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## Fight or flight: Can marketing tools help consumers cope with self-discrepancies and social identity threat?

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## ACADEMIC PAPER

# Fight or flight: Can marketing tools help consumers cope with self-discrepancies and social identity threat?

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**Abstract**

Self-discrepancy between the actual and ought self-concept is harmful to individuals, causing them to experience psychological discomfort. Previous consumer research has repeatedly demonstrated that self-discrepancies motivate consumers to cope with their negative psychological consequences. However, despite the potential of marketing tools to influence consumers' affective reactions, consumer research remains silent on how firms can help consumers cope with psychological discomfort caused by self-discrepancies. We apply the “approach–avoidance” coping classification to the firm context and suggest two marketing tools—cause-related marketing (CRM) and a spacious store layout—as moderators of the relationships between experienced self-discrepancy and a threat to a consumer's social identity and between social identity threat and store loyalty/store attitude. In a scenario-based experimental study, we collect data and apply structural equation modeling for data analysis. The results confirm that both suggested marketing tools can effectively mitigate the negative effects of social identity threat on store loyalty and attitude. Furthermore, a spacious store layout exerts a stronger moderating effect than CRM.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Past consumer research has established that self-discrepancies related to domains as diverse as one's sense of power (Dubois et al., 2012; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) and control (Cutright, 2012; Levav & Zhu, 2009), masculinity (Willer et al., 2013), professional (Braun & Wicklund, 1989) and intellectual (Gao et al., 2009) performance have a strong influence on one's consumer behavior. More precisely, consumer research has extensively discussed the so-called compensatory consumption, which occurs when an individual who experiences a self-discrepancy uses brands or products to compensate for the incongruity in the domain in question (Mandel et al., 2017; Woodruffe, 1997). When a self-discrepancy occurs, an individual experiences psychological stress, which can be reflected in various negative emotions (Higgins, 1987), and subsequently, an individual is

motivated to cope with the occurred psychological stress (Lazarus, 1983). However, with the focus limited to compensatory consumption, these studies do not examine psychological stress through the classical framework of coping theory, which can be critical for the broader understanding of consumers' responses to self-discrepancies (Han et al., 2015). Our study closes this research gap by grounding a consumer's response to a self-discrepancy in the “approach–avoidance” coping theoretical framework developed by Roth and Cohen (1986).

Furthermore, given the fruitful findings of the effect of self-discrepancies concerning one's self-concept on consumer behavior (Cutright, 2012; Dubois et al., 2012; Gao et al., 2009; Levav & Zhu, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2009), it is surprising that research on self-discrepancies occurring in the domain of social group membership and social status remains limited. This research would be

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especially beneficial given the importance that individuals assign to their social status and group memberships (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). The present study contributes to the research stream on self-discrepancies by investigating the effect of a status-related self-discrepancy experienced by high-income customers in a low-price store on their loyalty and attitude toward this store. While employing self-discrepancy theory (SDT) (Higgins, 1987) and social identity theory (Turner & Tajfel, 1986), we investigate a relationship between a status-related self-discrepancy and social identity of high-income customers along with their consumer behavior.

Another research area, which the present study is aimed to broaden, is consumer coping-related research. The existing studies in this area focus predominantly on antecedents of coping strategies and thus heavily rely on individuals' self-reported retrospective statements of coping when individuals have to recall which coping strategies they applied in a past stressful situation (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Billings & Moos, 1984; Endler & Parker, 1994). However, this method is subject to memory biases and, due to its correlational design, does not allow to conclude causal inference between coping and subsequent behavior (Smith et al., 1999). To overcome these limitations, researchers can manipulate coping strategies with the help of an experimental study design (Han et al., 2015). To the best of our knowledge, only two studies have manipulated approach-avoidance coping strategies (e.g., Miller et al., 2008—with the help of coping reading materials; Han et al., 2016—with advertisement messages). However, research is still needed to develop systematic approaches to manipulate coping strategies in the context of consumer behavior (Han et al., 2015). That is, consumer research on coping will benefit from studies manipulating coping strategies with the help of theoretically grounded and consistent experimental designs. By offering another way of manipulating individuals' coping strategies with marketing tools, our study makes a significant contribution to consumer literature on coping.

Finally, the present study offers substantial managerial implications for marketers of the companies that target various social groups with varying income levels. If it is likely that a customer's social identity can be threatened due to a self-discrepancy experienced in a shopping environment, marketers should be equipped with appropriate tools that resonate with different stress coping strategies, such as advertising campaigns or brand slogans (Han et al., 2015). By showing that cause-related marketing (CRM) has the power to change consumers' attitudes toward marginalized social groups and stores associated with them, we show that this marketing tool can resonate with an individual's approach coping strategy. Furthermore, by demonstrating that a spacious store layout can help consumers avoid stressors in a shopping environment, we offer another marketing tool that resonates with an individual's avoidance coping strategy. Research on coping is just gaining popularity in marketing (Duhachek & Iacobucci, 2005; Eroglu & Machleit, 2008; Han et al., 2015), and studies are needed to investigate coping strategies not only from a consumer's but also from a company's perspective (Duhachek, 2008). Our study addresses this research gap by providing practical marketing tools for marketers interested in enhancing their consumers'

psychological well-being by assisting them in coping with stressors in a shopping environment.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 | Status-related self-discrepancy and social identity threat

At the core of the proposed conceptual framework lies SDT (Higgins, 1987), which differentiates among the actual, ideal, and ought self as three fundamental domains of the self. The *actual self* comprises a set of characteristics and traits that an individual possesses, whereas the *ideal self* is formed by an individual's aspirations regarding the desired self-concept. The *ought self* refers to a set of beliefs a person holds about his or her obliged self-concept, which is shaped by social normative standards and expectations (Higgins, 1987). To maintain a favorable self-concept, an individual compares his or her actual self with the ideal or ought self and monitors whether any discrepancies exist between them (Malär et al., 2011; Mandel et al., 2017).

SDT holds that the incongruity between an actual and a desired self-concept reflects negative psychological situations, which are accompanied by various negative emotional states (Higgins, 1987). Specifically, people can experience agitation-related emotions such as threat, fear, or guilt when the self-discrepancy between the actual and ought self is subjected to other people's negative moral judgments (Higgins, 1987; Russell, 1980). In this case, the self-state representation is viewed from the standpoint of others.

When an individual recognizes self-discrepancy between the actual self from his or her own standpoint and the ought self from others' standpoint, the current state of his or her actual attributes does not match the expectations of these others (e.g., in-group members) (Higgins, 1987). Because a violation of social expectations is associated with negative evaluations and sanctions (e.g., social exclusion) (Doosje et al., 1995; Steele et al., 2002; Turner & Tajfel, 1986), this discrepancy is associated with negative outcomes, and thus the individual feels threatened (Carver et al., 1999; Higgins, 1987; Kemper, 1978).

Self-discrepancy, which can cause threat-related emotions, can also derive from group membership (Bizman et al., 2001; Mandel et al., 2017). In particular, the actual-ought group discrepancy causes threat-related emotions and the fear of negative evaluations based on unfavorable group membership (Bizman et al., 2001; Steele et al., 2002; Watson & Friend, 1969). In the context of our study, a high-income individual perceives him- or herself as a member of a high-status social group. Thus, it can be socially expected that this individual will pursue expensive consumption choices. An individual violates these social expectations by choosing the low-price option (i.e., shopping in a discount store), and a status-related self-discrepancy between an actual and ought selves occurs. As mentioned before, according to SDT, an actual-ought discrepancy is followed by threat-related emotions due to possible negative evaluation of others. Thus, we develop the first hypothesis:

**H1.** *As a result of status-related self-discrepancy, a high-income customer's social identity is threatened when he or she shops at a discount store.*

## 2.2 | Social identity threat and consumer behavior

Social identity theory (SIT) offers a framework to explain the relationship between the self-concept and a group, as well as the effect of social group memberships on an individual's behavior (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Livingstone & Haslam, 2008). The primary assumption of SIT is that identity encompasses two levels: *personal identity* (i.e., the identity related to an individual's sense of self) and *social identity* (i.e., the various aspects of the self-concept originating from social groups to which a person belongs) (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). In situations in which social identity is salient, individuals view the world through the lens of identity-consistent paradigms (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). That is, they try to achieve and maintain congruence with their important social identity (Malär et al., 2011).

According to SIT, individuals are motivated to maintain positive self-worth, which can be achieved by either imitating favorable social groups' consumption choices (Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; McFerran et al., 2010) or avoiding dissociative groups' consumption choices (Berger & Heath, 2008; White & Argo, 2009; White & Dahl, 2007). When self-discrepancy with regard to one's social identity arises and thus causes emotional discomfort (i.e., psychological threat), behavioral responses to the source of social identity threat can be negative (Aronson & McGlone, 2009; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005).

In line with this well-established finding from psychology research, consumer behavior research suggests that if an individuals' social identity is threatened (i.e., they are associated with a dissociative out-group), they will respond to the threat by avoiding products or brands that are associated with the threatened aspect of social identity (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; White & Argo, 2009; White & Dahl, 2006). By diverging from members of dissociative out-group in consumption choices, individuals avoid signaling undesired characteristics (Berger & Heath, 2007; Brough et al., 2016; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; White et al., 2012). In the context of our study, members of dissociative groups are low-income individuals who shop in discount stores due to budget constraints. According to SIT, high-income individuals will try to maintain their positive self-image by avoiding any association with low-income individuals. Therefore, it is likely that their loyalty and attitude toward a discount store will decrease due to an experienced social identity threat. Thus, we develop the second hypothesis:

**H2.** *Social identity threat experienced in a shopping context decreases store loyalty and worsens store attitude.*

## 2.3 | Marketing tools as coping strategies

Environmental psychologists have established that the environment is a composite of physical, interpersonal, and sociocultural dimensions

that influences individuals' psychological well-being (Eroglu & Machleit, 2008). In line with this reasoning is the so-called "transactional approach" that posits that behavioral phenomena should be studied as a holistic system that consists of people, psychological and social processes, and a physical environment (Altman, 1975; Kaplan, 1987). Marketing research can benefit greatly from this transactional approach to studying consumer-environment interaction. In a shopping context, customers are constantly impacted by the presence of other customers and by contextual elements such as marketing tools employed by the companies (Duhachek, 2008; Eroglu & Machleit, 1990, 2008). Because people are inseparable from the physical and social context, the occurred psychological processes (e.g., psychological stress) should be viewed in combination with contextual factors such as marketing tools.

A growing field of research has investigated the notion of consumers' psychological stress such as social identity threat (Berger & Heath, 2008; Brough et al., 2016; White & Argo, 2009; White & Dahl, 2007) and experienced vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005; Hill & Sharma, 2020). However, it has paid little attention to the methods marketers can apply to help consumers overcome these negative experiences. Marketing tools have the potential to address psychological stressors occurring in a shopping environment and help consumers cope with them (Baker et al., 2005; Duhachek, 2008; Gill & Lei, 2018). However, to define the effective marketing tools that would resonate with consumers' coping strategies, it is important to refer to the framework of coping theory (Han et al., 2015).

The central theoretical framework in coping research originates from the work of Roth and Cohen (1986), who derived two concepts central to an understanding of coping with psychological stress. The first concept—approach—refers to the approach toward anxiety-causing stimuli and is oriented toward the source of threat (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Such coping responses reflect active cognitive and behavioral efforts to understand the stressful situation and to resolve a stressor by engaging in problem-solving activities (Ebata & Moos, 1991). The second concept—avoidance—involves avoiding anxiety-causing stimuli and is oriented away from threat (Roth & Cohen, 1986). These coping responses entail cognitive and behavioral efforts to avoid thinking about the stressor or to avoid confronting the stressor itself (Ebata & Moos, 1991).

We employ the "approach-avoidance" framework to manipulate two types of coping strategies with the help of specific marketing tools that are discussed further.

### 2.3.1 | CRM as an approach strategy

As we noted previously, from the perspective of the approach coping strategy, an individual is motivated to actively approach the source of psychological stress (Roth & Cohen, 1986). In the context of our study, an individual experiences psychological stress (i.e., social identity threat) from the unfavorable association with a low-income social group. Therefore, we suggest that to assist its customers in approach

coping, a firm can apply CRM that supports low-income members of society and, in doing so, directly assuage the source of stress.

The aim of CRM is to achieve a company's marketing objectives through the support of social causes (Barone et al., 2000). When a company applies CRM, the moral identity of an individual is activated and connects him or her with others through a set of moral traits (e.g., compassion, empathy, understanding) that define the moral self (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Choi & Winterich, 2013; He et al., 2016; Winterich et al., 2009). According to Reed and Aquino (2003), a person with an activated moral identity becomes more inclusive and tolerant of marginalized groups and is motivated to support them. Acceptance of out-groups becomes possible from the expansion of the person's psychological boundaries that define in-group membership (Reed & Aquino, 2003; Winterich et al., 2009). As a result, he or she experiences less psychological stress caused by association with an out-group (i.e., social identity threat). Marketing research shows that consumers' moral identity moderates the effect of brand group membership on out-group brand attitudes by reducing the psychological distance between them and out-group brands (Choi & Winterich, 2013). Building on the research on moral identity and CRM, we develop the following hypotheses:

**H3a.** *Cause-related marketing negatively moderates the effect of status-related self-discrepancy on social identity threat experienced in a shopping context.*

**H3b.** *Cause-related marketing negatively moderates the effect of social identity threat experienced in a shopping context on store loyalty and store attitude.*

### 2.3.2 | Spacious store layout as an avoidance strategy

From the perspective of avoidance coping, an individual is motivated to actively avoid sources of psychological stress (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Therefore, to help customers avoid a stressor in a shopping environment, a retailer can implement a store layout spacious enough for them to avoid the stressor. Environmental psychologists have established that stressful social environmental cues (e.g., too many people in too little space) can lead to an increase of mental stress and emotional labor experienced by an individual (Russell, 1980; Russell & Mehrabian, 1974).

Applying the findings of environmental psychology to research on retailing, some researchers have established that a lack of space and social crowding in a store increase customers' psychological stress (Baker et al., 2002; Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Machleit et al., 2000). In the same vein, other studies on retailing have shown that a more spacious layout gives customers the feeling of spatial control and, as a result, decreases psychological stress in a shopping context (Hui & Bateson, 1991; Van Rompay et al., 2008, 2012; Ward & Barnes, 2001). According to the stimulus-organism-response paradigm (Russell, 1980), an improved emotional state then leads to positive consumer behavioral outcomes.

Furthermore, as we discussed previously, individuals tend to dissociate from unfavorable social groups to avoid or mitigate social identity threat (Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; White et al., 2012; White & Dahl, 2006). Dissociation occurs either mentally (i.e., individuals dissociate from a threatened social identity) or physically (i.e., individuals avoid encountering unfavorable groups) and helps individuals cope with social identity threat and its negative consequences on consumer behavioral outcomes (de Lemus et al., 2017). Therefore:

**H4a.** *A spacious store layout negatively moderates the effect of status-related self-discrepancy on social identity threat experienced in a shopping context.*

**H4b.** *A spacious store layout negatively moderates the effect of social identity threat experienced in a shopping context on store loyalty and store attitude.*

### 2.3.3 | CRM versus store layout

Both approach and avoidance coping strategies contribute to a person's mechanism for managing stressful circumstances (Ebata & Moos, 1991; Roth & Cohen, 1986). However, psychology research has established that coping strategies' effectiveness can vary depending on certain factors. First, drawing on the findings of earlier studies (Katz et al., 1970; Staudenmayer et al., 1979), Lazarus (1983) concludes that coping effectiveness depends on the controllability of the situation. When a psychologically stressful situation is beyond the control of an individual, avoidance coping is more effective in mitigating the relationship between stress and its antecedents, as well as the behavioral and physiological consequences (Lazarus, 1983). Second, with the help of a meta-analysis of research on approach-avoidance coping, Mullen and Suls (1982) establish that rejection (i.e., avoidance) produces better psychological responses than attention (i.e., approach) when outcome measures are immediate or short-term. Additional evidence indicates that avoidance coping has a more powerful immediate effect when emotional resources are limited (Lazarus, 1983).

In the context of our study, a person encounters a source of psychological stress (i.e., low-status customers) and shows immediate emotional and behavioral responses. Furthermore, the presence of other customers in a store is beyond the person's control. Thus, we propose the following:

**H5a.** *The negative moderating effect of store layout is stronger than the negative moderating effect of cause-related marketing on the relationship between status-related self-discrepancy and social identity threat.*

**H5b.** *The negative moderating effect of store layout is stronger than the negative moderating effect of cause-related marketing on the relationship between social identity threat and store loyalty/store attitude.*

In our conceptual framework, we combine the central assumptions of SDT and SIT, as well as the approach–avoidance coping, in the context of shopping in a discount store. Figure 1 illustrates the central constructs and the hypothesized relationships between them.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 | Experimental design

We tested our hypotheses in an online experiment. The study used a 1 (social identity threat)  $\times$  3 (firm's marketing tool: no tool vs. CRM vs. store layout) between-subjects design. Three experimental scenarios were developed for each experimental condition—the control scenario with no marketing tools (i.e., no coping strategy manipulated), the treatment scenario with a CRM campaign (i.e., manipulation of an approach coping strategy), and the treatment scenario with a spacious store layout (i.e., manipulation of an avoidance strategy) (see Appendix). In each of the scenarios, we first make the high-status social group membership salient, and we expose a respondent to a social identity threat experienced due to an encounter with a friend who observes a respondent's shopping choice, deviant from his or her social group's usual shopping behavior.

The treatment scenario manipulating an approach coping strategy was developed as follows. The information that “*this retailer supports a local charity*” is supported by the existing research findings that the success of a CRM campaign is higher when the donation is targeted locally rather than globally (Ellen et al., 2000; Grau & Folse, 2007). The fact that a grocery discount retailer supports a charity fighting hunger and poverty is supported by multiple studies' finding that the fit between a company and a charity organization significantly increases brand loyalty and attractiveness (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Till & Nowak, 2000; Trimble & Rifon, 2006). The phrase “*Our store has already donated €7.865 to the local charity organization*” is supposed to improve attitude toward a brand if the amount of the charitable support is openly communicated (Hyllegard et al., 2010). Finally, the phrases “*Understanding and supporting instead of prejudice and*

*discrimination*” and “*Join us! Together we can fight hunger and poverty!*” prime a respondent for an approach strategy.

Finally, the treatment scenario manipulating an avoidance coping strategy was developed using the following rationale. The first piece of information, “[*a store*] is quite spacious, with no baffles or pillars integrated into the design,” is inspired by research findings that a high number and density of various interior elements in the environment significantly worsens customers' attitude toward a store (Machleit et al., 2000). The information that “store is not crowded” is rooted in the extensive research on perceived crowding (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Hui & Bateson, 1991; Machleit et al., 2000). Finally, the phrase “*you do not come across other consumers and barely meet people on your way*” is aimed to prime a respondent for an avoidance strategy.

#### 3.2 | Pretest

Before conducting the main experiment, we conducted a pretest to check the effectiveness of the developed scenarios. Participants in the lab experiment were 300 students enrolled in a master's program at a large European university ( $M_{\text{age}} = 23$ ; 43% females and 57% males). Participants were asked to carefully read a scenario and imagine themselves in a described situation. The control scenario ( $n = 100$ ), the “*cause-related marketing*” treatment scenario ( $n = 100$ ), and the “*store layout*” treatment scenario ( $n = 100$ ) were randomly distributed among participants (see Appendix).

We anticipated that respondents who received the neutral scenario (no marketing tool) would report higher levels of social identity threat and lower levels of store loyalty. Social identity threat is expected to be lower in the “*cause-related marketing*” treatment and even lower in the “*store layout treatment*”. As to the store loyalty, the expected dynamic is the opposite: it is expected to be higher in the “*cause-related marketing*” treatment condition and even higher in the “*store layout*” treatment condition.

Results of one-way ANOVA supported our predictions. First, social identity threat was the highest in the control condition ( $M = 3.55$ ), lower in the “*cause-related marketing*” condition ( $M = 2.92$ ), and even lower in

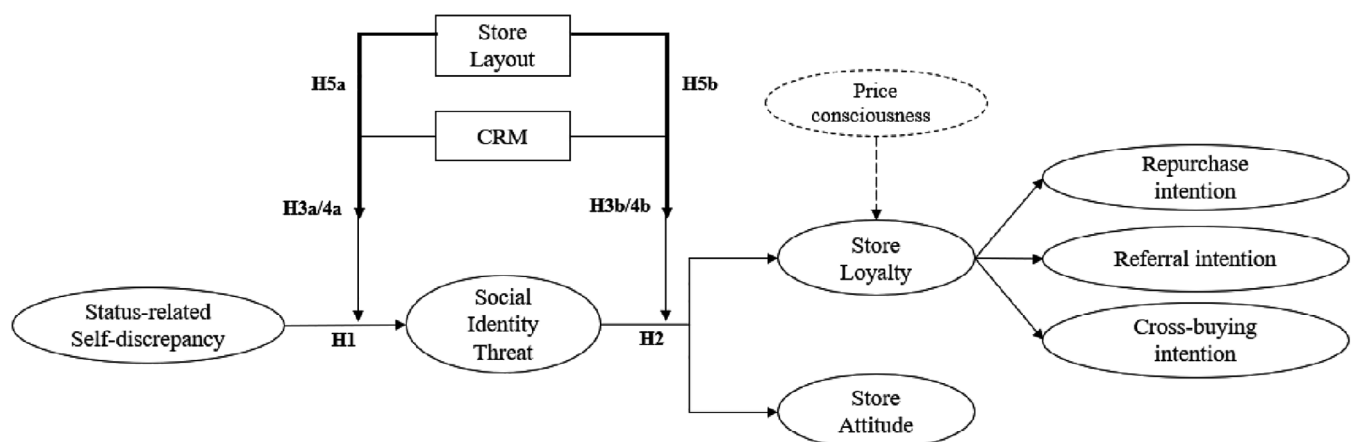


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework and hypothesized relationships

the “store layout” group ( $M = 2.58$ ). The difference between three groups was significant ( $F [2, 298] = 10.69, p < .001$ ). Second, store loyalty was found to be the lowest in the control condition ( $M = 3.58$ ), higher in the “cause-related marketing” condition ( $M = 5.02$ ), and even higher in the “store layout” group ( $M = 6.16$ ). The difference between three groups on this variable was also significant ( $F [2, 298] = 260.09, p < .001$ ). Therefore, we conclude that the treatment scenarios were effective and that we could use the developed scenarios for the main study, which we discuss below.

### 3.3 | Main study

#### 3.3.1 | Sample characteristics

Using random sampling, we collected the data in the same country where the pre-test was conducted through an online consumer panel, ultimately acquiring 956 respondents. Each respondent received a financial incentive for participating in the study. As the population of interest in this experiment are individuals with an average or above-average income, we filtered out respondents who indicated that their average household income is lower than the average income level in the country of residence. We randomly assigned respondents to one of three experimental conditions. Respondents read the scenarios followed by the questionnaire, which contained a manipulation check for an avoidance strategy (“The fact that due to the spacious store layout I did not come across other customers, made my after-shopping experience less stressful” [ $M = 5.12, SD = 1.02$ ]) and a manipulation check for an approach strategy (“The fact that this discount store supports a charity fighting hunger and poverty made my after-shopping experience less stressful” [ $M = 4.78, SD = 1.37$ ]). The manipulation of coping strategies was found to be effective.

After eliminating multivariate outliers, the final sample size was 827 respondents (283 in the control group, 276 in the CRM treatment group, 268 in the store layout treatment group). There were no missing data in the sample. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the final sample.

#### 3.3.2 | Measures

We measured all constructs in our study with multi-item 7-point Likert scales. To assess the measurement validity of each scale, we ran confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) for the central constructs. The Cronbach's alphas, CRs, and AVEs were above the recommended threshold as well as the indicator reliabilities were above the threshold of .4 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Table 2 shows the results.

We also assessed the realism of the scenarios on a 7-point Likert scale with the following two items: “I can easily imagine myself being in the described situation” and “The described situation is likely to occur in real life.” The results indicated that respondent found the scenarios realistic ( $M_{\text{control}} = 5.3, SD = 1.03; M_{\text{CRM}} = 5.25, SD = 1.23; M_{\text{layout}} = 5.0; SD = 1.16$ ).

**TABLE 1** Sample composition

	No tool (n = 283)	Cause-related marketing (n = 276)	Store layout (n = 268)
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	54%	51%	52%
Male	46%	49%	48%
<i>Age</i>			
18–24	1%	2%	4%
25–34	25%	14%	22%
35–44	26%	20%	20%
45–54	13%	26%	16%
55–64	20%	21%	18%
65 and over	15%	17%	20%
<i>Education level</i>			
Technical training	14%	10%	14%
High school graduate	15%	27%	21%
Bachelor's degree or higher	71%	63%	65%
<i>Household monthly income</i>			
Average	43%	44%	48%
Above average	57%	56%	52%

Table 3 shows the correlations and descriptive statistics of the dependent, independent, mediating, and control variables. The square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds the correlation with other frameworks' constructs, meeting Fornell and Larcker's (2018) criterion and establishing discriminant validity of the constructs.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | General model testing

As a first step, we tested the hypothesized direct relationships (H1 and H2). With the help of the statistical software Stata, we employed covariance-based SEM using maximum likelihood estimation. The model has a good fit with the data (TLI = .993; CFI = .994; RMSEA = .019; SRMR = .04). Table 4 reports the results of the general model. The parameter estimates are significant and support the relationships hypothesized in H1 and H2.

#### 4.1.1 | Direct effect of status-related self-discrepancy on social identity threat

In H1, we proposed that a status-related discrepancy would lead to social identity threat. As Table 4 shows, this positive relationship was

**TABLE 2** Definitions and scales measuring central constructs

Definition	Items	M	SD	IR	CR	AVE	CA
<b>Store attitude</b> —A customer's cognition and affect inferred from his or her perception of a store (Baker et al., 1994; Mazursky & Jacoby, 1986).	<b>Store attitude</b> (developed scale)				.82	.62	.82
	1. This discount store is a nice place to do shopping if I need groceries.	4.77	1.56	.59			
	2. This discount store has a pleasant atmosphere for buying groceries.	4.76	1.59	.62			
	3. This discount store is attractive for me if I need groceries.	4.79	1.56	.61			
<b>Repeat purchase intention</b> —Subjective estimates of the likelihood of purchasing again from the same store/brand (MacKenzie et al., 1986).	<b>Customer loyalty</b>						
	<i>Repurchase intention</i> (based on Pavlou & Fygenon, 2006):				.85	.65	.85
	1. If I need low price products, I would choose the same discount store again.	4.71	1.68	.65			
	2. It is very likely that I will purchase products in this discount store in the future.	4.68	1.65	.63			
<b>Intention to shop more</b> (cross-buying intention)—Intention to buy additional products or services from the same store/ brand (Ngobo, 2004).	<i>Intention to shop more</i> (based on Swinyard, 1993):				.87	.68	.87
	4. I would buy more groceries in this discount store.	4.78	1.68	.66			
	5. I would buy other items than groceries in this discount store.	4.73	1.65	.72			
	6. I would purchase additional products in this discount store.	4.71	1.67	.68			
<b>Intention to recommend</b> —Intention to informally communicate pleasant experiences in evaluations of a product/ brand/ store (Anderson, 1998).	<i>Intention to recommend</i> (based on Blodgett et al., 1997):				.85	.66	.85
	7. I would recommend my friends to purchase groceries in this discount store.	4.80	1.61	.69			
	8. I would advocate shopping in this discount store when talking to my friends about grocery stores.	4.68	1.71	.62			
	9. I would make sure to tell my friends to shop in this discount store.	4.71	1.70	.68			
<b>Social identity threat</b> —A psychological state experienced when a person feels at risk of being negatively evaluated on the basis of his or her social identity (Steele et al., 2002) or unfavorable group membership (White & Argo, 2009).	<b>Social identity threat</b> (developed scale)				.78	.54	.78
	1. The fact that my friend saw me with bags from this discount store undermined my identity.	3.29	1.51	.52			
	2. My personality was challenged when my friend saw me holding bags from this discount store.	3.28	1.55	.57			
	3. The fact that my friend saw me with bags from this discount store threatened the way I feel about myself.	2.26	1.52	.55			
<b>Status-related self-discrepancy</b> —incongruity between how an individual currently perceives and desires to perceive him- or herself with regard to the social status (Higgins, 1987).	<b>Status-related self-discrepancy</b> (developed scale)				.73	.48	.73
	1. I feel that this discount store is inconsistent with my social status because it is associated with low-income individuals.	3.26	1.38	.50			
	2. This discount store is targeting customers with low social status and, therefore, does not correspond my social status.	3.24	1.43	.47			
	3. Customers in this discount store usually are low-income individuals, and I do not associate myself with them.	3.22	1.38	.49			

Note: All items were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree").

Abbreviations: CA, Cronbach's alpha; IR, indicator reliabilities.



significant ( $\gamma = .431, p < .01$ ). This result indicates that once individuals experience incongruity between their social status and a shopping environment, their social identity related to high-status social group membership is threatened. Thus, H1 is supported.

#### 4.1.2 | Direct effect of social identity threat on store loyalty and attitude

The relationship between social identity threat and store loyalty was significantly negative ( $\gamma = -.494, p < .01$ ), as was the relationship between social identity threat and store attitude ( $\gamma = -.467, p < .01$ ). This finding shows that if one's social identity is threatened in an unfavorable shopping environment, one will show less loyalty and worse attitude toward this shopping environment. Thus, H2 is supported.

#### 4.1.3 | Controlling for price consciousness

Since the focus of our study is on a low-price shopping environment, it is important to control for a customer's price consciousness (Kukar-Kinney et al., 2007; Palazón & Delgado, 2009). Following Lichtenstein et al. (1993), we operationalize price consciousness as the extent to which an individual focuses on paying low prices. Therefore, we expect a price-conscious customer to show greater loyalty to a discount store. After including price consciousness in the model, we indeed found that it has a strong positive effect on store loyalty ( $\gamma = .243, p < .01$ ). However, the direct effects remain significant, indicating stability of the main effects.

### 4.2 | Moderating effects of marketing tools

For the moderation analysis of H3–H5, we employed multigroup SEM, to determine whether the grouping variable (i.e., treatment condition) leads to different results when we estimate the same model on multiple samples (Arnold, 1982). That is, we performed multigroup SEM comparing three subsamples: control group, a CRM group, and a store layout group. We discuss the results of multigroup SEM further.

#### 4.2.1 | Moderating effect of CRM

In H3a, we proposed that CRM would negatively moderate the effect of status-related self-discrepancy on social identity threat. To test this hypothesis, we compared a free model with a more restrictive model, including the constrained path of interest. The fit of the partial invariance model did not become significantly poorer, and the resulting chi-square difference was not significant ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 2.47, p = .116$ ). Thus, H3a was not supported.

To test H3b, we analyzed whether the effect of social identity threat on store loyalty was weaker when CRM was introduced. After comparing the free and constrained models, we found a significant chi-square difference ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 4.9, p = .027$ ). This finding suggests that the impact of social identity threat on store loyalty is significantly weaker in the CRM group ( $\gamma = -.460, p < .001$ ) than in the control group ( $\gamma = -.653, p < .001$ ). Second, we tested whether the effect of social identity threat on store attitude was weaker when CRM was introduced. The chi-square difference was again significant ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 10.0, p = .001$ ). This finding suggests that the impact of social identity threat on store attitude is significantly weaker in the CRM group ( $\gamma = -.435, p < .001$ ) than in the control group ( $\gamma = -.660, p < .001$ ). Thus, H3b was supported.

#### 4.2.2 | Moderating effect of store layout

In H4a, we proposed that a spacious store layout would negatively moderate the effect of status-related self-discrepancy on social identity threat. After constraining this path and comparing the free and restrictive models, we found a significant chi-square difference ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 13.7, p = .000$ ). Therefore, we can conclude that the effect of status-related self-discrepancy on social identity threat is significantly weaker in the treatment group ( $\gamma = .232, p < .001$ ) than in the control group ( $\gamma = -.614, p < .001$ ). Thus, H4a was supported.

In H4b, we proposed that when a store has a spacious store layout, the negative effect of social identity threat on store loyalty and attitude would be mitigated. We found a significant chi-square difference ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 21.9, p = .000$ ). This finding indicates that the negative

**TABLE 3** Descriptive statistics and correlations

	M	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Store attitude	4.77	1.35	.62	(.79)						
2. Repurchase intention	4.75	1.46	.65	.27***	(.81)					
3. Intention to recommend	4.73	1.47	.66	.21***	.48***	(.81)				
4. Intention to shop more	4.78	1.50	.68	.19***	.47***	.45***	(.82)			
5. Social identity threat	3.28	1.27	.54	-.34***	-.31***	-.23***	-.30***	(.73)		
6. Status-related self-discrepancy	3.24	1.13	.48	-.26***	-.21***	-.16***	-.19***	.31***	(.69)	
7. Price consciousness	3.95	1.23	.53	.16***	.10***	.17***	.11***	.04***	-.03	(.73)

Note: The square roots of the AVEs are on the diagonal.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 4** Estimated structural relationship coefficients (general sample)

	Path coefficient	Indirect effect	95%CI lower	95% CI upper
Status-related self-discrepancy > social identity threat (H1)	.431***		.353	.508
Social identity threat > store loyalty (H2)	-.494***		-.569	-.418
Social identity threat > store attitude (H2)	-.467***		-.537	-.395
Status-related self-discrepancy > social identity threat > store loyalty		-.213***	-.291	-.162
Status-related self-discrepancy > social identity threat > store attitude		-.201***	-.322	-.183

Note: Standardized coefficients are reported.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 5** Moderation effects of marketing tools (H3-H5)

	Path	Path coefficient			$\Delta\chi^2$ (df), $p$ -value
		Control	Cause-related marketing	Store layout	
Control versus cause-related marketing	Self-discrepancy > social identity threat	.614***	.370***	-	2.47 (1), $p = .116$
	Social identity threat > store loyalty	-.653***	-.460***	-	4.9 (1), $p = .027$
	Social identity threat > store attitude	-.660***	-.435***	-	10.0 (1), $p = .000$
Control versus store layout	Self-discrepancy > social identity threat	.614***	-	.232***	13.7 (1), $p = .000$
	Social identity threat > store loyalty	-.653***	-	-.259***	21.93 (1), $p = .000$
	Social identity threat > store attitude	-.660***	-	-.203***	27.91 (1), $p = .000$
Cause-related marketing versus store layout	Self-discrepancy > social identity threat	-	.370***	.232***	4.32 (1), $p = .038$
	Social identity threat > store loyalty	-	-.460***	-.259***	6.84 (1), $p = .008$
	Social identity threat > store attitude	-	-.435***	-.203***	6.21 (1), $p = .013$

Note: Standardized coefficients are reported.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

effect of social identity threat on store loyalty is significantly weaker when a spacious store layout is introduced ( $\gamma = -.259$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than in a neutral condition ( $\gamma = -.653$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Second, we constrained the path between social identity threat and store attitude. After comparing a free model with a constrained model, we found that the chi-square difference is significant ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 27.93$ ,  $p = .000$ ), indicating a substantial difference between groups. Specifically, the negative effect of social identity threat on store attitude is significantly weaker in the treatment group ( $\gamma = -.203$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than in the control group ( $\gamma = -.660$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, H4b was also supported.

#### 4.2.3 | Moderating effect of CRM versus store layout

In H5a, we predicted that the link between self-discrepancy and social identity threat will be mitigated by store layout to a greater extent than by CRM. To identify whether the difference between groups is significant, we first compared the chi-squares of the free

and constrained models. The chi-square difference was significant ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 4.32$ ,  $p = .038$ ); that is, the effect of self-discrepancy on social identity threat was significantly weaker when a spacious store layout was implemented ( $\gamma = .232$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than when a firm introduced CRM ( $\gamma = .370$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, H5a was supported.

H5b focuses on the effect of social identity threat on both the dependent variables and the moderation effect of CRM versus store layout. First, we found that the negative effect of social identity threat on store loyalty was significantly weaker when a spacious store layout was implemented ( $\gamma = -.259$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than when a firm introduced CRM ( $\gamma = -.460$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The chi-square difference for this path was significant ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 6.84$ ,  $p = .008$ ). Second, in the same vein, the negative effect of social identity threat on store attitude was weaker for a spacious store layout ( $\gamma = -.203$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than for CRM ( $\gamma = -.435$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The significance of this difference was supported by a significant chi-square difference ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 6.21$ ,  $p = .013$ ). Thus, H5b was supported. Table 5 summarizes the results of the moderation analysis of marketing tools.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

### 5.1 | Research contributions

The present study's findings make three significant contributions to consumer research areas investigating self-discrepancies and customer-related coping. First, prior research on the effects of individuals' self-discrepancies on their consumer behavior has predominantly focused on the phenomenon of compensatory consumption (Mandel et al., 2017). An extensive body of literature has established that consumers tend to purchase products that help them compensate for the experienced self-discrepancy in a particular domain (Cutright, 2012; Dubois et al., 2012; Levav & Zhu, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2009). While focusing on this type of consumers' coping with psychological stress (i.e., self-discrepancy), these studies ignore the importance of the theoretical framework of coping (Duhachek, 2008; Han et al., 2015). By applying the "approach-avoidance" framework (Roth & Cohen, 1986), to the context of consumer behavior, we address this research gap. Our findings show that companies can impact consumers' attitudes toward a stressor by implementing CRM—this marketing tool resonates with an approach coping strategy that an individual could apply. Furthermore, based on the transactional approach from environmental psychology (Altman, 1975; Kaplan, 1987), we show that environmental cues such as store layout can help consumers to avoid a stressor—a marketing tool resonating with an avoidance coping strategy. Future consumer research could build on this insight by applying the theoretical framework of coping to the context of self-discrepancies and other types of psychological stress occurring in a shopping environment.

Second, existing consumer research on self-discrepancies has exclusively applied SDT (Higgins, 1987) to investigate psychological stress with regard to an incongruity between actual and ideal identities (Braun & Wicklund, 1989; Gao et al., 2009; Willer et al., 2013). Research on self-discrepancies related to one's social group membership remains relatively scarce (Mandel et al., 2017). By grounding our conceptual framework in two theories prominent in psychology research—social identity theory (Turner & Tajfel, 1986) and SDT (Higgins, 1987)—we address this research gap and contribute to the existing consumer research on self-discrepancies. Our findings show that once people experience discrepancies with regard to social status, their social identity is threatened. Future consumer research could focus more intensely on the psychological processes behind the discrepancies that consumers experience in a shopping environment.

Third, it is a common practice in coping-related research to measure individuals' coping strategies with the help of retrospective self-reported accounts (Braun & Wicklund, 1989; Dubois et al., 2012; Gao et al., 2009), which were proven to be unreliable due to possible memory biases (Smith et al., 1999). Our study is one of a few (Han et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2008) that manipulate coping strategies with the help of research-supported marketing tools. We rely on the theoretical framework of coping and show that approach and avoidance

strategies can be manipulated successfully in a shopping environment. The transactional approach within environmental psychology supports this suggestion: psychological stress should be analyzed holistically—by analyzing social and contextual factors (Altman, 1975). Building on our study's insights, consumer behavior researchers could examine other tools manipulating consumers' coping strategies. Overall, our study uncovers new possibilities for future research on how a firm can help its customers cope with psychological stress.

### 5.2 | Managerial implications

Our results have several managerial implications. First, marketing practice can benefit significantly from our findings that show that companies have the power to prime their customers to a specific coping strategy under conditions of psychological stress. Effective stress coping strategies improve customers' psychological well-being by reducing the adverse effects of stress. It is essential in a consumption context since decreased psychological stress increases customer loyalty and improves their consumption-related attitudes. Therefore, managers should be equipped with marketing tools that can support consumers in their coping strategies.

Second, our finding that support of a social cause related to a source of stress decreases adverse effects of a stressor is a call to action for marketers and policymakers who aim to mitigate customers' negative stereotypes and prejudices toward outgroups. Basing our predictions on psychology literature on moral identity (i.e., feelings of empathy and tolerance), we show that CRM mitigates the negative effects of a social identity threat on shopping behavior. CRM was proven to activate a customer's moral identity, making an individual more inclusive of social outgroups. Thus, companies that target various social groups, including those considered marginalized, should consider CRM as an effective marketing tool to mitigate customers' stress related to unfavorable intergroup dynamics.

Third, with the focus on a discount store setting, our study can be insightful for companies in a low-price context. Discount stores often have limited space and a rather cluttered store layout. However, our findings show that managers of low-price stores should be aware that a more spacious store layout can reduce psychological stress experienced by customers. Furthermore, the results of our study show that an avoidance coping strategy is more effective than an approach strategy in a consumption context. Therefore, companies should also consider other marketing tools that resonate with avoidance strategies and help customers avoid potential stressors.

Overall, our study results can be beneficial also to companies that try to broaden their target audience by including various social groups. If members of one social group feel stressed by members of social outgroups, companies can help them cope with this psychological stress. Testing various marketing tools protecting customers' social identities from potential stressors should become of high priority for marketing managers of the companies that attempt to expand their image beyond their traditional customer groups.

### 5.3 | Limitations and further research

While our study focuses exclusively on self-discrepancies and social identity threat related to an individual's socioeconomic status, it is important to investigate coping with the effects of other sources of social identity threat. To establish generalizability of our findings, future studies should focus on different aspects of social identity (e.g., religion, race, sexual orientation). Furthermore, future studies on consumers' self-discrepancies can further investigate psychological mechanisms behind experienced self-discrepancies (e.g., embarrassment, desire to eliminate self-discrepancy, etc.).

To check the consistency of our findings, future studies could also examine other product categories (e.g., clothes, cars). According to prior consumer research, utilitarian products have different effects on consumer behavior than hedonic products (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Okada, 2005). Thus, future studies could replicate our study by employing a different product category.

The examined marketing tools—CRM and store layout—are only two possibilities that firms can apply to assist their customers in coping with social identity threats. We hope that our study will inspire marketing researchers and managers to focus more on the power of marketing tools to mitigate the effects of various consumer stressors. The classical framework of approach–avoidance coping can be applied in future consumer behavior studies to manipulate individuals' coping with the help of various marketing tools.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## APPENDIX: EXPERIMENTAL SCENARIOS

### Control scenario: No marketing tool

Today, you organize a barbeque party and have to do grocery shopping. There are a couple of stores in your neighborhood. Usually, as

most of your friends do, you do shopping in middle-priced grocery stores. However, today you decided to go to a discount store with prices much lower than in middle-priced grocery stores.

You enter the store. As you expected, prices are low at this store. You buy everything you need for the upcoming party. After you pack up your purchases in store branded shopping bags, you leave the store.

On your way home, you run into a good friend. After a warm greeting, you invite your friend to the party. You chat for another couple of minutes and you go home to make everything ready for the party.

#### **Treatment condition 1: Cause-related marketing**

Today, you organize a barbeque party and have to do grocery shopping. There are a couple of stores in your neighborhood. Usually, as most of your friends do, you do shopping in middle-priced grocery stores. However, today you decided to go to a discount store with prices much lower than in middle-priced grocery stores.

You enter the store. [At the entrance, you see a signboard saying that this retailer supports the local charity organization "Fighting against Poverty and Hunger". On the signboard, a photo of a poorly dressed man sitting at the entrance of a store and counting coins is depicted. The text under the photo says "*Understanding and supporting instead of prejudice and discrimination. We feel obliged to help people in need! We donate €1 from each of your €10-purchase to the cause. Our store has already donated €7.865 to the local charity organization. Join us! Together we can fight hunger and poverty!*" Now, you proceed with shopping.]

As you expected, prices are low at this store. You buy everything you need for the upcoming party. After you pack up your purchases in store branded shopping bags, you leave the store.

On your way home, you run into a good friend. After a warm greeting, you invite your friend to the party. You chat for another couple of minutes and you go home to make everything ready for the party.

#### **Treatment condition 2: Store layout**

Today, you organize a barbeque party and have to do grocery shopping. There are a couple of stores in your neighborhood. Usually, as most of your friends do, you do shopping in middle-priced grocery stores. However, today you decided to go to a discount store with prices much lower than in middle-priced grocery stores.

You enter the store. [It is quite spacious, with no baffles or pillars integrated into the design so you can easily navigate and find all the products you need. Besides, the store is not crowded, so you do not come across other consumers and barely meet people on your way. You experience a comfortable feeling of spatial control over the environment around you.]

As you expected, prices are low at this store. You buy everything you need for the upcoming party. After you pack up your purchases in store branded shopping bags, you leave the store.

On your way home, you run into a good friend. After a warm greeting, you invite your friend to the party. You chat for another couple of minutes and you go home to make everything ready for the party.