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The Social-Identity Function in Person Perception: Communicated Meanings of Product Preferences

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A recent survey of 500 people across England for the supermarket chain Somerfield reveals that the vast majority of people (71 percent) believe that the contents of shopping carts send out powerful messages about the persons pushing them.... What's more, 11 percent of singles under 25 said they regularly, deliberately communicate with prospective partners via the contents of their shopping baskets.
—D. Lewis (cited in Mistaen, 1997).

One of the fundamental assumptions of functional theory is that people often hold or express their attitudes and preferences in order to communicate something about themselves to other people (Katz, 1960;

Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). That is, attitudes toward specific issues, products, or ideas serve to convey broader information about us to interested parties.

To date, this *social-identity function* of attitudes (Shavitt, 1989) has primarily been investigated from the perspective of the attitude holder—in terms of the persuasiveness of appeals targeted at that function. For instance, studies have consistently shown that, for attitudes that serve this type of functional goal, social image appeals, status appeals, and other “soft-sell” strategies that describe the impression conveyed by an attitudinal position or a consumer choice are particularly persuasive (e.g., Shavitt 1990; Snyder & DeBono, 1985, 1987).

However, an equally important implication of the social identity function that has yet to be explored is the role of attitudes in creating an impression in the eye of the beholder. To the extent that an attitude serves a social-identity function, one would expect it to affect the judgments that observers make about the attitude holder based on their knowledge of that person’s attitude. That is, the notion of a social-identity function implicates person perception processes. In this sense, then, the “social-identity function of attitudes” refers to the informativeness of attitudes for person impressions, or how much attitudes appear to convey about the persons who hold them.

In what follows, we explore these person perception implications of the social-identity function. Our program of research shifts the focus from the attitude holder to the observer, and the conclusions drawn by that observer on the basis of attitudinal information. Specifically, we examine the communicated meanings of product attitudes in a person perception context, that is, the types of judgments that observers make about targets based on the products that the targets select.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Although social signaling via the display of one’s attitudes and preferences is presumably a ubiquitous social communication process, only limited research in psychology has investigated its characteristics. Prior psychological research, using conceptual frameworks other than functional theory, has demonstrated that observers do make judgments about targets based on knowledge of their attitudes. Indeed, exchanging information about one’s attitudinal stands is a common part of the acquaintanceship

process (Kent, Davis, & Shapiro, 1981). The effects of attitude similarity on person judgments have been studied extensively (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Schachter, 1951), and it is well established that the expression of similar and/or dissimilar attitudes influences interpersonal attraction (e.g., Byrne & Clore, 1970; Byrne et al., 1971; Rosenbaum, 1986).

Psychologists have rarely addressed the person inferences elicited specifically by product usage or consumption preferences. One exception is judgments based on a person's attire: Manipulations of attire have been used to assess the effects of status, authority, and other person characteristics on behavior, and numerous studies have demonstrated that clothing serves as an important cue to such person characteristics (e.g., Darley & Cooper, 1972; Hamid, 1968, 1972; Lambert, 1972; Satrapa et al., 1992; Suedfeld, Bochner, & Matas, 1971; Thibaut & Riecken, 1955).¹

In contrast, there has been extensive research in marketing, communication, and sociology demonstrating that observers readily make person judgments based on knowledge of targets' purchase decisions (e.g., Baran, Mok, Land, & Kang, 1989; Belk, 1981; Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Calder & Burnkrant, 1977; Fram & Cibotti, 1991; Haire, 1950; see Belk et al., 1982, for an excellent review). One of the earliest empirical demonstrations of this phenomenon was a classic and widely cited study published in 1950 by Mason Haire, which focused on women's perceptions of the types of people who purchase instant coffee (a newly introduced product) versus traditional drip-grind coffee. This study used a unique technique in which homemakers were shown a shopping list ostensibly written by another homemaker and were asked to describe the writer's personality and character. Haire found that, compared to those who saw a list containing "Maxwell House coffee (drip ground)," those who saw a list containing "Nescafé instant coffee" were more likely to describe the woman who wrote the list as being lazy, a poor planner, and a bad wife!

Happily, more recent research suggests that judgments of instant coffee users have improved substantially (see Fram & Cibotti, 1991), in part reflecting the evolution of women's social positions since 1950. However, coffee and many other products continue to be used as a basis for making personality judgments about their users. For instance, Baran et al. (1989) found that people made judgments of a person's responsibility and character based on the target's gender and purchase of various "practical"

¹We do not include here studies that have assessed responses to uniforms or other prescribed professional attire (e.g., Bushman, 1988; Frank & Gilovich, 1988) because such attire may not be perceived to reflect the wearers' personal selections or preferences.

versus “upscale” brands of supermarket goods. They concluded that “variously positioned products do indeed provide a social stock of knowledge that people use in typifying those they meet” (p. 52).

Our approach to functional theory makes specific predictions about *when* person impressions are likely to be informed by targets’ product attitudes. Such person judgments reflect the social-identity function of product attitudes. Thus, we would expect person impressions to be based on product attitudes to the extent that those attitudes are perceived to serve a social-identity function. However, as described in what follows, for many products, attitudes do not tend to serve a social-identity function.

THE ROLE OF ATTITUDE OBJECTS IN ATTITUDE FUNCTIONS

In previous research, we have demonstrated that products (and other attitude objects) differ in the degree to which they engage social identity and utilitarian attitude functions (Nelson, Shavitt, Schennum, & Barkmeier, 1997; Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt, Lowrey, & Han, 1992). Products tend to engage a utilitarian function to the extent that they are intrinsically associated with rewards or punishments, and that consumption and maintenance behaviors toward them are generally aimed at maximizing product rewards. Products tend to engage a social-identity function to the extent that they are seen as expressing identity and values, consumption behaviors are likely to be performed in public, the product is generally displayed or is visible to others, or the product is widely seen as symbolizing membership in a particular group (Shavitt, 1989). Note, therefore, that the functions of attitudes toward a product are determined not only by characteristics of the product itself (e.g., its active ingredients, its cost per use), but also by shared societal definitions of the product (e.g., its “status”). Thus, the functions served by attitudes toward a product are in part a reflection of social consensus about the meanings or goals associated with the product.

A variety of factors may influence the types of meanings or goals that become associated with a product. For instance, the more universal the use of a product (e.g., over-the-counter painkillers), the less it will be perceived to convey discriminating information about its users and, thus, the less it may be likely to engage a social-identity function. On the other hand, products that are much less commonly used will not necessarily be

relevant to social-identity goals. Consider, for example, the use of an antibiotic to treat a specific infection. Also, some products that are very commonly used (e.g., a university sweatshirt among college students) can nevertheless be strongly associated with social-identity goals (Shavitt, 1990). Thus, the degree to which a product's use is widespread will not be sufficient to predict the functions it is likely to engage. It is crucial to consider the types of goals associated with the product and the degree to which those goals are intrinsically associated with the product (e.g., pain relief), as opposed to socially mediated (e.g., popularity).

Importantly, some objects or products (e.g., air conditioners, aspirin) are predominantly relevant to utilitarian goals, and thus typically tend to engage attitudes that serve a utilitarian function and not those that serve a social-identity function. In contrast, some objects or products (e.g., team banners, perfumes) are primarily relevant to social-identity goals, and thus typically tend to engage attitudes that serve a social-identity function and not those that serve a utilitarian function. These differences make product or object variation a viable strategy for manipulating attitude functions (Shavitt, 1989).

Our prior research has shown that these differences between objects are consequential in that they predict a number of things. For instance, they predict the content of the cognitive representation underlying an attitude (Shavitt, 1990, Study 1). Attitudes toward products and objects that are expected primarily to engage a utilitarian function tend to be based on beliefs about object attributes and the rewards and punishments intrinsically associated with them. In contrast, attitudes toward products and objects that are expected primarily to engage a social-identity function tend to be based on beliefs about what the objects symbolize and what they express to others.

These differences between product categories also have implications for the persuasiveness of appeals (Shavitt, 1990, Studies 2 and 3). For products that predominantly engage a utilitarian function, claims regarding product attributes and benefits are particularly persuasive (e.g., "the special construction that makes Coolcraft air conditioners so efficient also makes them quiet"). However, for products that typically engage a social-identity function, claims regarding what the product symbolizes or conveys to others are particularly persuasive (e.g., "Astoria is the sophisticated scent that tells people you're *not* one of the crowd"). Indeed, for products that primarily engage a single (utilitarian or social-identity) function, these differences between product categories appear to be more

important in predicting the persuasiveness of appeals than are individual differences in self-monitoring (Shavitt et al., 1992).

Furthermore, these product differences also appear to predict the relation between cognitive responses to an advertising appeal and long-term persuasion. Nelson et al. (1997) assessed cognitive responses to ads that contained both utilitarian and social-identity claims for different types of products. At a 1-week delay, attitudes toward the advertised brands as well as recall of the listed cognitive responses were also assessed. The types of recalled thoughts that tended to be more predictive of delayed attitudes were those that reflected the functions engaged by the products (i.e., for utilitarian products, the favorability of thoughts that were recalled about attributes and benefits of the brand; for social-identity products, the favorability of thoughts that were recalled about what the brand symbolizes or conveys to others).

Implications for Person Judgments. In the present context, such differences in the functions engaged by products imply that attitudes toward different types of products may also vary in the degree to which they are seen as informative in forming person impressions². Specifically, we argue that to the extent that a product engages attitudes that serve a social-identity function, attitudes toward the product should be more likely to elicit individuating person judgments. Our research addresses this hypothesis.

It should be noted that, as a description of the stimuli will reveal, we use the term "attitude" loosely here. Participants were not exposed to any attitudinal statements purportedly made by the targets (as in studies of attitude similarity; Byrne & Clore, 1970; Byrne et al., 1971). Rather, they were given information about targets' purchase decisions. It is assumed that, if a perceiver knows that a target bought a given item, they will infer that the target has a favorable disposition toward that item (although there are conditions under which such attributions are less likely to be made; see, e.g., Calder & Burnkrant, 1977).

²Indeed, in 1981, Russell Belk obtained some evidence for this notion. Belk's predictions were based on specific characteristics of products rather than a unifying theoretical framework. Nevertheless, his findings provided partial support for the hypothesized role of those characteristics: Participant's ratings of a variety of products and services indicated that products that were rated as informative about users' personalities were also seen as having greater visibility, higher cost, greater time and thought invested in the purchase decision, and greater selection/variety (but not greater uniqueness, stylistic change, or complexity). Experimental data for a specific product (attaché case) indicated that manipulations of cost and time/thought invested in the decision (but not selection variety) affected specific personality ratings of the typical customer.

It should also be noted that by “individuating” person judgments we mean any of a variety of dispositional judgments (e.g., personality judgments and impressions about other preferences, tastes, or interests of the target) rather than inferences that place the target into a demographic category. Inferences about, say, gender or age can be made without reference to the individual consumer simply by considering the uses associated with the product (e.g., cosmetics, denture adhesives). However, individuating judgments are more likely to reflect impression-formation processes. Thus, although we examined all types of person inferences, we were primarily interested in judgments about target persons’ personality or preferences.

Finally, it should be noted that our focus in this research is on the person perception implications of the functions engaged by products and not by specific brands of those products. Of course, brands can themselves engage a variety of attitude functions, and thus both a person’s product selections and a person’s brand selections can be informative. However, the functions engaged by the various brands of a product may or may not be the same as those engaged by the product category itself. For instance, the purchase and display of a U.S. flag or a team banner may be driven primarily by social-identity goals. However, the selection of a specific *brand* of flag or banner may be made to maximize utilitarian goals (e.g., durability, fade resistance, cost savings). In this research, therefore, we did not include brand names in the information about targets’ purchase decisions.

Next, we describe a series of studies that attempted to demonstrate the person perception implications of product attitudes, dimensionalize the person judgments made in response to those attitudes, and examine the role of product categories in moderating the degree to which individuating judgments are elicited.

STUDY 1

One straightforward way to assess the person perception implications of product attitudes is simply to ask respondents to describe the typical consumer of a given product. This offers the advantage of obtaining rich person descriptions without constraining respondents to any particular dimensions of judgment.

In the present study, we asked 123 participants to consider the typical consumer of one of a variety of products in three function categories. The utilitarian products selected were aspirin and air conditioner. The social-identity products selected were team banner and class ring. There was also

a multiple-function product category for products that were expected to readily engage both utilitarian and social-identity functions, and this comprised mineral water and coffee (presented as instant, automatic drip, or gourmet coffee).

These products were selected based on previous research on the functional goals people associated with their own attitudes toward these and similar products (Nelson et al., 1997; Shavitt et al. 1992). We used these products to examine the personal qualities inferred from others' attitudes toward them. We expected that to the extent that products engage attitudes that serve a social-identity function they will elicit individuating descriptors of their users, with social-identity products eliciting the greatest number of such descriptors and utilitarian products the least.

Respondents were instructed as follows: "Sometimes you can characterize people by the types of products they buy. Please describe your view of the type of person who buys/uses _____. List as many words as you can think of that describe the person. Make a list and then number them." Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the products listed above and were given as much time as they needed to complete this task.

The words or descriptors listed by respondents were subsequently coded. Those responses were readily codable into three broad categories (see Table 2.1): (a) personality traits, as well as other individuating descriptors regarding the activities, interests, and opinions of the targets

TABLE 2.1
Categorization and Percentage of Descriptors Listed

<i>Descriptive type</i>	<i>Study 1</i>	<i>Study 2</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Personality or individuating descriptors	66%	66%	Artsy Likes sports Smart Sentimental
Demographic descriptors	20%	20%	Older Wealthy Middle class Homeowner
Other descriptors	14%	14%	Sweaty Has a headache Sick Hungover

(descriptors typically referred to by market researchers as “psychographics”; Piirto, 1991); (b) demographic characteristics (descriptors referring to gender, age, socioeconomic status, and the like); and (c) other words (descriptors that were not relevant to either personality/individuating or demographic judgments; these did not describe anything enduring about the target person, but tended instead to focus on product-related needs).

Respondents had little difficulty characterizing the typical users of these products. Indeed, the great majority (86%) of descriptors that were listed represented enduring characteristics of the targets. Moreover, most of the time (66%), respondents listed individuating impressions of the traits, activities, interests, or opinions of those persons. The remainder of the descriptors were classified as “other” words.

How did the functional category of the product influence the target descriptions listed? Overall, there was no difference between product categories in the total number of descriptors listed. However, several differences emerged in the types of descriptors provided, as presented in Fig. 2.1.

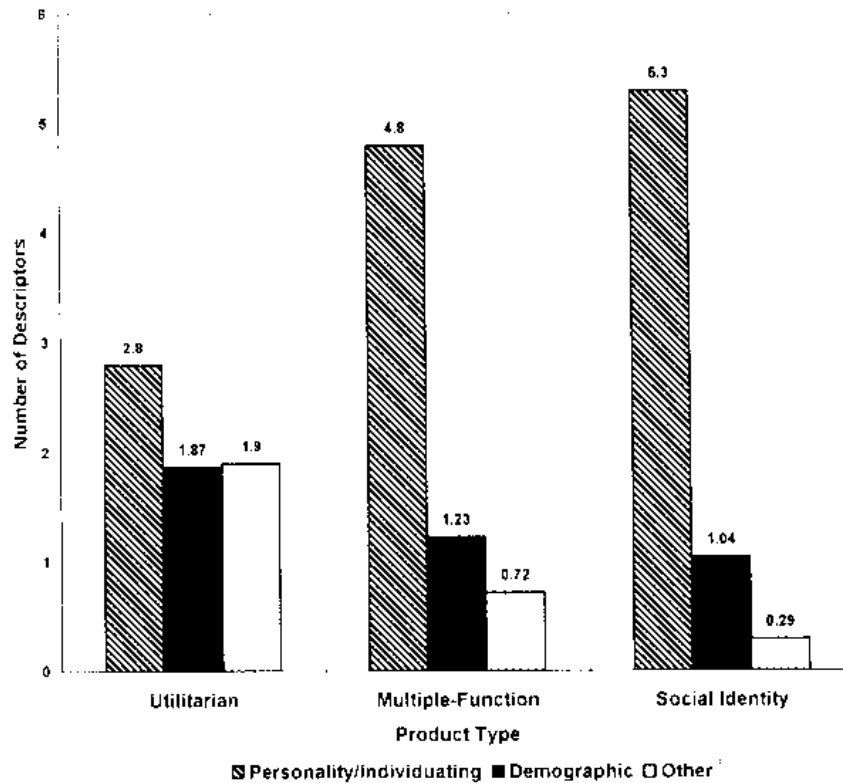


FIG. 2.1. Mean number of descriptors as a function of product type: Study 1.

As expected, participants used significantly more personality/individuating descriptors (such as “loud” or “flashy”) to describe users of social-identity or multiple-function products than users of utilitarian products. Conversely, “other” words (e.g., “sick” or “hot”) appeared more often for users of utilitarian products than for users of multiple-function products, and more often for users of multiple-function products than for users of social-identity products. Similarly, demographic descriptors (e.g., “office workers” or “rich”) appeared more often in describing users of utilitarian products than in describing users of multiple-function and social-identity products.

Table 2.2 provides a look at the actual content themes emerging in the target descriptions. As these themes illustrate, users of social-identity products were described primarily in terms of their traits, interests, and activities. In contrast, users of utilitarian products were described primarily in terms of their product-related needs and demographic characteristics—apparently, the types of needs or benefits associated with these products were ascribed to particular demographic groups (indeed, “older” was the most common descriptor for users of aspirin).

Users of multiple-function products were described mostly in terms of their traits, interests, and activities, along with a variety of demographic descriptors. It is also worth noting that different types of coffee elicited somewhat different descriptions of their users. This is consistent with several previous studies (see Fram & Cibotti, 1991, for a review) and indicates more generally that differences *within* a product category, including differences between brands, can also have substantial implications for person perception.

Overall, the results confirmed that product attitudes are likely to elicit individuating person descriptions to the extent that those product attitudes tend to serve a social-identity function. When products engaged attitudes that typically served a utilitarian function (aspirin, air conditioner), participants made fewer individuating judgments of product users than they did when the products engaged attitudes that served a social-identity function. In other words, some product attitudes appeared to communicate substantially more dispositional information than did others.

STUDY 2

The results of the initial study provided clear evidence that different product attitudes have differential implications for person perception. In

TABLE 2.2

Most Common Themes Emerging From Personality Descriptors: Study 1

<i>Utilitarian Products</i>	
<i>Aspirin</i>	<i>Air Conditioner</i>
Older (D)	Wealthy/rich (D)
Stressed (O)	Hot (O)
Sick/has a headache (O)	Wants to be comfortable (O)
Busy (P/I)	Intolerable/irritable (P/I)
Concerned/worried (O)	Family (D)
Old-fashioned (P/I)	Smart (P/I)
Tired (O)	Lazy (P/I)
<i>Social-Identity Products</i>	
<i>Class Ring</i>	<i>Team Banner</i>
School spirit/loyal (P/I)	School spirit/loyal (P/I)
Wealthy/rich (D)	Social/fun (P/I)
Sentimental/nostalgic (P/I)	Athletic/likes sports (P/I)
Smart (P/I)	Competitive (P/I)
Athletic/likes sports (P/I)	Energetic/lively (P/I)
Showy/flashy (P/I)	Loud (P/I)
Successful/achiever (P/I)	Follower (P/I)
<i>Multiple-Function Products</i>	
<i>Mineral Water</i>	<i>Gourmet Coffee</i>
Healthy/health-conscious (P/I)	Wealthy/rich (D)
Athletic/likes sports (P/I)	Sophisticated (P/I)
Wealthy/rich (D)	Intellectual (P/I)
Yuppie (D)	Picky/choosy (P/I)
Snobby (P/I)	Snobby (P/I)
Well-dressed/trendy (P/I)	Yuppie (D)
Natural/down-to-earth (P/I)	Artsy (P/I)
<i>Instant Coffee</i>	<i>Automatic Drip</i>
"Working" people (D)	Middle income (D)
Cheap (P/I)	Older (D)
Hurried/fast pace (P/I)	Office workers (D)
Not picky about taste (P/I)	Do not like to cook (P/I)
Older (D)	Busy (P/I)
Economical (P/I)	Caffeine addicts (P/I)
Hyper (P/I)	Average (O)

Note. Descriptors: P/I = personality/individuating; D = demographic; O = other.

the second study, we sought to address both the replicability and the generalizability of these results by extending the findings to a broader set of products. Thus, for each functional category, we chose one product from the previous study and one new product. The utilitarian products selected were aspirin and orange juice. The social-identity products selected were team banner and men's cologne. The multiple-function products selected were gourmet coffee and sweatshirt. As in Study 1, these products were chosen based on previous research on the functions that they typically engage.

We also sought to ensure that respondents did not feel obliged to generate a person description if they felt unable to characterize the target. In this way, one would have greater confidence that any descriptions provided reflect participants' actual perceptions of the target persons. Thus, in addition to instructions similar to those for the previous study in which they were asked to describe the type of person who buys a given product, the 70 participants in this study were told, "If you do *not* feel you can characterize this person based on their use of that product, please note that below and wait for further instructions." Results indicated that more than 91% of respondents freely provided some descriptor(s) of the target person.

As before, respondents in this study appeared able and willing to characterize the typical users of these products in personality/individuating and/or demographic terms (see Table 2.1). Moreover, most of the descriptors they listed (66%) reflected individuating impressions of the targets.

The results as a function of product category replicated those of Study 1. As in that study, no difference between product categories was obtained in the total number of descriptors listed. However, as shown in Fig. 2.2, several differences emerged in the types of descriptors listed. As expected, participants used significantly more personality/individuating descriptors (e.g., "competitive" or "loyal") to describe users of social-identity or multiple-function products than users of utilitarian products. Conversely, "other" words (e.g., "has a headache" or "thirsty") appeared more often for users of utilitarian products than for users of multiple-function products, and more often for users of multiple-function products than for users of social-identity products. This time, there was no difference between product categories in the number of demographic descriptors used (e.g., "older" or "middle class").

Taken together, the results of these two studies demonstrate that respondents will readily provide target judgments of product users.

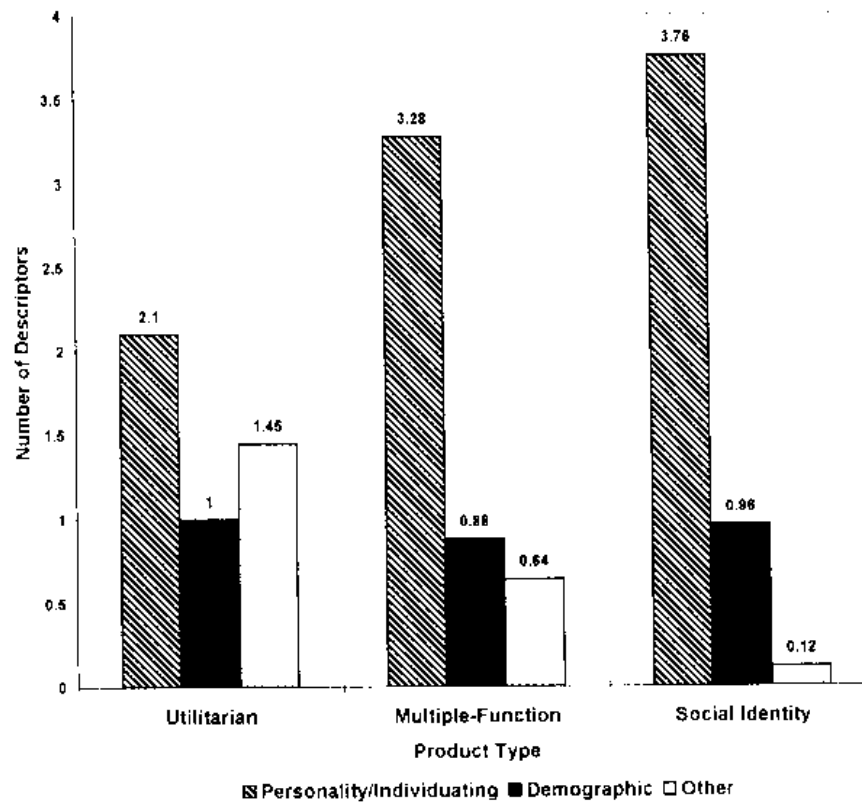


FIG. 2.2. Mean number of descriptors as a function of product type: Study 2.

Moreover, for the sets of products examined here, most of the descriptions of product users offered by respondents involved individuating judgments. These were inferences about the traits, activities, interests, or opinions of those target persons. Only 14% of descriptors were not obviously relevant to any enduring characteristics of the target persons. This is consistent with a large literature in marketing, communications, and sociology that has suggested a pervasive tendency to form person impressions based on product usage (see Belk et al., 1982, for a review).

Importantly, our findings have pointed to boundary conditions for this phenomenon. Specifically, the tendency to make individuating person judgments about product users is moderated by the functional category of the product. Products that primarily engage attitudes that serve a utilitarian function (e.g., aspirin, air conditioner, orange juice) appear much less likely to elicit individuating impressions of their users than other products do. Products that engage social-identity attitudes (primarily or partially, e.g., class rings, team banners, gourmet coffee,

sweatshirts) are seen as a better basis for forming person impressions about their users. Indeed, the pattern of data in both studies suggests that the more a product engages social-identity attitudes, the more individuating information it is perceived to communicate about its users.

STUDY 3

In this final study, we considered the implications of these results for judgments of individual persons. The prior studies examined respondents' judgments about product users as a category, in effect asking respondents to apply their product-user stereotypes to the judgment task. However, those concepts may or may not be applied to the judgment of a specific individual.

A separate condition in Study 2, not described here for the sake of brevity, attempted to address this issue. In this condition, respondents were led to believe that the product purchase information they were shown about the target came from the "purchase diary" of an actual person named "Joe M." They were given the same instructions as the other participants except that they were asked specifically to characterize Joe M. As expected, respondents provided more "other" descriptors of the target in response to utilitarian products as compared to other types of products. They provided fewer demographic descriptors to utilitarian versus other types of products. Somewhat surprisingly, however, there was no difference in the tendency to offer personality/individuating descriptors as a function of product type—for all product types, the number of such descriptors was equally low (comparable to the number offered in response to utilitarian products in the other conditions of Study 2).

These findings suggested that perceivers will not necessarily use product information to judge specific persons in individuating terms, even when products are perceived to be informative along these lines. For instance, perceivers may consider their product-user stereotypes to be an invalid basis for the judgment of a specific individual and may not feel entitled to judge the target person on that basis alone (cf. Yzerbyt, Schadrin, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994). Product-user stereotypes may instead be more likely to affect the evaluation of a specific target person when purchase information is provided incidentally, in the context of other information about the target, such that perceivers are not explicitly asked to consider the implications of a purchase for judgment of the target.

Thus, in this study, we examined the influence of product purchase information on judgments of an individual target person when attention is not drawn to the product information. The central questions we sought to address were as follows: When evaluating a specific target person, under what conditions would incidental product-purchase information be used to inform that judgment? Does the predominant function engaged by a product, which in the previous studies moderated person judgments of the “type of person” who uses the product, also predict these conditions?

If products that engage social-identity attitudes are seen as a better basis for forming person impressions than products that do not, then one might make the following prediction: The more important it is to form an impression of a target, the *more* one would expect target judgments to be influenced by social-identity product purchases, and the *less* one would expect target judgments to be influenced by utilitarian product purchases. This is because, when attempting to carefully form a person judgment, one would presumably want to use facts that are perceived to be informative for the judgment (such as social-identity purchases) and avoid using facts that are seen as uninformative (such as utilitarian purchases).

Testing of these hypotheses required a different design from that used in Studies 1 and 2. In this study, respondents were provided with product purchase information embedded in other information about the person, and the effect on person judgments was then assessed. However, we did not focus on the frequency with which personality/individuating inferences were made about the target because pretests had suggested that the other, filler information was eliciting a large proportion of these inferences. Rather, the favorability of the product information (i.e., whether the product is viewed positively or negatively) was manipulated within each function category so that the effects of that product information would be reflected in differences in the *favorability of person judgments*. Focusing on the favorability of person judgments as the main dependent variable, we examined the conditions under which the favorability of the target’s product-purchase information had the greatest effects. We compared the influence of utilitarian and social-identity product-purchase information.

A pretest was conducted to identify product pairs that differed in their favorability but were similar in their functional meaning. For a variety of products, respondents were asked to rate (a) their overall attitude toward the product, (b) importance of the product’s quality or performance in deciding whether to buy/use it (utilitarian function rating) and,

(c) importance of the product's image in deciding whether to buy/use it (social-identity function rating). Product favorability was a between-subjects factor, such that respondents rated only products that were expected to be viewed favorably (or unfavorably).

Based on these ratings, four pairs of products were selected for use in Study 3 (one product from Study 2 and one new product for each function category). The utilitarian products selected were orange juice (favorable version: fresh squeezed orange juice; unfavorable version: instant orange drink) and corn (favorable version: fresh sweet corn; unfavorable version: canned creamed corn). The social-identity products selected were team banner (favorable version: Illini banner; unfavorable version: University of Michigan banner) and flowers (favorable version: fresh flowers, unfavorable version: plastic flowers). Some of these selections are obviously quite specific to our subject population (University of Illinois undergraduates). Within favorability category, pretest participants' average attitude ratings toward these products were very similar across utilitarian and social-identity products. However, the functional meaning of these products (i.e., the relative importance of utilitarian and social-identity criteria in participants' ratings) differed as expected.

Information about purchase of these products was embedded in a printed, one-page scenario in which "you" (the reader) encounter three acquaintances, including the target person (Sara), while shopping at a grocery superstore. Participants were instructed to read the scenario and to try to project themselves into the situation as much as possible (i.e., to imagine that they were interacting with the other people in the story). In the scenario, several products and purchases were mentioned incidentally. Sara was described as purchasing both of either the utilitarian or the social identity products, and both of the products were either favorable or unfavorable. That is, product favorability and product function were between-subjects factors in the design. The portion of the scenario describing Sara read,

...Up ahead you see Sara—who recognizes you immediately and smiles. She asks how you've been and you chat for a short time about your new classes. Sara says she is taking 18 hours this semester. She picks out a _____ from the display but then drops it. You bend down to pick it up and put it into her cart next to _____. Nothing is damaged and Sara thanks you. You and Sara talk for a couple more minutes and then you say goodbye and move on....

To examine how the importance of the person judgment affects the role of product information in making that judgment, participants' level

of involvement in evaluating Sara was also manipulated. Thus, the complete design was a 2 (involvement: high vs. low) \times 2 (product function: utilitarian vs. social identity) \times 2 (product favorability: favorable vs. unfavorable) factorial. In the high-involvement version, after the initial instructions, participants were further instructed to imagine that they are looking for a housemate for next semester and that Sara is a potential candidate. This provided a reason for forming a careful evaluation of Sara. In the low-involvement version, participants were instructed to imagine that they are looking for a job for next semester and that Terry (one of the non-target persons in the story) is a potential employer. Thus, low-involvement participants had no reason to form a careful evaluation of Sara. We anticipated that, as the motivation to form a careful evaluation increased, evaluations of Sara would be more in line with the favorability of social-identity product information and less in line with the favorability of utilitarian product information.

After reading the scenario, participants responded to a number of measures including providing an open-ended description of Sara. That is, similar to the previous studies, respondents were also asked to write as many words as they could think of to describe the target. These descriptors were subsequently coded for their favorability. Manipulation checks for involvement and product favorability were also included, and these validated the effectiveness of the manipulations.

Results indicated that the role of product-purchase information in influencing impressions of Sara under high-involvement conditions, as opposed to low-involvement conditions, depended on the function engaged by the products. Figure 2.3 shows an index of the favorability of descriptions of Sara (the number of favorable minus unfavorable descriptors that respondents wrote) by product function, product favorability, and involvement. For utilitarian products, the favorability of impressions of Sara was less in line with the favorability of her product selections for high-involvement conditions than for low-involvement conditions. In fact, under high-involvement conditions it appeared that overcorrection for the influence of the utilitarian product selections may have occurred, so that impressions of Sara were somewhat better when she selected unfavorable as opposed to favorable products. This is consistent with the notion that, when they were motivated to form a careful evaluation of Sara, participants avoided using information about utilitarian product selections because this was perceived to be uninformative for the judgment.

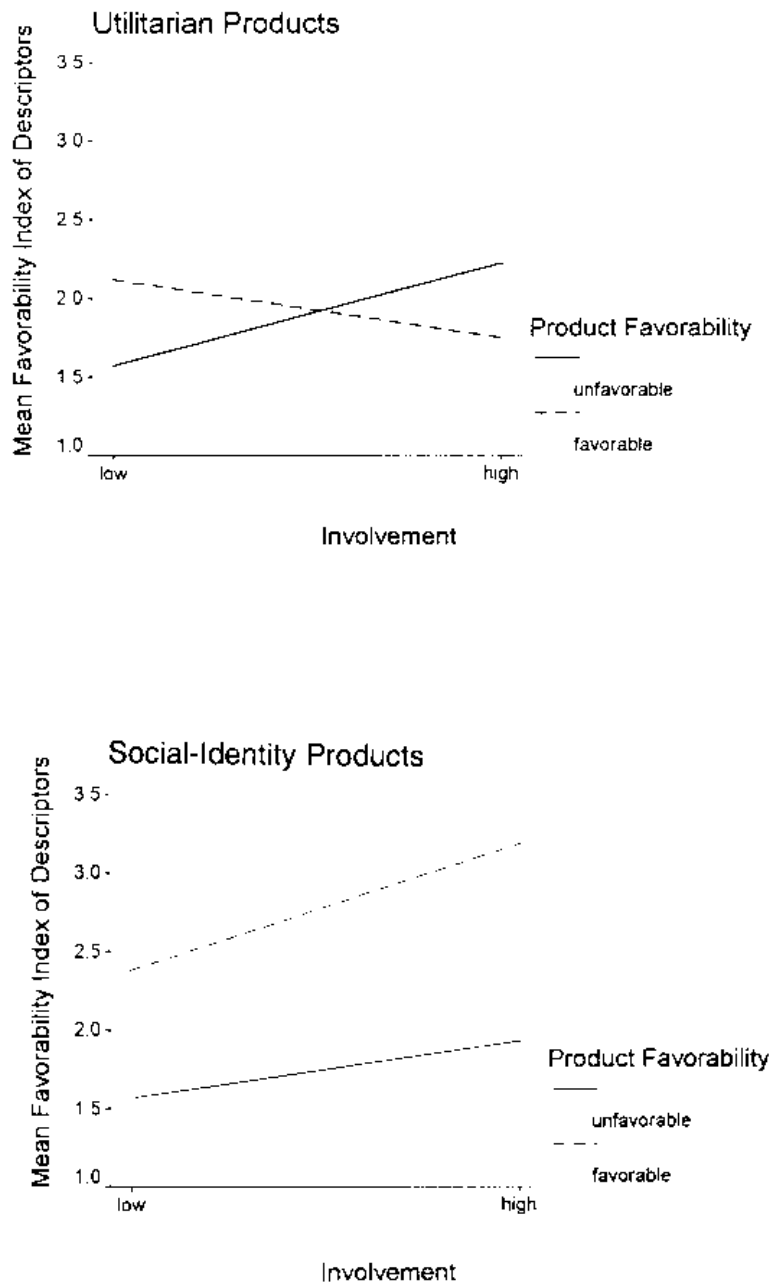


FIG. 2.3. Favorability index of descriptions of Sara: Study 3.

For social-identity products, favorable (compared to unfavorable) product selections elicited more favorable descriptions of Sara. Yet this effect appeared to be greater under high-involvement conditions. That is, although unfavorable product selections yielded slightly more favorable

descriptions of Sara under high-involvement conditions than low-involvement conditions, this was offset by a larger increase in the favorability of descriptions elicited by favorable product selections. Thus, for social-identity products, as the level of involvement in evaluating Sara increased, impressions of Sara were more informed by the favorability of the product information.

Direct evaluative ratings of Sara were generally consistent with these patterns across social-identity and utilitarian products. Overall, then, these findings indicate that product-purchase information can indeed influence judgments of a specific target person when that information is acquired incidentally in the context of other information about the person. Importantly, however, the functional meaning of the product information affects the impact of that information. When the motivation to form a careful evaluation of the target was high (vs. low), evaluations were more in line with the favorability of social-identity product information and less in line with the favorability of utilitarian product information. This pattern of results suggests that, when seeking to form a careful evaluation of a target person, social-identity product selections are seen as providing information that has more implications for evaluation than the information provided by utilitarian product selections.

CONCLUSIONS

Functional theory has fundamental implications for the processes by which people use their attitudes and preferences to communicate information about the self to others. To date, little psychological research has been conducted to address this aspect of the social-identity function of attitudes. The studies described here represent a step toward elucidating a functional perspective on the social identities communicated by one's attitudes, possessions, and purchase preferences.

What we have demonstrated so far is that product attitudes sometimes have significant implications for judging their owners. This is consistent with research in other areas on the implications of product usage for person judgments. We have shown specifically that perceivers can and will infer considerable dispositional (personality/individuating) information from product attitudes.

However, the degree to which a given product attitude is seen as informative about dispositional characteristics of the target person de-

depends on the functions engaged by the product. Social-identity product selections appear to be perceived as a better, more informative basis for making person judgments than are utilitarian product selections. To the extent that a product engages a social-identity function, information about persons' product attitudes or selections will elicit more individuating person impressions. Moreover, when one's judgment of a given individual matters, one is more likely to use the individual's attitudes toward social-identity products (compared to utilitarian products) to inform one's impressions of the person. In other words, attitudes toward social-identity products are more likely to serve a communicative social-identity function than attitudes toward utilitarian products.

This is very much in line with what has been shown in past research. Objects and products differ in the attitude functions that they tend to engage (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997; Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt et al., 1992), and these differences have a number of consequences—for the nature of attitudes, the persuasiveness of appeals, and so it seems for person perception.

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