/he was buying the gift. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) contends that individuals who are members of a group incorporate that group into their understanding of who they are. In identity-verifying scenarios, participants were told explicitly that the recipient attends a nearby rival school, Texas A&M University, but behaves identically. After reading about the recipient, participants are asked to record a friend’s initials who fits the description of the recipient to increase the realism of the choice.

Participants were then faced with making the choice of one mug from a set of five mugs for the recipient. In all of the conditions, participants were told the recipient had created a gift registry; next they were presented with five mugs, one of which was the registry mug, which was designated with a yellow star placed explicitly on the front. Thus, in identity-contrary conditions the mug from the rival school featuring the A&M maroon logo was starred; in the identity-verifying conditions the mug from the giver’s own school featuring the Texas Longhorn burnt orange logo, was starred (see app. A).

After selecting a gift from a registry, participants were told to pick up the mug that they chose and bring it to a different table where they would be asked to answer the second part of the study. In order to preserve the salience of the social closeness between the giver and their intended recipient as they transitioned from the first to the second part of the study, participants were told that they would be writing a note to accompany the gift and should think about what to say in the note to their intended recipient.

**Dependent Measure**

When participants arrived at the second table with the mug, they placed the mug down next to them as they answered additional questions. After they left the room, we captured participants’ feelings of threat by measuring the physical distance each person placed the mug from him/herself. We took this measurement by recording the linear distance (in inches) from where the participant sat to where s/he placed the mug. After the dependent measure was completed, participants answered two manipulation check questions pertaining to their liking for the gift selected (not at all/very much) and their perceived social closeness to the recipient (very distant/very close) on 7-point Likert scales.

**Pretest**

A pretest confirmed that participants from the same pool of University of Texas students perceived the rival school, Texas A&M, as a threat. Twenty-two participants were asked to rate several universities on 1–7 Likert scales on the strength of rivalry between their own university and the target university (1 = no rivalry, 7 = fierce rivalry). By comparing participants’ ratings of the rival school, Texas A&M, to the midpoint of the scale, we see that participants perceive the identity-contrary school as a rival to their own school ($M_{scale} = 4.0$ vs. $M_{ID \text{ Contrary}} = 6.9$; $t(21) = 26.4, p < .0001$).

**Results**

Manipulation checks confirmed that those in the close (vs. distant) friend condition indicated having a closer relationship with the recipient than those in the distant relationship ($M_{Close} = 6.28$ vs. $M_{Distant} = 5.04$; $F(1, 49) = 17.64, p < .0001$) and that the school attended by the recipient had no effect on givers’ reported closeness to the recipient ($M_{ID \text{ Verifying}} = 5.80$ vs. $M_{ID \text{ Contrary}} = 5.70$; $F(1, 49) = .12, p < .74$). We also confirmed that participants preferred the identity-verifying to the identity-contrary mug ($M_{ID \text{ Verifying}} = 5.75$ vs. $M_{ID \text{ Contrary}} = 4.10$; $F(1, 49) = 21.37, p < .0001$).

Next we examined how choosing an identity-contrary (vs. verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend affected givers’
spatial distance from the gift. We observed a significant main effect of threat on the distance participants placed the mugs from themselves ($M_{ID\text{ Contrary}} = 16.14$ vs. $M_{ID\text{ Verifying}} = 14.17$; $F(1, 49) = 10.12, p < .0026$) but no main effect of social closeness ($M_{Close} = 15.41$ vs. $M_{Distant} = 14.92$; $F(1, 49) = .57, p < .45$). Supporting hypothesis 1, we observed a significant product identity congruence $\times$ social closeness interaction ($F(1, 49) = 10.04, p < .0027$), indicating that after givers chose the identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend, they felt threatened and consequently were more likely to place the item farther from themselves. The simple effects indicate that when participants were choosing for a close friend, they were more likely to place greater distance between themselves and the gift after choosing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) gift ($M_{ID\text{ Contrary}} = 17.00$ inches vs. $M_{ID\text{ Verifying}} = 13.75$ inches; $F(1, 49) = 8.22, p < .0062$). Conversely, when participants were choosing for a distant friend, after choosing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) product, there was not a significant difference in the distance they placed the item from themselves ($M_{ID\text{ Contrary}} = 14.83$ inches vs. $M_{ID\text{ Verifying}} = 15.00$ inches; $F(1, 49) = 2.18, p < .12$; see fig. 1).

Discussion

In this experiment, we gauged participants’ felt threat by measuring their physical responses to the gifts they chose from the registry. Confirming hypothesis 1, we found that individuals who chose an identity-contrary gift for a close (vs. distant) friend felt threatened and responded by placing the chosen gift farther from themselves. These findings illustrate that one way individuals may offset feelings of threat is to distance themselves physically from the source of threat. In our next study, we observe how gift givers offset their feelings of threat by increasing their affiliation with the threatened identity.

STUDY 2

According to self-verification theory (Swann 1983), people are motivated to restore their threatened identities in their subsequent decisions. In the study described below, we tested whether choosing an identity-contrary gift influenced gift givers’ desire to assert the relevant identity at their next opportunity. In this study design, we test hypothesis 2a, that after choosing an identity-contrary (vs. identity-verifying or identity-incongruent neutral) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend, participants will self-verify and reestablish their identity. To isolate that our effect is due to the identity threat mechanism and not merely to buying a non-identity-reflective gift, in study 2, we included two kinds of identity-incongruent gifts: one gift that threatened the giver’s identity and another that was identity incongruent and neutral. We compared participants’ scale measures before and after the experimental conditions to see how choosing an identity-contrary (vs. -neutral or -verifying) gift affected participants’ subsequent desire to express the relevant identity on a scale measure.

Design and Procedure

Two hundred and twenty-six undergraduate students participated in a 3 (product identity congruence: contrary vs. verifying vs. neutral) $\times$ 2 (social closeness of recipient: close vs. distant) $\times$ 2 (identity measure time: pre-gift vs. post-gift) study. Participants acted as gift givers and chose a gift for a recipient from a gift registry using the same procedure and social closeness manipulation as described in

FIGURE 1

INTERACTION OF SOCIAL CLOSENESS AND IDENTITY CONGRUENCE ON GIFT DISTANCE FROM PARTICIPANT (STUDY 1)
study 1. Participants were provided information about the recipient including his/her school allegiance and were asked to record the initials of a close (vs. distant) friend who fit the description of the recipient described in the scenario. In the identity-verify ing condition, participants were told that the recipient attends the participant’s school, University of Texas. In the identity-threatening condition, the friend attends the nearby rival school, Texas A&M, whereas in the identity-incongruent neutral condition, participants were told that the recipient attends a local community college.

Pretest

A pretest confirmed that participants from the same pool of students perceived the nearby rival school, Texas A&M, as personally threatening and the community college as identity-incongruent and neutral. Fifty-two participants were asked to rate both schools on 1–7 Likert scales on how familiar they were with each school (not familiar/very familiar), the personal rivalry they felt with the target school (no personal rivalry/fierce personal rivalry), and agreement with statements about how purchasing a gift with the target school’s logos and colors emblazoned on it from a gift registry would make them uneasy, threaten their identity, and make them not want to buy the item (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree about their feelings regarding this gift choice). Participants reported being equally familiar with both identity-incongruent schools (MID Contry = 4.0 vs. MID Neutral = 3.80; t(38) = −18, p < .001) but indicated that they felt more of a personal rivalry with the identity-contrary school (MID Contry = 2.5 vs. MID Neutral = 2.1; t(52) = 13.71, p < .0001). Further, participants indicated that they would feel more uneasy (MID Contry = 4.9 vs. MID Neutral = 4.1; t(52) = 4.89, p < .0001), their identity would be more threatened (MID Contry = 3.6 vs. MID Neutral = 2.5; t(52) = 4.90, p < .0001), and they would experience stranger feelings of not wanting to buy the item (MID Contry = 4.0 vs. MID Neutral = 3.5; t(52) = 4.90, p < .0001) when they were considering choosing something from the identity-contrary, rival school versus the identity-incongruent neutral, community college, respectively.

Dependent Measure

The identity time measure was a within-subject measure of participants’ affiliation with their school identity before and after their gift choice. Prior to participating in the study, participants filled out an initial identity measure online to capture how strongly aligned they felt with their school identity (i.e., a pre-gift identity measure). Participants rated their school identity on a three-measure scale adopted from the work of Bolton and Reed (2004), which includes three statements pertaining to their feelings of affiliation with their university: “I would describe myself as a SCHOOL AFFILIATED IDENTITY,” “I would feel a loss if I were forced to give up being a SCHOOL AFFILIATED IDENTITY,” and “Being a SCHOOL AFFILIATED IDENTITY is an important part of who I am,” on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale (see app. B).

When participants arrived at the lab, they read a hypothetical gift scenario that included a description of the recipient. Participants subsequently chose one mug from a set of five mugs for their friend. Similar to the experimental design in prior studies, in all of the conditions participants were told that the recipient had created a gift registry and that the mug s/he had chosen for his/her registry was delineated with a prominent yellow star. In the identity-verifying conditions the mug from the participant’s school was starred. Conversely, in the identity-contrary conditions the mug from the rival school was starred; in the identity-incongruent neutral conditions, the mug from a local community college was starred.

After choosing the gift, participants were presented with an ostensibly unrelated task of filling out a second set of identity measures (i.e., post-gift identity measure). In order to prevent participants from simply indicating identities consistent to those they made prior to the experiment, we used a pictorial 5-point scale measure of school identity (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; see app. B). Scores on such scales are associated with verbal measures of identification with a group and the perceived similarity of an individual’s attitudes to those of a particular group. Last, participants answered the same manipulation check questions on 7-point Likert scales pertaining to liking for the gift selected and perceived social closeness to the recipient.

Results

Confirming our manipulations, we found that those in the close friend condition indicated having a closer relationship with the recipient than those in the distant friend condition (MClo = 6.4 vs. MDist = 4.9; F(1, 225) = 101.08, p < .0001) and that the school that the recipient attended had no effect on givers’ reported closeness to recipients (MID Contrary = 5.6 vs. MID Verifying = 5.6 vs. MID Neutral = 5.7; F(2, 224) = .09, p < .91). We also confirmed that participants liked the identity-verifying mug more than the identity-incongruent mugs (MID Verifying = 5.17 vs. MID Contrary = 3.5 and MID Neutral = 3.6; F(1, 225) = 49.44, p < .0001). Further, we confirmed that the school identity was strongly held, with most participants (81%) indicating their affiliation with their school identity at or above the midpoint of the scale.

In this study, we consider how participants’ pre-measures of identity interact with gift-identity congruence and social closeness to predict their post-experimental measure of identity. Our expectation is that participants’ pre-gift identity is predictive of their post-gift identity measures except in the experimental condition of purchasing an identity-contrary gift for a close friend. As the school identity is a strongly held identity, we expect the majority of participants to feel threatened by the identity-contrary gift scenario (Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers 1999) when choosing for a close friend.
and consequently to exhibit greater identity verification on the post-experimental identity measure. The means are presented in figure 2. We tested the full model of main effects and interactions (social closeness × identity threat × pre-identity measure) in predicting participants’ post-gift identity (see table 1, part A). We observed significant main effects for product identity congruence, social closeness, and pre-identity measure (p’s < .05). Corroborating study 1 and hypothesis 2a, we observed a significant product identity × social closeness interaction (F(1, 226) = 8.35, p < .01). In further hypothesis support, we found a significant three-way interaction of social closeness × identity threat × pre-gift identity measure on participants’ post-gift identity measures (F(1, 226) = 5.60, p < .019). In order to understand how the slopes in the pre-versus post-identity measures relate to one another in each condition, we examined the simple effects of the interaction. As expected, we find that the pre-gift identity measure is predictive of the post-gift identity measure in all conditions (p’s < .05) except for the close-friend, identity-contrary product condition (F(1, 226) = .07, p < .79; see table 1, part B). Finally, to confirm that the identity-contrary choice, close-friend condition exhibited greater identity verification than all of the other post-gift choice conditions, we created contrast codes that allowed us to pit this condition against the others in the full model. The results confirmed that post-gift identity verification in the identity-contrary choice, close-friend condition was significantly greater than the other conditions (M_{ID Contrary, Close} = 3.57 vs. M_{Other conditions} = 2.55; F(1, 226) = 8.3, p < .004).

**Discussion**

The results of study 2 indicate that after choosing an identity-contrary gift for a close (but not for a distant) friend, givers felt compelled to verify themselves by heightening their endorsement of the relevant threatened identity (e.g., school identity). Our data also clearly show that self-verifying behaviors only occur after the individuals made threatening choices (but not after making incongruent neutral choices). This finding rules out the alternative explanation that individuals will display verifying behaviors after any identity-incongruent choice because such a choice will make their own identity more accessible or salient. These results support our contention that choosing an identity-contrary gift can create an identity threat resulting in givers’ subsequent need to self-verify. Next, we examine how the same experimental conditions affect consumers’ desire to self-verify with their product choices and confirm that these choices are mediated by givers’ felt threat.

**STUDY 3**

In a follow-up study using a procedure almost identical to that in study 2, we examine how consumers select identity-related products after making identity-contrary (vs. verifying) gift choices. Our predictions are that after choosing an identity-contrary (vs. verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend, givers will self-verify (hypothesis 2a) by increasing their likelihood of choosing identity-expressive products and that this product choice will be mediated by the givers’ experienced identity threat (hypothesis 2b).

**Design and Procedure**

Fifty-eight undergraduate students participated one at a time in study 3 as part of a data collection session that included a series of unrelated studies. In a 2 (product identity congruence: verifying vs. contrary product) × 2 (social closeness of recipient: close vs. distant) experimental design participants were told that they were purchasing a mug for a friend. Our scenario and manipulations of product identity congruence and social closeness were the same as in prior studies. After reading the scenario, participants were told that they should walk over to a nearby table where the actual mugs were displayed and make their gift selection. The experimenter explained to each participant that s/he would be videotaped while s/he made his/her choice. No further instructions were given because we wanted to observe participants’ natural behavior when making the choice. After choosing the gift, participants filled out a 5-minute filler task.

**Dependent Measure**

After completing the filler task, participants were presented with an ostensibly unrelated choice (for themselves) between a less-liked but more verifying product and an objectively more appealing product. The products used in this choice were a less-preferred plastic pen with the participant’s school logo, the University of Texas Longhorn, printed on it (a self-verifying item) versus a more-preferred silver pen. Participants were told that they had the chance to win the product they chose. The two pens were labeled as Pen 1 (the silver pen) and Pen 2 (the identity-verifying pen). The dependent measure asked participants to indicate their preference for the pens on a scale from 1 = strongly prefer Pen 1 to 7 = strongly prefer Pen 2. Again, after the dependent variable, participants answered the same additional manipulation check measures reported in prior studies gauging social closeness and liking for the gift they selected.

A pretest confirmed a difference in the pens’ attractiveness. Specifically, 49 participants were asked which pen they would be more likely to choose to win as part of a raffle. The more attractive silver pen was labeled as 1 and the identity-verifying pen was labeled as 7. On average, participants indicated strong preference for the attractive silver pen with an average rating of 2, which is significantly lower than the midpoint of the scale of 4 (t(48) = -9.70, p < .0001).

Using the videos of each participant’s product choice, we measured and coded participants’ nonverbal threat behaviors. The stereotype threat literature shows that when individuals are faced with a threat to their group, those who are highly identified with the challenged group identity may interpret and respond to the threat as if it were a direct threat
IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU

**FIGURE 2**

PRE-VERSUS POST-EXPERIMENTAL IDENTITY MEASURE (STUDY 2)

A

- **Recipient: Close Friend**
- **Recipient: Distant Friend**

![Bar chart A](image)

B

- **Recipient: Close Friend**
- **Recipient: Distant Friend**

![Bar chart B](image)

In order to code the nonverbal threat responses, two judges who were blind to all procedures and hypotheses watched each videotaped gift product choice and rated participants’ nonverbal threat behaviors and facial expressions when making their product choices. Coders could see participants’ behaviors and expressions but could not see the gift that was designated on the registry in order to keep them blind to the condition they were coding. Following the Bosson et al. (2003) method of coding nonverbal indications of identity threat, the coders were instructed to “consider the extent to which the target appears uncomfortable” and look for “any behaviors that communicate discomfort, anxiety, awkwardness, or a similar emotion.” Specifically, judges rated signs of threat on two 7-point Likert scales: facial expression threat (1 = no facial expression, 7 = strong facial expression) and body language threat (1 = no discomfort evident, 7 = extreme discomfort evident). As detailed in appendix C, indications of facial expression threat included chewing on lips, nervous smiling, averting or narrowing eyes, flinching, and sneering. Indications of body language threat included fidgeting, playing with hair, biting nails, stiff posture, or crossed arms. The two judges had high reliability ($r(58) = .88$, $p = .01$) and differences were resolved in a meeting between them. The facial expressions and body language nonverbal threat measures exhibited high correlation ($r(58) = .84$, $p = .04$) and were averaged to form a single measure of nonverbal threat.
Results

Manipulation checks confirmed that those in the close (vs. distant) friend condition indicated having a closer relationship with the recipient (M.Close = 5.48 vs. M.Distant = 3.34; F(1, 57) = 4.60, p < .0001) and that the school that the recipient attended had no effect on the givers’ reported closeness to the recipient (M.ID Contrary = 4.50 vs. M.ID Verifying = 4.41; F(1, 57) = .03, p < .87). We also confirmed that participants liked the identity-contrary mug less than the identity-verifying mug (M.ID Contrary = 4.00 vs. M.ID Verifying = 5.38; F(1, 57) = 11.12, p < .002).

Next, we investigated how choosing a threatening (vs. verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend affects product choice of the more preferred pen versus the less preferred but identity-verifying pen. The data revealed significant main effects of product identity congruence (M.ID Contrary = 3.04 vs. M.ID Verifying = 2.0; F(1, 57) = 8.20, p < .005) and social closeness (M.Close = 2.93 vs. M.Distant = 2.1; F(1, 57) = 4.0, p < .05). Importantly, the results in study 3 support hypothesis 3 that after givers choose a threatening (vs. verifying) gift for a close friend (vs. distant friend), they are more likely to choose the less appealing but more identity-verifying pen for themselves. Specifically, we observed a significant product identity congruence × social closeness interaction (F(1, 57) = 5.10, p < .03). The simple effects confirmed that when participants were choosing for a close friend, they were more likely to self-verify by choosing the identity-aligned pen after choosing an identity-contrary (vs. verifying) gift (M.ID Contrary = 3.7 vs. M.ID Verifying = 2.2; F(1, 57) = 13.77, p < .0005). Conversely, when participants were choosing for a distant friend, after selecting an identity-contrary (vs. verifying) product, there was no difference in their choice of the identity-verifying item (M.ID Contrary = 2.4 vs. M.ID Verifying = 1.8; F(1, 57) = .22, p < .64; see fig. 3A).

Furthermore, the data revealed that product identity congruence did not have a significant effect on participants’ nonverbal threat behaviors (M.ID Contrary = 4.81 vs. M.ID Verifying = 4.20; F(1, 57) = 2.14, p < .15); however, social closeness did have a significant effect on these behaviors (M.Close = 5.0 vs. M.Distant = 4.1; F(1, 57) = 4.67, p < .03). Further, we observed a significant product identity congruence × social closeness interaction (F(1, 57) = 10.61, p < .002). These results support hypothesis 1, which states that after givers choose the identity-contrary (vs. verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend they are more likely to feel threatened. The simple effects confirm that when participants chose an identity-contrary (vs. verifying) gift for a close friend, they were more likely to exhibit nonverbal indications of threat (M.ID Contrary = 5.7 vs. M.ID Verifying = 3.50; F(1, 57) = 6.25, p < .001), while there was no difference when choosing for a distant friend (M.ID Contrary = 3.00 vs. M.ID Verifying = 2.9; F(1, 57) = 1.45, p < .23; see fig. 3B).

Moderated Mediation Analysis

Next we examine whether the relationship between choosing an identity-contrary versus aligned gift and givers’ subsequent preference for identity-verifying (vs. non-verifying) products is mediated by their feelings of identity threat. In our model the relationship between the identity congruence of the gift and his/her subsequent product choice is
FIGURE 3
STUDY 3: INTERACTION OF SOCIAL CLOSENESS AND IDENTITY CONGRUENCE ON VERIFYING (VS. CONTROL) PRODUCT CHOICE (A) AND ON NONVERBAL IDENTITY THREAT BEHAVIORS (B); MODERATED MEDIATION (C)

A  
- Recipient: Close Friend
- Recipient: Distant Friend

B  
- Recipient: Close Friend
- Recipient: Distant Friend

C  
- Close Friend: $\beta = -38^*$
- Distant Friend: $\beta = .02$

Product ID Congruence $\rightarrow$ Non-Verbal Identity Threat $\rightarrow$ Product Choice

* = $p > .05$; ** = $p > .001$
mediated by identity threat (mediator), and this mediation process is moderated by the social distance between the giver and recipient. That is, the path from identity congruence of the gift (independent variable) to product choice (dependent variable) operates through identity threat and should apply to close relationships but not distant relationships (see fig. 3C for reference).

To assess this moderated mediation model we analyzed the conditions using an SPSS macro designed by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007, model 2) which incorporates a bootstrapping procedure that generates a sample size of 5,000 to assess the regression models necessary for a mediation.

The first model regressed product choice on givers’ feelings of identity threat \((B = -.68, \text{SE} = 1.0; t(58) = 6.89, p < .0001)\). The second model regressed givers’ identity threat on the identity congruence of the chosen gift, social closeness, and their interactions, which yielded the two-way interaction \((B = -1.15, \text{SE} = .32; t(58) = -3.41, p < .01)\). The third model regressed product choice on the identity congruence of the gift, which produced a significant effect \((B = -.83, \text{SE} = .19; t(58) = -4.39, p < .0001)\). Supporting hypothesis 2b, when givers’ felt identity threat was added to the model tested above, the independent variable decreased in significance \((B = -.48, \text{SE} = .17; t(58) = -2.78, p < .007)\).

Finally, we tested the conditional indirect effects of the moderator. We find that social closeness moderates the path from identity-congruence of the gift to the identity threat felt by the giver. In the close friend condition, the conditional indirect effect is significant \((B = -2.38, \text{SE} = .18; z = -2.1, p = .03)\), but not in the distant friend condition \((B = -.02, \text{SE} = .07; z = -.34, p = .73)\).

**Discussion**

The correspondence between the results of study 2 and study 3 underscores the fact that givers react to an identity threat by verifying both when endorsing an identity scale measure and choosing a product. From these two studies, we conclude that when givers choose a threatening item for a close friend, they will experience an identity threat and subsequently exhibit our predicted response of verifying their identity in future choices. It is important to note that choosing an identity-contrary gift does indeed cause an identity threat, and the effect of the threat on the individual’s subsequent choices is much stronger when the gift is intended for a close friend (vs. a distant friend) as close friends are much more self-relevant than distant friends to the giver’s self-concept. Furthermore, our test for mediation indicates that givers’ felt threat drives these self-verification behaviors as they endeavor to offset these aversive feelings with identity-expressive product choices.

Next, we examine a new identity to establish that our findings generalize beyond the school identity. Further we used more subtle products that were less overtly symbolic of the threatened identity to determine how representative the identity-aligned item must be in order to effectively verify participants’ threatened identities.

**STUDY 4**

**Design and Procedure**

This study has a setup similar to that of study 3; however, we changed the relevant identity to participants’ political identities (i.e., Democrat vs. Republican). Prior to the study, we collected participants’ political affiliations (i.e., Democrat or Republican) and randomly assigned them to an identity-contrary (vs. identity-verifying) experimental condition. If the participant indicated being Independent, s/he was not included in the study.

In the focal study, 141 participants took part in a 2 (product identity congruence: identity contrary vs. verifying) × 2 (social closeness of recipient: close vs. distant) experiment. Givers chose a gift mug for a close (vs. distant) friend’s upcoming birthday from a wish list. Participants then were provided with additional information about the recipient, including his/her hobbies, personal tastes and political affiliation in order to make the scenario more realistic. The variables of the givers’ political identity and identity congruence between giver and recipient were fully crossed in the experimental design. That is, in identity-verifying scenarios, participants were explicitly told that the recipient has the same political leanings as the participant (i.e., if the participant is a Democrat, the friend is also a Democrat), whereas in identity-contrary scenarios, the recipient has the opposite political affiliation (i.e., if the participant is a Democrat, the friend is a Republican). Similar to the prior studies, two of the mugs available were explicitly politically affiliated, as they displayed one of the two political icons (i.e., the donkey or the elephant, which represent the Democrat and Republican political parties, respectively). In verifying conditions, the mug from the congruent political party is starred; in identity-contrary conditions, the mug from the opposite political party is starred. The stimuli used are presented in appendix A.

**Dependent Variable**

After making the choice of an identity-contrary or verifying mug from the wish list, participants were told that to thank them for participating, they would be entered in a lottery for one of two magazine subscriptions. Products vary in the degree to which they communicate things about their users (Berg and Heath 2007; Escalas and Betman 2005). While in prior studies we used a product choice that was highly identity expressive (a school-related pen visually depicting school identity), in this study we used magazine subscriptions to test whether participants still would use these more subtle identity-symbolic products to self-verify. Specifically, after choosing the identity-contrary (vs. verifying) gift, we instructed participants to choose between a less-preferred but politically verifying magazine subscription versus a more-preferred (but politically neutral) subscription.
FIGURE 4
INTERACTION OF SOCIAL CLOSENESS AND IDENTITY CONGRUENCE OF GIFT ON IDENTITY-VERIFYING (VS. -CONTROL) PRODUCT CHOICE (STUDY 4)

Pretest

A pretest of 52 participants was conducted to identify appropriate periodicals on 7-point Likert scales, measuring how affiliated each was with the respective Democrat and Republican parties (low/high affiliation with political party). Participants also indicated how much they liked each publication (do not like/like very much). Participants perceived the New York Times (M = 6.5) as more Democrat-affiliated than the Wall Street Journal (M = 3.2; F(1, 51) = 4.24, p < .03) and Time magazine (M = 4.1; F(1, 51) = 2.58, p < .1). Conversely, the Wall Street Journal (M = 6.7) was perceived as more Republican-affiliated than the New York Times (M = 3.0; F(1, 51) = 4.48, p < .02) and Time magazine (M = 4.2; F(1, 51) = 4.35, p < .01). Finally, the pretest confirmed that Time magazine was preferred to both of the above periodicals, regardless of political identity (Democrat: Mtime = 5.8 vs. MNY Times = 3.0; F(1, 51) = 5.48, p < .01) and (Republican: Mtime = 5.8 vs. MWall St J = 3.7; F(1, 51) = 3.24, p < .04). As each political party is associated with specific publications, Democrats and Republicans made different identity-verifyng choices. The Democrat (Republican) participants were faced with a choice between a less-preferred but more identity-verifying subscription to the New York Times (Wall Street Journal) versus a more-preferred subscription of Time magazine. The dependent measure asked participants to indicate their preference for a magazine subscription on a scale from 1 = strongly prefer Time magazine to 7 = strongly prefer New York Times (Wall Street Journal). Following the dependent variable, participants answered the same additional measures reported in prior studies gauging social closeness and liking for the chosen gift.

Results

Manipulation checks confirmed that those in the close (vs. distant) friend manipulation indicated having a closer relationship with the recipient (Mclose = 6.2 vs. MDistant = 4.5; F(1, 140) = 25.24, p < .0001) and that the recipient’s political affiliation had no effect on the giver’s reported closeness to the recipient (MID Verifying = 5.8 vs. MID Contrary = 5.5; F(1, 140) = 1.29, p < .29). We also confirmed that participants had greater liking for the identity-verifying than the identity-contrary mug (MID Verifying = 4.7 vs. MID Contrary = 3.8; F(1, 140) = 3.85, p < .05). Figure 4 shows how choosing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) gift for a close (vs. distant) friend affects participants’ subsequent choice of a preferred but less identity-expressive subscription versus the less-preferred but more identity-expressive subscription. We observed a marginally significant main effect of threat (MID Contrary = 3.73 vs. MID Verifying = 3.05; F(1, 140) = 2.85, p < .09) but did not find a main effect of social closeness on participants’ choice of magazine (Mclose = 3.56 vs. MDistant = 3.19; F(1, 140) = .79, p < .38). Confirming hypothesis 2a, we find a significant product identity congruence × social closeness interaction (F(1, 140) = 33.64, p < .0128). When choosing for a close friend after choosing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) product, participants were more likely in their next choice to choose an identity-expressive subscription (MID Contrary = 4.5 vs. MID Verifying = 2.7; F(1, 140) = 3.03, p < .003). Conversely, when participants were choosing for a distant friend, after choosing an identity-contrary (vs. -verifying) product there was no difference in their next choice of an identity-expressive subscription (MID Contrary = 3.1, MID Verifying = 3.3; F(1, 140) = .45, p < .65). To further test hypothesis 2a, we created a
dichotomous choice measure from the relative preference scale (scale midpoint and below vs. above scale midpoint) and corroborated our predicted interaction between product identity congruence × social closeness ($\chi^2(1, 140) = 4.91, p < .03$).

Discussion

Study 4 replicates our prior pattern of results as well as generalizes these findings to different identity and product domains. These results corroborate our finding that the social closeness between the giver and recipient moderates the degree to which the giver feels threatened and drives his/her subsequent verifying choice.

Notably, the prior results are replicated even when the self-verifying product choice options are less symbolic of the shaken identity. In other words, when an individual’s identity has been threatened, s/he is highly motivated to resolve the threat and will attempt to verify at the next opportunity. Even if the product is not overtly identity expressive, people are likely to be attentive to its culturally imbued meanings and will self-verify by choosing products that are aligned (even to a lesser degree) with the threatened identity.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of five studies show that an identity-contrary gift purchase for a close friend whom the gift giver has integrated into his/her own self-concept may create an identity threat. In response to this threat, we show that the giver will seek to verify his/her identity in a subsequent decision or purchase. The pilot study and study 1 demonstrate that after choosing a gift for a close friend that opposes the giver’s identity, s/he experiences a felt identity threat (hypothesis 1) as evidenced in study 1 by the participants placing the identity-contrary gift at a greater physical distance from themselves. In study 2, we build on these results and confirm that in response to such a threat, s/he is likely to make an effort to reassert the relevant identity by strengthening his/her identity endorsement in the next task (hypothesis 2a). In study 3, we generalize these findings to a product choice context. We find that after experiencing an identity threat resulting from a choosing an identity-contrary gift choice for a close (vs. distant) friend, participants were more inclined to bolster their identities by choosing a product that is symbolic of the shaken identity (hypothesis 2a). Notably, we show that these product choices are mediated by givers’ feelings of threat as evidenced by their nonverbal threat behaviors (hypothesis 2b). Finally, in study 4, we replicate the prior results using a new set of identities and symbolic products. Further, we show that following a contrary gift purchase for a close friend, people are motivated to reassert their identities and will do so even when the product is not overtly symbolic.

Identities serve as scripts for social interaction, telling people what to expect, how to conduct themselves, and how to interpret events they encounter. Self-verification theory (Swann 1983) predicts that people want others to see them as they see themselves. One way that people express their identities is through the products that they purchase and consume. There is a long tradition of identity research that supports the idea that people often are attracted to products and brands that are linked to their identities (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Forehand, Deshpande, and Reed 2002; Sirgy 1982). This linkage may come about because the brand or product symbolizes the consumer’s own personality traits (Aaker 1997) or embodies an aspiration identity that the consumer strives to become (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Levy 1959). This body of research suggests that consumers link products to particular social identities and form impressions of consumers who use these products (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Shavitt and Nelson 2000). Thus, products serve as proxies to assert one’s identity. An individual who is motivated to assert a specific identity may choose a product that is imbued with a specific cultural meaning and is universally understood by others. Further, recent research shows that givers value gifts that they have customized more highly than items designed by an expert, as customized gifts are imbued with and reinforce the giver’s own identity (Bonney, Herd, and Moreau 2010).

Across all of the studies we see evidence that consumers are deeply affected by identity threats and enact strong efforts to correct in future decisions. Specifically, in all of the studies presented, we find a main effect of threat such that givers who made an identity contrary gift purchase subsequently verified with products or exaggerated behaviors that related to the threatened identity. Moreover, we find that making purchases for close friends is especially likely to result in an identity threat, as the recipient is considered an integral part of the self.

We contribute to the existing literature on identity in several important ways. First, while the extant literature focuses on how individuals choose products that verify their identity, we find that the choice of an identity-contrary product can cause a threat to one’s self-concept. Interestingly, in these studies we show that product purchase is such an important identity marker that even when the product is intended for someone else, it still may threaten the identity of the purchaser.

Second, while earlier work has shown that an individual’s self-concept can be threatened when they receive discrepant feedback from external sources (e.g., identity-contrary feedback from another person or from failing an identity-relevant test), the studies discussed in this research indicate that there are situations in which consumers create their own identity threat in order to achieve an important personal goal.

Furthermore, while this work focuses on the choice of a product for another person, there are many times that individuals are faced with such an identity-threatening situation even when choosing for themselves. For example, an individual who possesses a casual identity may need to dress more elegantly for a first-time meeting with his fiancée’s conservative parents. While the individual may feel that a pair of jeans is most representative of his identity, he must
present himself more traditionally if he hopes to win the respect and trust of his new in-laws. In this situation, the consumer chooses to present himself in a way that runs counter to his true identity in order to conform to social norms and expectations. Similarly, when making a joint purchase with another person, an individual may have to sacrifice a central identity to appease the other purchaser. For example, a person with a “hi-tech” identity may need to compromise this identity and buy a simpler model of television or stereo so that his/her spouse can operate the product. We posit that such purchases, while necessary to accomplish the consumer’s goals, might come at the cost of the individual’s identity certainty. As a result of such a purchase, we predict that the consumer may make additional purchases later to reclaim his/her shaken identity.

Research has examined how people manage their multiple identities as they navigate different product choices and finds that a consumer’s sense of self can be developed from among a wide range of possible identities and that only a subset of them will influence the consumer in any given situation (LeBoeuf, Shafir, and Belyavsky 2010; Reed 2004). This research indicates that people are flexible and are able to integrate many (at times opposing) choices into their self-concepts. However, as our research indicates, there are certain situations in which people are inflexible with their identities, and when they act in ways that are contrary to these important self-views, the consequence is a threat to their identity. Interestingly, although prior research has found differences in gift-giving behavior as a function of gender, our results on identity-contrary gifts leading to an identity threat were robust across both genders in all our studies.

Our findings provide direction for future research. One question that arises is, how does the relative importance of the threatened self-view affect the identity threat? In the research presented above, we chose identities that vary in importance. While students’ school identity is generally quite important ($M_{\text{School ID}} = 5.0$ on a 7-point scale) across the participant population, participants’ political leanings were less self-defining ($M_{\text{Political ID}} = 3.5$ on a 7-point scale). Our results replicate across identities; however, future research might explore the boundaries of these effects.

We show that people may exhibit nonverbal threat behavior when choosing an identity-contrary gift for a close friend (study 3) and seek to offset this threat by distancing themselves physically from the threatening object (study 1). Given these results, one interesting question is how conscious individuals are of their felt threat and their desire to resolve it. We collected verbal thought protocols from participants following the same design as study 1 to gauge how explicitly individuals expressed their felt threat after making an identity-contrary gift choice. Participants’ oral responses were coded for whether they expressed feelings of threat after making their gift choices (e.g., “I’m not sure I could buy something with the rival school logo on it”). We observed an interaction of product identity congruence $\times$ social closeness ($\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 5.2, p < .02$) on expressed threat such that givers choosing for a close friend were more likely to express threat after choosing an identity-contrary (52%) versus identity-verifying gift (17%; $\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 5.2, p < .02$). Conversely, when participants were choosing for a distant friend, there was no difference in expressed threat after choosing an identity-contrary (22%) versus identity-verifying gift (28%; $\chi^2(1, N = 72) = .94, p = .33$).

We conjecture that verbalizing their feelings of discomfort after choosing an identity-contrary gift may be one way that givers neutralize an identity threat.

Future research on the topic might investigate how the context of the gift purchase and exchange influences the persistence of the identity threat. Gao et al. (2009) found that after an individual has the opportunity to restore his/her shaken self-view, s/he no longer persists in identity verification in future opportunities. This finding suggests that physical distancing and verbal expression behaviors may neutralize the threat and mitigate givers’ need to self-verify in their subsequent choices. It would be interesting to examine whether the identity threat experienced after the actual purchase of an identity-contrary product is severe enough to lead to persistence with consumers seeking self-verification across multiple decisions in a retail setting. Additionally, we speculate that givers may re-experience the identity threat when presenting the gift to the recipient.

One further issue worth investigating is how threat functions differently for the giver and the recipient. While it may be threatening for the giver to choose something that is incongruous with his/her own identity, we think that it would be equally or possibly more threatening to receive an identity-contrary gift from a close friend. An interesting direction to pursue would be an examination of how an identity threat felt by a recipient might differ from that of the giver. Our intuition is that recipients would feel unknown by the giver and act in ways that reassert his/her important identities.

Finally, in these studies, we have created a context in which the giver is forcibly constrained by a gift registry (Botti et al. 2008). That is, the choices they make are constrained by the mechanism of the gift registry, which explicitly indicates which product the recipient desires. Interestingly, 4%–7% of participants across studies did not select the registry-designated item, and they were predominantly in the close friend, identity-contrary gift condition. In future research, it would be interesting to vary the giver’s agency in his/her own gift decision. One could hypothesize that an individual would feel a stronger identity threat if he had more control of his/her own threatening choice. However, according to self-perception theory, the opposite hypothesis might be true: an individual would feel less threatened when s/he has more control of the decision as s/he would simply infer that this choice was indicative of his/her true identity.

The findings of these studies have important implications for retail practice. There is evidence that after choosing gifts from a registry, consumers may feel increased motivation to choose something for themselves that is highly representative of self. Retailers might capitalize on this finding by including identity-relevant products in their assortments and positioning these products near the gift registry so that con-
consumers can have the immediate gratification of self-verifying. Also, given the insight that certain gifts can be threatening to the givers, retailers who include a gift registry in their store might further emphasize ways in which givers can customize the items they choose for their friends and thus self-verify, including writing a custom note or choosing a personalized wrapping paper.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, our research investigates how the purchase of an identity-contrary gift can cause an identity threat. Because close relationships are integral to an individual’s sense of self, givers are motivated to choose gifts that match recipients’ preferences but are threatened by presenting a gift that challenges their own self-concept. These studies show that people who experience an identity threat are motivated to make subsequent product choices that bolster their shaken self-images in order to restore important self-concepts. Further, we add to the existing literature on the relationship between products and consumers’ identities and illuminate how products can serve as both a mode of personal expression and a threat to a giver’s self-concept.

APPENDIX A

SCHOOL AFFILIATED GIFT CHOICES (STUDIES 1, 2, 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITION:</th>
<th>IDENTITY CONTRARY</th>
<th>IDENTITY VERIFY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Please decide which mug you would purchase for your close (vs. distant) friend's birthday

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchase</th>
<th>Purchase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

POLITICALLY AFFILIATED GIFT CHOICES (STUDY 4)

DEMOCRATS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITION:</th>
<th>IDENTITY VERIFY</th>
<th>IDENTITY CONTRARY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

A salesperson comes over and informs you that your friend has created a wish list and included one of the mugs on the list. The mug on the list has a star next to it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchase</th>
<th>Purchase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE.—Color version available as an online enhancement.
**APPENDIX B**

**IDENTITY MEASURE TIME (PRE VS. POST GIFT CHOICE) (STUDY 2)**

**PRE-IDENTITY MEASURE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I would describe myself as a SCHOOL AFFILIATED IDENTITY</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I would feel a loss if I were forced to give up being a SCHOOL AFFILIATED IDENTITY</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being a SCHOOL AFFILIATED IDENTITY is an important part of who I am</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**VISUAL POST-IDENTITY MEASURE**

**Directions:** Now we are going to ask you to think about yourself relative to your School Affiliation. We will ask you to indicate your perception of the relationship you have with School Affiliation using a set of pictures.

1. Please select (with an X below) which picture best describes how you see yourself in relation to School Affiliation in general

![Image of visual post-identity measure]

**Note:**—Color version available as an online enhancement.
APPENDIX C
NONVERBAL THREAT CODING
PROTOCOLS (STUDY 3)

Before doing the coding, please watch each video completely. Then, start the video again and code each video (according to the participant number) on the following variables:

**Facial Expression:** Does his/her face indicate an annoyed, disgusted or uncomfortable expression? The indications of this are:
- Jaw tightening, furrowed forehead (frown), lips tight together, nervous smiling, avoiding direct eye contact with product, squinting at the product, flinching, scowling or crinkling of nose, narrowing of eyes, biting the lip, lip licking.

Compared to the other participants, please rate the extent to which each participant displays these facial expressions when s/he looks at the registry gift on a 1–7 scale (1 = no facial expression/7 strong facial expression).

**Body Language:** Does the participant appear uncomfortable by behaving in any of the following ways when s/he examines the threatening mug:
- Torso lean (away), sudden arm cross with grip, chest puff, withdrawn arms, folded arms, nail biting, stiff posture.

Compared to the other participants, please rate the extent to which to which each participant displays this body language when s/he looks at the registry gift on a 1–7 scale (1 = no discomfort evident/7 extreme discomfort evident).

REFERENCES

- Freud, Sigmund (1921/1951), Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, New York: Liveright.
- Preacher, Kristopher, Derek D. Rucker, and Andrew F. Hayes (2007), “Addressing Moderated Mediation Hypotheses: The-


