

# Making the Leader Identity Salient Can Be Demotivating

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Extensive research has shown that when a social identity is made salient, people tend to embrace positive identities (e.g., being a voter) and shy away from negative identities (e.g., being a cheater). The present research proposes that this effect of identity salience could be reversed for identities that cannot be attained or rejected by engaging in simple behaviors (e.g., being a leader). People perceived leadership education programs that highlighted the leader identity as more difficult (Studies 1 and 3), and were less interested in signing up for such programs (Study 2). People performed worse when learning educational material framed in terms of the leader identity (Study 4). However, a growth mindset about leadership ability reduced the negative effects of identity frames on performance (Study 4). These findings highlight that the motivational effects of making identities salient might not hold for identities that cannot be attained by executing simple behaviors.

### **Public Significance Statement**

This research found that people perceive leadership development courses as being more difficult, and are less interested in signing up for such courses, when the course is framed in terms of helping people *become leaders* rather than in terms of *developing their leadership skills*. The findings have implications for how leadership education courses should be framed to increase students' interest and motivation.

*Keywords:* identity, motivation, lay beliefs, framing, leadership

Research on social identity has a long history, both in social psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979) and in management (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Classic studies have shown that highlighting people's social identities influences their intergroup attitudes, making them more likely to favor in-group members over out-group members (Brewer & Kramer, 1986). Recent work has shown that highlighting people's identities also influences their behaviors (LeBoeuf, Shafir, & Belyavsky, 2008; Morris, Carranza, & Fox, 2008; Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). Emerging findings in this area suggest that messages encouraging people to engage in a behavior as a means to achieve a positive identity are more effective than messages simply encouraging people to engage in the desired behavior. For example, people who saw a message highlighting the

voter identity were more likely to vote in a subsequent election than those who saw a message merely highlighting the opportunity to vote (Bryan, Walton, Rogers, & Dweck, 2011). Likewise, people encouraged to acquire the helper identity were more likely to help another person subsequently than those merely encouraged to help (Bryan, Master, & Walton, 2014).

A common feature of prior studies on the relationship between identity and behavior is that people can acquire the relevant identity by engaging in a simple behavior: If you vote, you are a voter. But not all identities can be acquired by engaging in a well-defined set of behaviors. In this research, we ask whether for identities that cannot be acquired by engaging in simple behaviors, highlighting the identity can demotivate rather than motivate people to engage in identity-consistent behaviors because making such an identity salient highlights the challenges that need to be overcome to acquire the identity. Specifically, we ask whether highlighting the possibility of acquiring the leader identity can reduce people's interest in pursuing leadership education and their performance in it.

### **Motivating Effects of Social Identity**

According to social identity theory, people classify themselves into multiple social categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). These categories can be based on various types of individual characteristics, such as one's physique (e.g., athletic built), talents (e.g., piano player), traits (e.g., extraverted), and preferences (e.g., environmentalist), and on various types of social characteristics, such as one's demographics (e.g., gender, race, nationality), profession

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(e.g., academics), and residence (e.g., Beverly Hills). Identity has significant motivational effects because people strive to embrace positive identities and to avoid negative identities that are salient in a given context (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015).

The power of identity is not just limited to the identities that one has already subscribed to—people can also be nudged to adopt new identities. Psychologists have demonstrated the power of identity frames versus behavior frames (Gelman & Heyman, 1999; Walton & Banaji, 2004) to motivate new behavior in different domains. For example, asking people to adopt a prosocial identity (“you could be a helper when someone needs help”) motivates them to engage in prosocial behavior more than simply asking people to engage in prosocial behavior (“you could help when someone needs help;” Bryan et al., 2014). Similarly, exposing citizens to the message that they can have a voter identity (“be a voter”) by engaging in the relevant behavior (i.e., voting) motivates them to vote in the U.S. presidential elections more than exposing them to the message that they can vote (Bryan et al., 2011). In the eyes of the actor, acquiring a positive identity not only entails engagement in the relevant behavior but also implies acquiring a characteristic that is relatively stable. For this reason, evidence suggests that, at least in some contexts, identity frames can be more powerful motivators than behavior frames.

### The Salience of Identity in the Leadership Context

Leadership education programs, such as those offered by business schools, provide leadership development opportunities with the goal of helping students develop their leadership skills and become future leaders. In this context, the above-mentioned past research would predict that making the goal of acquiring leader identity salient would be more likely to increase their motivation to engage in leadership development than simply focusing on teaching the leadership behaviors per se. Yet, could the salience of the leader identity become demotivating? We suggest that past research on identity might not generalize in the context of leadership education.

Two lines of reasoning lead to the prediction that people might perceive acquiring the leader identity as harder than engaging in leadership behaviors. First, past research has focused on identities that could be easily acquired by engaging in simple one-shot behaviors, such as voting, helping, and not cheating (Bryan et al., 2011, 2014; Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013). In contrast, the leader identity cannot be easily acquired by one-shot behaviors, but instead involves a series of social interactions over an extended period. It is hard to define a single set of behaviors that would qualify a person as a leader—there is no easy and clear path to acquiring the leader identity right away. Second, whereas people can control whether or not to engage in behaviors that are associated with leadership, they have little control over acquiring a leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Lack of control is associated with perceived difficulty, with Ajzen and Madden (1986) even defining perceived behavioral control as “a person’s belief as to how easy or difficult performance of the behavior is likely to be” (p. 457). Based on this rationale, we hypothesized that when leadership education programs are framed with a salient leader identity (i.e., “this program prepares you to become a leader” vs. “this program prepares you to engage in leadership

behaviors”), potential students of leadership are likely to think that becoming a leader is challenging or difficult, compared to identical leadership education programs that do not invoke the leader identity. Thus, we propose:

*Hypothesis 1:* People would perceive leadership education programs with an identity frame as more difficult than those without an identity frame.

Extensive research in motivational psychology, particularly on the expectance-value model of achievement, has found that people are more attracted to and more interested in tasks that are not too difficult (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Horvath, Herleman, & McKie, 2006; see Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, for a review). This relationship is explained by the perceived likelihood of success—people are more likely to succeed when they engage in relatively easy tasks than when they engage in relatively difficult tasks. Given people’s need for self-esteem and positive self-regard (Taylor & Brown, 1988), it is not surprising that people are more interested in pursuing tasks that would make them feel good about themselves. Therefore, to the extent that people perceive leadership education programs with an identity frame as more difficult and daunting than identical programs that do not invoke a leader identity, we predict that they would be less interested in engaging in leadership education programs presented with an identify frame. Thus, we propose:

*Hypothesis 2:* People would be less interested in pursuing leadership education programs with an identity frame than programs without an identity frame.

Further, even among those who have signed up to participate in a leadership program, how the educational materials that they encounter are framed could impact their performance. If given the choice of whether to pursue a task or not, it is likely that once the perceived difficulty of the task crosses some threshold, an individual might think that succeeding at the task is not worth the effort, and thus not to try at all. However, often times in academic contexts people do not have the choice of whether to do a task. For example, all MBA students need to take the required courses, otherwise they will be asked to leave the program. In such cases, the more students perceive that the task is difficult (keeping the actual difficulty constant), the less motivated they are likely to be because they would expect a smaller reward from a given amount of effort. Thus, greater perceived difficulty is likely to lead to lower performance. Indeed, multiple studies across diverse domains have found negative correlations between perceived task difficulty or complexity and subsequent performance (e.g., Haerem & Rau, 2007; Li, Lee, & Solmon, 2007; Mangos & Steele-Johnson, 2001; Maynard & Hakel, 1997). Extending this logic to the present research, if people perceive leadership education materials framed in terms of the leader identity as more difficult to master than leadership education materials without an identity frame, they would put in less effort in mastering the material. Thus, we propose:

*Hypothesis 3:* People would show less comprehension and less memory for leadership education materials with an identity frame than those without an identity frame.

## Role of Fixed Versus Growth Beliefs of Leadership

Not everyone is likely to respond to salience of identity in the same way. Although most people might perceive acquiring the leader identity as a difficult task, some individuals frame challenges as opportunities to develop themselves rather than obstacles to shy away from. Research on lay theories has identified that people hold different beliefs about the extent to which various abilities are fixed and stable (a fixed belief) or malleable and changeable (a growth belief; for reviews, see Dweck, 2006; Molden & Dweck, 2006). Compared to those with a fixed belief, people with a growth belief in a given domain are more likely to have an action approach, believing that difficult tasks are achievable by anyone if they put in the time and effort (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). People with a growth belief perceive the difficulties that they encounter in the process of acquiring new abilities as opportunities for developing their abilities, focusing on the possibility of change and progress, whereas those with a fixed belief hold that individuals either have an ability or not, with little possibility of development (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Although earlier research in this area had focused on fixed versus growth beliefs about intelligence (e.g., Dweck, 1986) and personality (e.g., Heslin, Latham, & Vandewalle, 2005; Heslin & VandeWalle, 2011; Heslin, Vandewalle, & Latham, 2006), more recent work has shown that people also differ in whether they hold fixed versus growth beliefs about leadership ability (Burnette & Pollack, 2013; Hoyt, Burnette, & Innella, 2012), and these beliefs have significant consequences for people's leadership outcomes. For example, women with a fixed belief about leadership ability were more demotivated by information showing that men greatly outnumber women in leadership positions compared to those with a growth belief (Burnette, Pollack, & Hoyt, 2010). Further, past research has shown that when facing challenging tasks, people with growth beliefs outperform those with fixed beliefs in diverse domains such as high school math (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), interpersonal interactions (Kammrath & Dweck, 2006), and negotiations (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007). Following failure on a challenging task, people with growth beliefs experience less negative affect compared to those with fixed beliefs (Niiya, Crocker, & Bartmess, 2004).

When confronted with the goal of acquiring the leader identity, if students of leadership view this task as difficult and challenging (as proposed in Hypothesis 1), their reactions to the challenge and subsequent performance on the challenging task are likely to differ based on their fixed versus growth belief about leadership ability. Given that people with a growth belief perform better in the face of challenges, in the leadership education context we would predict that a growth belief about leadership ability would help people maintain their motivation and perform better when they encounter leadership material that appears challenging. In other words, a growth belief about leadership ability is likely to protect students against the negative effects of an identity frame on performance. Thus, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 4:* Compared to a fixed belief, a growth belief about leadership ability would eliminate the negative effect of an identity frame of leadership educational material compared to a nonidentity frame on performance.

In sum, the present research highlights a potential negative consequence of making an identity salient, and a strategy to counter this negative effect. We test whether making the leader identity salient can be demotivating, but a growth belief about leadership ability would eliminate this negative consequence.

## Overview of Studies

We tested our hypotheses in a series of four studies. In Studies 1 to 4, we tested whether people find leadership educational programs with an identity frame more difficult (Hypothesis 1), are less interested in learning (Hypothesis 2), and perform worse in these programs (Hypothesis 3) than in leadership programs without the identity frame. Study 4 also tested whether an induced growth belief about leadership ability can eliminate the negative effect of identity frames on students' performance (Hypothesis 4). This research was approved by the National University of Singapore Institutional Review Board protocol 12-326 (titled "Attitudes, Decision Making, and Performance") and Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board protocol 2015-07-018 (titled "Role of Implicit Processes in Cultural Learning").

### Study 1

We first examine whether an identity frame would influence how potential students of leadership perceive leadership educational programs. Specifically, we test whether working adults not yet engaged in leadership education perceive a leadership educational program with a leader identity frame as more difficult than a program without making the leader identity salient (Hypothesis 1).

## Method

**Participants.** Our goal was to recruit working adults in this study as only this population is likely to be interested in leadership education. We posted a study for 200 U.S. residents on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), expecting that about three fourths would meet our eligibility criteria. In response, 120 working adults (55 women, 65 men; mean age 35.77 years) residing in the United States completed the study. Participants were randomly assigned to either the identity frame condition or the control condition.

**Procedure.** Participants were first presented with a description of a hypothetical course about leadership offered by a local university.

In the *control condition*, participants were presented with a description of a leadership course that focused on leadership as a set of knowledge, abilities, and skills. Specifically, participants were informed:

Leadership skill is essential for your career development. In today's business world, leadership skill involves using the skills, talents, and resources of different individuals working under them to maximize their outcomes. Our program is designed to improve your leadership skills, such as making effective decisions, influencing and motivating others, managing diverse teams, and driving organizational change. The central goal of our program is to improve your leadership skills!

In the *identity frame condition*, participants were presented with a description of a leadership course that made the leader identity salient. Instead of simply learning leadership skills, participants in

the identity frame condition were told that they would learn to become a leader. Specifically, participants were informed:

Being a leader is essential for your career development. In today's business world, leaders need to use the skills, talents, and resources of different individuals working under them to maximize their outcomes. Our program is designed to help you become a leader who makes effective decisions, influences and motivates others, manages diverse teams, and drives organizational change. The central goal of our program is to make you a great leader!

Then, participants in both conditions were asked six questions about their perceptions of the course difficulty: perceived difficulty, perceived level of challenge, the level of effort it would take, the amount of time it would take, how hard it would be, and how many obstacles they would encounter to finish the course. Participants responded on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*. We averaged participants' responses to these six items to capture the overall perceived difficulty of the course (Control condition:  $\alpha = .91$ ; Identity condition:  $\alpha = .91$ ).

## Results

A *t* test confirmed that participants perceived the leadership course as significantly more difficult in the identity frame condition,  $M = 5.03$ , 95% CI [4.78, 5.28],  $SD = .99$ , than those in the control condition,  $M = 4.58$ , 95% CI [4.32, 4.83],  $SD = .97$ ,  $t(118) = 2.51$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $d = .46$ .

## Discussion

Study 1 supported Hypothesis 1 by showing that working adults found a leadership course with an identity frame as more difficult than the same course without making the leader identity salient. We found this difference despite the fact that the content of the two frames was purposefully made to be identical—we had merely adjusted the frame by substituting a few words.

### Study 2

The goal of Study 2 is to test whether the effect of identity frame goes beyond influencing the perception of a leadership course and can also influence potential students' interest in enrolling in the course. We predict that working adults would be less interested in leadership courses when the leader identity was made salient compared to the control condition (Hypothesis 2).

## Method

**Participants.** A power analysis with  $d = .46$  (from Study 1),  $\alpha = .05$  (two-tailed), indicated that we would need to recruit 151 participants to achieve 80% power. We posted a study for 200 U.S. residents on MTurk. In response, 131 working adults (67 women, 62 men, 2 unreported; mean age 31.57 years) residing in the United States completed the study. Participants were randomly assigned to either the control condition or the identity salience condition.

**Procedure.** Participants were first presented with the leadership course description used in Study 1. In both conditions, participants assessed their intention to sign up for the course on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely* on three items:

“How likely would you be to sign up for this course?”; “How likely would you be to register for the course even if you were busy?”; and “How likely would you be to register for this course if you could afford it and had the time?” We averaged responses to these three items to capture the overall interest level (Control condition:  $\alpha = .90$ ; Identity condition:  $\alpha = .91$ ).

## Results

A *t* test confirmed that participants were significantly less interested in signing up for the leadership course when the leader identity was made salient,  $M = 3.71$ , 95% CI [3.32, 4.10],  $SD = 1.62$  than those in the control condition,  $M = 4.29$ , 95% CI [3.89, 4.69],  $SD = 1.57$ ,  $t(129) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .041$ ,  $d = .36$ .

## Discussion

Study 2 supported Hypothesis 2 by showing that presenting a leadership course in terms of an identity frame that focuses on becoming a leader reduces working adults' interest in pursuing the course compared to presenting the same course without highlighting the leader identity. Thus, not only do people find leadership courses with an identity frame more difficult, they are also less interested in pursuing such learning opportunities.

### Study 3

The goal of Study 3 was to extend the findings of Studies 1 and 2. First, Studies 1 and 2 suffer from a possible confound because the final sentence in the identity condition stated, “The central goal of our program is to make you a great leader!” whereas the corresponding sentence in the control condition stated, “The central goal of our program is to improve your leadership skills!” Becoming a “great leader” is likely a more difficult goal to attain than “improving your leadership skills,” and thus might pose a confound. In the current study, we eliminated this potential confound introduced by deleting the final sentence of the course descriptions. Second, we added two manipulation checks: one testing whether compared to the control condition, the identity condition did indeed make participants feel as if the course would give them a leader identity; and another testing whether both conditions were similarly effective in communicating to participants that they would gain leadership skills, which would be required of any leadership education course. Third, we tested whether both conditions were similarly vague/clear in their description. Finally, we tested whether there would be an indirect effect of the leader identity framing on interest in the course through perceived course difficulty.

## Method

**Participants.** A power analysis with  $d = .41$  (the average effect size from Studies 1 and 2),  $\alpha = .05$  (two-tailed), indicated that we would need to recruit 190 participants to achieve 80% power. To ensure sufficient valid participants, we posted a study for 400 U.S. residents on MTurk. In response, 280 working adults (148 women, 130 men, 1 gender fluid, 1 unreported; mean age 37.27 years) residing in the United States completed the study. Participants were randomly assigned to either the control condition or the identity salience condition.

**Procedure.** Participants were presented with the course descriptions used in Study 1 but with the final sentence eliminated. Thereafter, participants in both conditions were asked the six questions about their perceptions of the course difficulty used in Study 1. We averaged participants' responses to these six items to capture the overall perceived difficulty of the course (Control condition:  $\alpha = .90$ ; Identity condition:  $\alpha = .90$ ). Participants also indicated their interest in signing up for the course on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely* on three items: "How interested would you be in signing up for this course?", "How likely would you be to sign up for this course?", and "How excited would you be about enrolling in this course?". We averaged responses to these three items to capture the overall interest level (Control condition:  $\alpha = .95$ ; Identity condition:  $\alpha = .97$ ).

We then administered two manipulation check items: "The goal of this course is to help students identify themselves as a leader" and "The goal of this course is to improve students' leadership skills." Participants responded to these items on a 7-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Finally, we also measured how clear/vague the course description was using three items: "How clear is the course description?", "How vague is the course description" (reverse-coded), "How well do you understand the course description?" Participants responded to these items on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*. We averaged participants' responses to these three items to capture how clear they found the course descriptions (Control condition:  $\alpha = .85$ ; Identity condition:  $\alpha = .77$ ).

## Results

**Manipulation checks.** A *t* test confirmed that participants in the identity condition were significantly more likely to perceive that the leadership course's aim was to help them have a leader identity,  $M = 5.13$ , 95% CI [4.90, 5.36],  $SD = 1.35$ , as compared to those in the control condition,  $M = 4.73$ , 95% CI [4.50, 4.96],  $SD = 1.39$ ,  $t(277) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .015$ ,  $d = .29$ . As expected, participants in both conditions agreed that the course would help them gain leadership skills,  $M_{identity} = 6.19$ , 95% CI [6.04, 6.34],  $SD = 0.91$ ,  $M_{control} = 6.25$ , 95% CI [6.08, 6.42],  $SD = 1.04$ ,  $t(277) = 0.51$ ,  $p = .61$ ,  $d = .061$ . Importantly, participants in both conditions found the course description equally clear,  $M_{identity} = 4.88$ , 95% CI [4.68, 5.08],  $SD = 1.20$ ,  $M_{control} = 4.98$ , 95% CI [4.78, 5.17],  $SD = 1.19$ ,  $t(278) = 0.67$ ,  $p = .51$ ,  $d = .080$ .

**Dependent measures.** A *t* test replicated Study 1's finding that participants perceived the leadership course significantly more difficult in the leader identity condition,  $M = 5.10$ , 95% CI [4.95, 5.26],  $SD = 0.95$ , than in the control condition,  $M = 4.52$ , 95% CI [4.36, 4.68],  $SD = 0.96$ ,  $t(278) = 5.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .61$ . Participants' interest in signing up for the leadership course was similar across the leader identity condition,  $M = 3.63$ , 95% CI [3.32, 3.94],  $SD = 1.86$ , and the control condition,  $M = 3.74$ , 95% CI [3.46, 4.02],  $SD = 1.70$ ,  $t(278) = 0.52$ ,  $p = .60$ ,  $d = .063$ . We surmise that this might have occurred because the course difficulty measure came in between the experimental manipulation and the interest measure, and thus could have disrupted the direct effect of the experimental manipulation on interest. We next tested whether there is an indirect effect of perceptions of the course difficulty on interest. We used Preacher and Hayes' (2004) PROCESS model for this analysis. A bootstrap analysis with 5,000 iterations indi-

cated that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect (standardized indirect effect = .15) excluded zero, [.020, .32]. Thus, we found that there is a significant indirect effect of the leader identity condition on lower interest in signing up for the course through greater perceived course difficulty.

## Discussion

Study 3 showed further support for Hypotheses 1 and 2, replicating the findings found in Studies 1 and 2, even after removing the final statement of the course description, which was a possible confound. Furthermore, Study 3 showed that the participants in the identity condition did indeed believe that the goal of the leadership course was to help them develop a leader identity, significantly more than those in the control condition. Both groups of participants were equally likely to believe that the leadership course is effective in teaching them leadership skills and considered the course descriptions as equally clear. Lastly, we showed that there was a significant indirect effect of the identity framing on participants' interest in the leadership course through perceived course difficulty.

## Study 4

Going beyond perceptions of and interest in leadership courses, Study 4 tested whether an identity frame of leadership educational materials would impact how well students learn new information about leadership. Our hypothesis was that students learning leadership materials with an identity frame would show poorer performance than those in the control condition (Hypothesis 3). Another goal of Study 4 was to test whether the negative effects of an identity frame on students' performance can be counteracted by a growth belief of leadership ability (Hypothesis 4). In addition to the identity salience manipulation, we also manipulated participants' beliefs about whether leadership is fixed or can grow and measured how well they grasped new information about leadership.

## Method

**Participants.** We recruited 90 students (51 women, 39 men; mean age 21.26 years) from the general undergraduate population of a large university in Singapore to participate in the lab study before the end of the semester. Participants were randomly assigned to one cell of a 2 (belief: fixed vs. growth)  $\times$  2 (identity frame: salience vs. control) design. We conducted the study in English, given that English is the primary language of instruction in all schools and colleges in Singapore.

**Procedure.** To manipulate participants' beliefs about leadership ability, we gave them a printed copy of an APA Science Observer<sup>®</sup> style article claiming either that leadership ability is fixed ("Leaders tend to be born—leadership ability is fixed"; "Leadership efficacy is difficult to develop") or that leadership ability can be developed ("Leaders tend to be made—leadership ability is changeable"; "Leadership efficacy can be enhanced"). These articles have been used in past research to manipulate people's beliefs about leadership ability (Burnette et al., 2010). To ensure that participants read the article provided, they were asked to underline five sentences that conveyed the main point of the

article. Instructions on the computer requested participants to spend at least 5 minutes on the task. After 5 minutes, a *Continue* button appeared on the screen, allowing participants to proceed when they were ready.

Thereafter, Participants were presented with leadership education material taught in a core organizational behavior MBA course at an international business school. This material consisted of “seven models of leadership,” which referred to different construals of leadership, each accompanied by a quote from a well-known leader. The material is challenging in that it contrasts various nuances about what makes for good leadership (e.g., power, vision, ethics, and courage). In both conditions, participants read the same materials with only one exception: In the leader identity frame condition, we highlighted that leadership is essentially about characteristics of the leader (see Appendix). After participants read the seven models of leadership, they were presented with the names of the seven models and the seven quotes, both in different random orders, and asked to match the two (see Appendix).

At the end of the experiment, participants were administered an 8-item manipulation check for the fixed versus malleable beliefs about leadership ability manipulation (e.g., “The kind of leader someone is is very basic and it can’t be changed very much”;  $\alpha = .92$ ; adapted from Dweck’s (2000) scale on fixed vs. growth beliefs about intelligence). Participants responded on 7-point scales ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

## Results

Three participants who failed to follow the instructions to underline five sentences that conveyed the main point of the fixed or growth belief article were excluded from the analyses. Thus, the valid sample size was 87. The manipulation check confirmed that participants in the fixed-belief condition were more likely to believe that leadership ability cannot be changed than those in the growth-belief condition,  $M_{\text{Fixed}} = 4.17$ ,  $SD = .77$ ,  $M_{\text{Growth}} = 3.37$ ,  $SD = .72$ ,  $t(85) = 5.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 1.08$ . However, participants’ beliefs were not influenced by the leadership framing manipulation,  $M_{\text{Identity}} = 3.79$ ,  $SD = .88$ ,  $M_{\text{Control}} = 3.74$ ,  $SD = .82$ ,  $t(85) = .31$ ,  $p = .76$ , Cohen’s  $d = .07$ .

The distribution of the number of accurately matched quotes had a mode at an end-point of the scale, making it impossible to analyze the data using normal-distribution based models, with or without transformations. Specifically, about half the participants (52%) matched all seven quotes accurately. Thus, the dependent variable was a binary variable indicating whether participants accurately matched all seven quotes about leadership with the seven models about leadership, an objective measure of learning. An examination of the means (see Figure 1) indicated that accuracy was lowest in the fixed-belief condition combined with leadership material with an identity frame,  $M_{\text{Identity/Fixed}} = 29\%$ , but relatively high in the other three conditions,  $M_{\text{Identity/Growth}} = 61\%$ ,  $M_{\text{Control/Fixed}} = 59\%$ ,  $M_{\text{Control/Growth}} = 57\%$ .

Given that we had an a priori hypothesis about the pattern of the means, we ran a logistic regression with accuracy as the outcome variable, and three planned orthogonal contrasts. Contrast 1 tested whether participants who received the control frame and the fixed belief differed from participants who received the control frame and growth belief (1, -1, 0, 0). Contrast 2 tested whether the two groups who received the control frame differed from those who

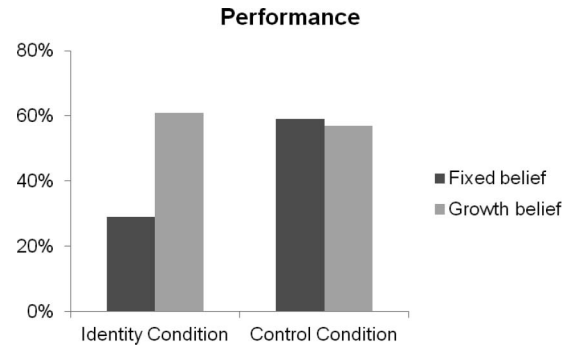


Figure 1. Percentage of participants with perfect performance by experimental condition (Study 4).

received the growth belief and the identity frame (1, 1, -2, 0). Contrast 3 tested whether the three groups who received either the control frame or the growth belief differed from the fourth group that received the fixed belief and the identity frame (1, 1, 1, -3).

Contrast 1 was nonsignificant,  $B = -0.04$ , 95% CI [-.65, .57],  $SE = 0.31$ , *odds ratio* = .96,  $z = 0.14$ ,  $p = .89$ , indicating that participants who were not presented with an identity frame performed equally well irrespective of whether they were exposed to a fixed belief or a growth belief about leadership ability. Contrast 2 was also nonsignificant,  $B = -0.18$ , 95% CI [-.38, .31], *odds ratio* = .96,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $z = 0.90$ ,  $p = .37$ , indicating that participants who were exposed to the growth belief performed equally well irrespective of whether they received an identity frame or a control frame. Finally, Contrast 3 was significant,  $B = 0.33$ , 95% CI [.054, .59], *odds ratio* = 1.38,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $z = 2.36$ ,  $p = .018$  indicating that participants who were in the condition with the identity frame and a fixed belief performed significantly worse than those who were in the other three conditions.

## Discussion

Study 4 extended the findings from Studies 1 to 3 by showing that whereas an identity frame of leadership material leads to worse performance, a growth belief about leadership ability can counteract the negative effects of an identity frame.

### General Discussion

Four studies found that highlighting prospective positive identities is not always motivating. Study 1 found that leadership educational programs that focus on acquiring leader identity were perceived as more difficult than identical programs that did not make the leader identity salient. Study 2 showed that people were less interested in signing up for a leadership course with an identity frame than an identical course without an identity frame. Study 3 replicated the finding of Study 1 with an improved experimental manipulation that eliminated a possible confound, and found an indirect effect of the identity frame on the interest in signing up for the course through perceived course difficulty. Study 4 extended these findings by demonstrating that identity frames not only influence students’ perceptions and interest but also their performance: participants had worse memory for leadership material with an identity frame than material without an identity frame.

Further, Study 4 found that a growth belief of leadership ability could counter the negative effects of an identity frame of leadership material on performance.

### Theoretical and Practical Implications

**Social identity.** The current studies presented an alternative perspective on the power of identity. Our findings identify a new domain in which making identity salient could lead to significant negative consequences, filling in an important gap in the earlier research. In this regard, social identity theory has been a highly influential theoretical perspective across the social and organizational sciences. Research in multiple disciplines has found that identity salience is motivating. When an identity is made salient, people are propelled to display identity-consistent behaviors. For example, cultural psychologists have shown that Chinese Americans became more competitive when their American identity was made salient but became more cooperative when their Chinese identity was made salient (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Wong & Hong, 2005). In the domain of political psychology, activating conservative political identities induced people to choose financial options labeled *conservative*, irrespective of whether the options were actually conservative or not based on common parlance (Morris et al., 2008). Research in consumer behavior has shown that people are more likely to choose healthy food if their “healthy eater” identity was made salient (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012).

Our research contributes to the vast literature on identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which has argued that invoking an identity has powerful motivational effects (Bryan et al., 2011, 2013, 2014). We identify a boundary condition in which invoking the possibility of acquiring a positive identity can have demotivating effects, reducing people’s interest and performance in the domain. Our findings suggest that the power of highlighting prospective identities hinges on the ease with which the new identity can be acquired. For simple identities that are relatively easy to acquire, such as being a helper or being a voter, invoking identities motivates people to engage in identity-congruent behavior. However, for more complex identities that tend to be more common in organizational contexts, such as being a leader, invoking identities might make the task appear more difficult and can reduce people’s interest and performance. The present research thus provides a more nuanced understanding of the power of identity in motivating behavior.

The present research further contributes to the research on the consequences of making identities salient. For example, early work on the minimum group paradigm identified intergroup stereotyping, discrimination, and conflict as one of the key consequences of making social identity salient (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Some research has documented that when people’s identities are made salient, they are more likely to engage in identity-congruent behavior even if the behaviors go against their self-interest (e.g., eating unhealthy food; Oyserman et al., 2007). The present research shows that not only identities that one possesses but even identities that one aspires to have can have demotivational effects if the aspired identities appear too difficult to achieve. The findings highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of identity, especially in the leadership education process.

**Motivation and performance.** Past research on motivation within the context of leadership education has examined numerous factors that influence students’ motivation and performance, such as intervention type, content focus, outcome category, and research design (Collins & Holton, 2004). The current research contributes to this literature by documenting that students’ interest and performance on leadership education material are highly susceptible to minor variations in framing. Although extensive research has investigated the influence of framing on managerial decisions, including risky decision making (Sitkin & Weingart, 1995), compensation setting (Larrazza-Kintana, Gomez-Mejia, & Wiseman, 2011), and negotiations (Neale & Bazerman, 1985), the present investigation is the first to examine the implications of framing on performance and motivation in the leadership education context. We add to this literature by documenting that students’ performance in leadership educational programs is influenced by the subtle manner in which such programs are framed. Our findings suggest that framing the same leadership educational programs and materials by making the leader identity salient or not would affect students’ motivation and performance.

**Fixed versus growth beliefs.** The current paper contributes to the literature on fixed versus growth theories about leadership. It is worth noting that although lay theories can be construed as individual differences, they are distinct from personality traits (Dweck, 1996). Lay theories are relatively stable but not fixed (Dweck, 2006). Unlike general dispositions, such as traits or social skills, lay theories are domain-specific. These theories can guide everyday actions in persistent ways until a new way of thinking replaces old theories. Thus, unlike personality traits, lay theories can be taught or learned using relatively simple interventions, such as a short magazine article on scientific research supporting or refuting the malleability of an attribute (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007), which makes it particularly relevant in the research of leadership education.

The current research identifies an important role of lay theories in the leadership domain. Thus far, research on fixed versus growth theories about leadership has focused on testing the influence of a growth belief on people’s attitudes and self-efficacy in the domain of leadership (Burnette et al., 2010; Hoyt et al., 2012). We documented that fixed-growth beliefs about leadership ability have broader consequences that extend to the domain of motivation and performance. We found that a growth belief can compensate for the negative impact of making the leader identity salient in the context of leadership education. What is limiting in the identity frame is the notion that leadership development is about people’s characters or identities, which are relatively more stable. The negative impact of the leader identity, however, can be eliminated once people are equipped with a growth belief about leadership ability—that leadership is a set of behaviors, knowledge, and skills that can be developed. Practically speaking, a leadership program might aim to convey a growth belief not only because it is particularly beneficial in contexts suffused with identity frames but also because it motivates better performance in challenging learning environments (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

### Limitations and Future Directions

**Methodology.** The present research used a series of experiments to provide causal evidence in support of each hypothesis

without any common method bias. Future research might consider testing multiple outcomes in a single study, but such a strategy runs the risk of suffering from common method bias and cross-contamination across different dependent measures. Future research can also attempt to replicate the core findings from the current research using field experiments. For example, in large business schools in which multiple sections of the same course on leadership are taught, sections can be randomly assigned to either an identity frame condition or a control condition, and test whether students in sections where leader identity is made salient perform worse on exams and other assessments than those in the control condition. Future research can also manipulate the mission statements and other messages on business school websites to test whether reducing the salience of identity frame might increase the number of applications that the school receives.

**Subject population.** The current studies used a combination of adult workers in the United States as well as undergraduate students to test the hypotheses, using both online surveys and lab studies. Future research can test whether the findings hold with more advanced students, such as MBA and EMBA participants, as well as samples of adults who are actively interested in seeking leadership education opportunities. It is possible that people who are not yet engaged in leadership education might find the idea of being a leader particularly difficult, but people who already have experience in the domain of leadership might not experience the negative effects of an identity frame. Further, it is possible that people who already have a leader identity, or foresee themselves as becoming leader in the future might actually be motivated rather than demotivated by the identity frame, a question that future research can examine. Although we did not investigate whether different subgroups would be more or less affected by identity frames, it is possible that underrepresented groups (e.g., women, racial minorities, individuals from lower socioeconomic status), who might already perceive attaining leadership roles as a difficult task (Acker, 2006; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Ridgeway, 2001) might be particularly sensitive to the framing manipulation. If so, then programs wishing to increase their intake and performance of these underrepresented groups should be particularly careful of how to position the leader identity in their programs.

**Generalizability of leadership frames.** We used two different types of framing manipulations in this research—framing the description of leadership courses and framing the content of leadership course material. Future research can investigate whether manipulating other important factors such as slogans, mission statements, and other messages on business school and leadership education program websites; course titles and course descriptions; and messages used by corporations to attract candidates, would have similar effects. Such work would help identify the range and the boundaries of the effects of making the leader identity salient.

In addition, leadership development comes in many forms. For example, past research has documented a wide range of experiences relevant to leadership, including on-the-job assignments (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), coaching and mentoring programs (Ting & Scisco, 2006), as well as formal training programs (Burke & Day, 1986). Future research can examine the influence of identity frames in both formal and informal training programs, through the framing of not only the educational materials but also feedback and coaching sessions.

**Generalizability of outcome measures.** The present studies focused on people's interest and performance in leadership education as the key outcome. Future research can investigate whether the effect of the framing manipulation on interest generalizes to behavior, such as people's willingness to sign up for a paid leadership education program, and whether the effect of the framing manipulation on interest generalizes to long-run performance, such as that in a semester-long course.

**Generalization to other identities.** The present research was focused on the leader identity given its relevance to business. However, the underlying idea applies to any identity that cannot be acquired by executing a known set of behaviors. For example, does highlighting the good parent identity, the teacher identity, or the scientist identity reduce people's interest in becoming good parents/teachers/scientists compared to highlighting parenting skills, teaching skills, and scientific skills? Future research can examine whether the current findings generalize to other domains in which acquiring new identities is not straightforward.

## Conclusion

Identities are powerful. Invoking desired identities motivates behavior. The current research shows for the first time that invoking desired identities can sometimes be overpowering and demotivating if the identity is perceived to be difficult to acquire. Thus, identity is a double-edged sword that can either motivate or demotivate behavior depending on how easily it can be acquired.

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## Appendix

### Leadership Development Materials Used in Study 4

In this task, we will present you with “Seven Models of How to be a Leader”.

Please read each model carefully because you will be asked questions about it later on.

#### Seven Models of How to Be a Leader [Identity Framing Condition]

- 1. Personal.** Leadership is all about the leader. What are their strengths and weaknesses?

“Great leaders have something in them which inspires a whole people and makes them do great deeds.” – Jawaharlal Nehru

- 2. Situational.** Good leaders are good at identifying situations. What situations play to your strengths? What opportunities are “easy” for you to shine?

“I skate to where I think the puck will be.” – Wayne Gretzky

- 3. Organizational/Hierarchical.** People at the top of any organization have more opportunities to become leaders. Potential leaders know how to make it to the top. Why do some make it to the top and others do not?

“One only gets to the top rung on the ladder by steadily climbing up one at a time, and suddenly all sorts of powers, all sorts of abilities which you thought never belonged to you—suddenly become within your own possibility and you think, “Well, I’ll have a go, too.” – Margaret Thatcher

- 4. Power.** Leaders get things done, and that requires acquiring and mastering the levers of power. Who has the power to make things happen? Who has more power than their official position suggests?

“Leaders have the ability to get men to do what they don’t like to do and like it.” – Harry S. Truman

- 5. Vision.** Leaders need to motivate others by having a clear idea of where they want to take their group.

“If you want to move people, it has to be toward a vision that’s positive for them, that taps important values, that gets them something they desire, and it has to be presented in a compelling way they feel inspired to follow.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

- 6. Ethical.** Good leaders do what is “right” or “good” for the group. Who embodies the values of the group? Who has the best interests of the group at heart?

(Appendix continues)

“Leaders . . . arise, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers.” – James MacGregor Burns

7. **Courage.** Authentic leaders have the courage to be yourself, the willingness to put yourself at risk when you are needed by your group, and the ability to harness your position and power in order to take your group to a better place.

“Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because it is the quality that guarantees all others.” – Winston Churchill

### Seven Models of How to Be a Leader [Control Condition]

1. **Personal.** Leadership is all about the leader’s skills. What are their strengths and weaknesses?

“Great leaders have skills that inspire a whole people and make them do great deeds.” – Jawaharlal Nehru

2. **Situational.** Leadership success depends on the situation. What situations play to your strengths? What opportunities are “easy” for you to shine?

“I skate to where I think the puck will be.” – Wayne Gretzky

3. **Organizational/Hierarchical.** People at the top of any organization have more opportunities to display leadership. Who makes it to the top? Why do some make it to the top and others do not?

“One only gets to the top rung on the ladder by steadily climbing up one at a time, and suddenly all sorts of powers, all sorts of abilities which you thought never belonged to you—suddenly become within your own possibility and you think, “Well, I’ll have a go, too.” – Margaret Thatcher

4. **Power.** Leadership skills mean that you get things done, and that requires acquiring and mastering the levers of power. Who has the power to make things happen? Who has more power than their official position suggests?

“Leadership is the skill to get men to do what they don’t like to do and like it.” – Harry S. Truman

5. **Vision.** Leadership skills involve motivating others by having a clear idea of where they want to take their group.

“If you want to move people, it has to be toward a vision that’s positive for them, that taps important values, that gets them something they desire, and it has to be presented in a compelling way they feel inspired to follow.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

6. **Ethical.** Leadership is about doing what is “right” or “good” for the group. Who embodies the values of the group? Who has the best interests of the group at heart?

“Leaders . . . arise, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers.” – James MacGregor Burns

7. **Courage.** Authentic leadership is about having the courage to be yourself, the willingness to put yourself at risk when you are needed by your group, and the ability to harness your position and power in order to take your group to a better place.

“Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because it is the quality that guarantees all others.” – Winston Churchill

[Dependent Measure]

[Identity Framing Condition]

In the following table, the left-hand column lists the title of the seven frames; the right-hand column lists the seven quotations from famous leaders.

Based on what each quotation exemplifies, please drag each quotation into the relevant frame of how to be a leader.

[Control Condition]

In the following table, the left-hand column lists the title of the seven frames; the right-hand column lists the seven quotations from famous people who have good leadership.

Based on what each quotation exemplifies, please drag each quotation into the relevant frame of leadership.

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