



FlashReport

The malleable influence of social consensus on attitude certainty

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Social identity needs moderate the effect of social consensus on attitude certainty.
- When seeking belongingness, high attitude consensus increases attitude certainty.
- When seeking uniqueness, low attitude consensus increases attitude certainty.
- This pattern replicates when directly manipulating individuals' information focus.

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ABSTRACT

People often reflect on the opinions of others and express greater attitude certainty when they perceive their attitudes to be shared by others (high attitude consensus). The present research tests the possibility that either high or low attitude consensus can increase attitude certainty depending on people's salient social identification needs. In particular, high attitude consensus with a target group is found to be more validating when people seek to belong to the group, as this identification motive promotes a search for similarities between themselves and the group. In contrast, low attitude consensus with a target group is found to be more validating when people seek to be unique from a group, as this identification motive promotes a search for dissimilarities between themselves and the group. Two experiments support these hypotheses, offering insight into the intra-personal motives that alter the diagnostic value of social consensus information.

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1. Introduction

Whether perusing consumer reviews, reading editorials, listening to radio shows, or conversing with friends, individuals often look to others to validate their own attitudes (Asch, 1956; Gerard & Orive, 1987; Terry & Hogg, 2000; see Festinger, 1954). Not surprisingly, individuals receive greater validation—and thus report higher attitude certainty—when others share their attitudes (e.g., Goethals, 1972; Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007; Tormala, DeSensi, Clarkson, & Rucker, 2009; Visser & Mirabile, 2004). Indeed, social consensus is a well-established antecedent of attitude certainty (for a review see Tormala & Rucker, 2007).

Despite this well-documented link between social consensus and attitude certainty, it is unclear whether social consensus always increases attitude certainty. For example, the basic effect might be tied to a general desire to want to hold attitudes that are similar to others' attitudes. However, might individuals sometimes desire attitude dissimilarity—for example, low perceived consensus surrounding their attitude on a topic? If so, holding an attitude that others do not share might, under

some conditions, offer more validation than holding an attitude that others share. The present research explores this question by investigating the moderating role of individuals' social identity needs.

Considerable research suggests that social identity needs are flexible (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1991; Tajfel, 1978), such that people balance their simultaneous needs for social belonging and uniqueness to achieve a state of optimal distinctiveness with a given social group (see Brewer, 1991). For example, showing up to a party in an outfit similar to most others might evoke a need to demonstrate one's uniqueness from the group, whereas showing up to a party in an outfit very different from most others might evoke a need to demonstrate one's belongingness to the group. People sometimes respond to these distinct needs by seeking out similarities or dissimilarities with the target group to reach a state of optimal distinctiveness. For instance, people might recall events in a biased manner (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000), engage in self-stereotyping (Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002), or alter their perceptions of group homogeneity (Pickett & Brewer, 2001) to balance these competing social needs. Activating one need, therefore, can lead people to selectively think or act in ways to satisfy that need.

The current research extends this logic to the attitudes domain to shed new light on the relationship between social consensus and

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attitude certainty. Specifically, we explore the possibility that individuals sometimes selectively seek out attitude similarity (i.e., high consensus) or dissimilarity (i.e., low consensus) with the attitudes of others within a social group to meet their varying needs for belongingness or uniqueness with respect to that group. Moreover, we propose that satisfying one's salient social identity need provides a sense of validation that leads people to become more certain in the attitude itself. That is, when people have a particular identity goal, information that confirms that goal is likely to be viewed as more valid. Thus, when individuals seek belonging or self-other similarities, we propose that high consensus will be validating and produce greater attitude certainty. In contrast, when individuals seek uniqueness or self-other differences, then low consensus will be validating and produce greater attitude certainty.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 manipulated individuals' social identity needs with a target group and then provided consensus feedback from that group. We expected that individuals with a need for belonging (uniqueness) with respect to a target group would express greater attitude certainty after receiving information that their attitude was shared (not shared) by other members of the group. Moreover, because attitudes held with high (relative to low) certainty are more predictive of behavioral intentions (see Tormala & Rucker, 2007), we also assessed behavioral intentions to examine an important consequence of differences in certainty.¹

Method

Participants and design

One hundred undergraduates, participating for course credit, were randomly assigned to a 2 (identification need: belonging or uniqueness) \times 2 (attitude consensus: high or low) between-participants design.

Procedure

Upon entering the lab, participants were told that the study was designed to create a profile of their student body (the target group) and they would complete several tasks to this end. Participants first completed a 12-item survey consisting of questions culled from various personality scales that ostensibly indicated a core personality trait. They were then told the computer would compare their responses to their fellow undergraduate participants and they would be provided with a summary of this analysis. In reality, this feedback manipulated participants' identification needs (see Pickett et al., 2002). In the *need to belong* condition, participants were told their core personality was extremely dissimilar to their student body. In the *need for uniqueness* condition, participants were told their core personality was extremely similar to their student body.

Next, participants provided their reactions to a new identification card policy supposedly being considered at their campus (see Petrocelli et al., 2007). They received background information about the policy and then provided their attitude on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (*Against*) to 9 (*In Favor*). Subsequently, participants were presented with false feedback about others students' attitudes toward the policy as our manipulation of attitude consensus (Petrocelli et al., 2007). Participants were told that a computer analysis of their score relative to a database of nearly 2000 students' attitudes toward the identification card policy at their university revealed that either

¹ Heightened attitude certainty is shown to increase reliance on one's attitude when forming behavioral intentions (Tormala & Rucker, 2007), but not necessarily the extremity of intention. Specifically, individuals may form and hold a behavior intention based on factors beyond one's attitude (see Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). That is, two individuals might report the same intention, but one's intention might be derived from his/her attitude whereas another's intention might be based on contextual factors. Our concern, then, was on the effect of certainty on attitude–intention correspondence rather than mean intentions.

89.37% (high consensus) or 10.63% (low consensus) of those students shared their attitude.

Participants then reported their attitude certainty on two items adapted from Clarkson, Tormala, and Rucker (2008): How certain/confident are you of your attitude toward the identification card policy? Responses were gathered on 9-point scales anchored at *Not certain/confident at all* to *Very certain/confident* and averaged to create a composite index ($r = .80$, $p < .001$). Finally, participants indicated how willing they would be to help promote the identification card policy on a scale ranging from 1 (*Not willing at all*) to 9 (*Very willing*).

Results

All measures were submitted to two-way ANOVAs, with identification need and attitude consensus as independent variables.

Attitudes

These were no differences in attitudes across conditions ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 2.52$), all $ps > .31$.

Attitude certainty

The attitude certainty index revealed an identification need \times attitude consensus interaction, $F(1,96) = 13.20$, $p = .001$ (see Fig. 1). Those with a need for belonging reported greater certainty in the high (versus low) consensus condition, $F(1,96) = 8.19$, $p = .005$. Conversely, those with a need for uniqueness reported greater certainty in the low (versus high) consensus condition, $F(1,96) = 5.05$, $p = .027$. Neither main effect was significant, $F_s < 1$.

Attitude–intention correspondence

Behavioral intentions revealed no differences across conditions, $F_s < 1$. However, for those seeking belonging, attitude–intention correspondence was greater following the high ($r = .47$, $p = .018$) rather than low ($r = -.05$, $p = .83$) consensus feedback, $z = 1.94$, $p = .026$ (one-tailed). For those seeking uniqueness, attitude–intention correspondence was greater following the low ($r = .58$, $p = .001$) rather than high ($r = .07$, $p = .77$) consensus feedback, $z = 1.80$, $p = .036$ (one-tailed).

Discussion

Experiment 1 offered evidence that individuals' social identity needs alter the impact of consensus feedback. Replicating the classic consensus effect (e.g., Goethals, 1972), individuals were more certain and exhibited greater attitude–intention correspondence when the target group shared their attitude. However, this effect was limited to those seeking to belong to the target group. For those seeking uniqueness from the target group, certainty and attitude–intention

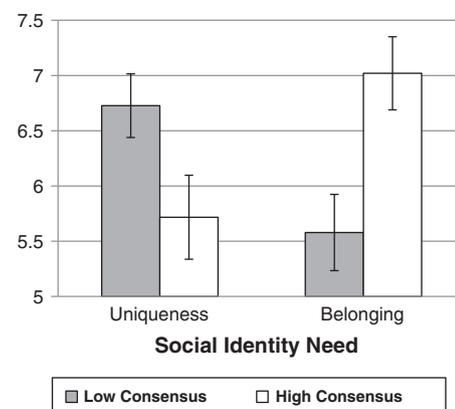


Fig. 1. Attitude certainty as a function of attitude consensus and social identity need in Experiment 1. Note: Bars represent SEs.

correspondence were greater when individuals' attitudes were different from those of the target group.

Experiment 2

We submit that social identity needs moderate the validating influence of consensus feedback by altering individuals' focus on similarities versus dissimilarities with the target group. Specifically, the need for belonging to a particular group is postulated to promote a focus on self-group similarities that makes similar information (i.e., high consensus) more validating. In contrast, a need for uniqueness from a particular group is postulated to promote a focus on self-group dissimilarities that makes dissimilar information (i.e., low consensus) more validating. If true, manipulating the extent to which participants are focused on similarity versus dissimilarity should alter the effect of consensus feedback on attitude certainty. Experiment 2, then, directly varied participants' focus on similarities or dissimilarities between themselves and a target group. We predicted that a similarity (dissimilarity) mindset would lead people to find high (low) consensus feedback more validating and produce increased attitude certainty and attitude–intention correspondence.

Method

Participants and design

One hundred twenty undergraduates, participating for course credit, were randomly assigned to a 2 (mindset: similarity or dissimilarity) \times 2 (attitude consensus: high or low) between-subjects design.

Procedure

As in Experiment 1, participants were told that the study was designed to create a profile of their student body (the target group) and they would complete several tasks. The first task involved generating comparative responses between themselves and the student body. Participants were instructed to list four ways in which they were either similar to or different from most other students at their university. This task served as our mindset manipulation to focus participants on seeking validation from similar versus dissimilar responses (Tormala & Clarkson, 2007). Participants indicated their attitude toward the identification card policy on the same scale as in Experiment 1 and then received the attitude consensus manipulation related to the target group as in Experiment 1. Participants then reported their level of certainty on the same two items as in Experiment 1 ($r = .71, p < .001$). Finally, participants completed an index of behavioral intentions (adapted from Tormala, Clarkson, & Petty, 2006). Specifically, participants indicated how much time they would invest into making phone calls and how many letters they would be willing to send to other students informing them about the policy. Responses were gathered on scales ranging from 1 (*No time/letters at all*) to 9 (*A great deal of time/letters*) and averaged to create a composite index ($r = .44, p < .001$).

Results

All dependent measures were submitted to two-way ANOVAs, with mindset and attitude consensus as independent variables.

Attitudes

There were no differences in attitudes across conditions ($M = 4.11, SD = 2.27$), all $ps > .21$.

Attitude certainty

The attitude certainty index revealed a mindset \times attitude consensus interaction, $F(1,116) = 9.09, p = .003$ (see Fig. 2). Those with a similarity mindset reported greater certainty in the high (versus low) consensus condition, $F(1,116) = 4.10, p = .045$. Conversely, those with a dissimilarity mindset condition reported greater

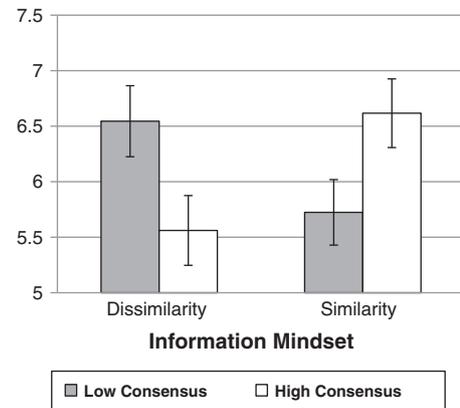


Fig. 2. Attitude certainty as a function of attitude consensus and information mindset in Experiment 2. Note: Bars represent SEs.

certainty in the low (versus high) consensus condition, $F(1,116) = 5.03, p = .027$. Neither main effect was significant, $F_s < 1$.

Attitude–intention correspondence

Behavioral intentions revealed a marginal main effect of attitude consensus, $F(1,116) = 3.05, p = .083$; behavioral intentions were greater after receiving high ($M = 1.98, SD = 1.50$) rather than low ($M = 1.56, SD = 1.10$) consensus feedback. No other effects approached significance, $F_s < 1$. As in Experiment 1, our primary interest was the pattern of attitude–intention correspondence across conditions. In the similarity mindset condition, attitude–intention correspondence was greater following the high ($r = .46, p = .011$) rather than low ($r = .04, p = .851$) consensus feedback, $z = 1.68, p < .046$ (one-tailed). In the dissimilarity mindset condition, attitude–intention correspondence was greater following the low ($r = .60, p = .001$) rather than high ($r = .24, p = .187$) consensus feedback, $z = 1.66, p = .047$ (one-tailed).

Discussion

Conceptually replicating Experiment 1, this study revealed that either high or low attitude consensus can validate one's attitude depending on the information one seeks. Specifically, directly inducing a focus on similarities (dissimilarities) led participants to derive greater certainty and show higher attitude–intention correspondence when their attitudes were shared (not shared) by the target group. Thus, the validating effects of high or low consensus appear connected to participants' motivation to identify similarities or dissimilarities between themselves and their salient social group, respectively.

General discussion

Two experiments demonstrate that the pursuit of self-group similarity leads to greater validation following high attitude consensus, whereas the pursuit of self-group dissimilarity leads to greater validation following low attitude consensus. In both experiments, validation was demonstrated in the form of both heightened attitude certainty and higher attitude–behavioral intention correspondence. This effect was shown by manipulating individuals' social identity needs (Experiment 1) and their similarity–dissimilarity mindsets (Experiment 2). The reversal of the classic consensus effect underscores the important and flexible role of social identity motives in shaping the validating impact of social consensus. Both high and low consensus can validate one's attitude as long as it satisfies one's salient social identity needs.

Of importance, these findings raise the question of whether past research demonstrating a link between high consensus and increased certainty occurred because a need to belong was salient. In support of this possibility, individuals may be naturally predisposed to affiliate with their in-group by seeking out self-group similarities (see Baumeister &

Leary, 1995). But, belongingness needs may not be a prerequisite for social consensus to increase attitude certainty. After all, individuals generally seek to hold correct attitudes (Hart et al., 2009) and often look to others to assess correctness (Festinger, 1954; Petrocelli et al., 2007). Thus, we assume that individuals may seek and receive validation from high consensus as a means of achieving correctness even in the absence of belongingness motives. Additionally, even if affiliation needs were a default, this does not mean that affiliation needs will always increase attitude certainty. For example, individuals may sometimes balance a heightened affiliation need by seeking out self-group dissimilarities (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

We believe future research should consider the extent to which social identity needs influence social consensus feedback more broadly. For instance, people are generally slower to endorse a minority opinion (Bassili, 2003). Additionally, people induced to hold a minority opinion express greater clarity in their self-concept, especially if the opinion is central to one's values (Morrison & Wheeler, 2010). To the extent that low social consensus is associated with a minority opinion, one might expect response latencies and self-concept clarity to be affected by salient social needs, such that individuals seeking belonging (versus uniqueness) actually spend less time—and report less self-clarity after—endorsing a minority opinion.

Finally, this research focused on peoples' social identity needs to illustrate the malleable influence of social consensus on attitude certainty. Yet there may be other conditions in which attitude dissimilarity (i.e., low consensus) validates one's attitudes. For instance, if one expects disagreement with others (e.g., the individuals belong to an outgroup; Brewer, 1991), then attitude dissimilarity might promote greater attitude certainty. More broadly, identifying other contexts in which attitude dissimilarity fosters attitude certainty, in the absence of social uniqueness motives, is an important next step in this area of research. For now, we simply note that although high consensus plays an important role in attitude validation, the current research suggests that understanding the conditions under which low consensus might validate attitudes is important. We have identified one such condition, and believe further research into the factors that shape the validating impact of low social consensus will help deepen our insight into social influences on attitudes.

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