FORMATION OF A POSITIVE SOCIAL IDENTITY: HOW SIGNIFICANT ARE ATTITUDES, SUBJECTIVE NORMS AND PERCEIVED SIMILARITY CONCERNING GROUP IDENTIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the hypothesis that an individual who becomes part of a well-evaluated new social group forms a positive social identity due to psychological mechanisms such as attitudes towards group membership, subjective norms, and perceived similarities with the group. The results of the study support these hypotheses. A factor analysis confirmed three factors of the social identity scale explaining 81.02% of the variance. The correlation between the social identity scale used in the current research and existing scales confirms the reliability of the present research instruments.

INTRODUCTION

Social identity can be defined as an individual's knowledge of belonging to certain social groups (e.g. family, social class, team etc.) and the consequent evaluation of the significance of that group membership (Tajfel, 1979). A person's social identity indicates who he/she is in terms of the groups to which the individual belongs.

A positive or negative social identity might be formed when comparing internal group characteristics with external groups. A positive social identity is formed when our group is perceived more positively than other relevant external groups. Individuals try different strategies to form a positive social identity and escape from a negative one (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). When people fail to achieve a positive social identity, they try to distance themselves from a low status and negatively evaluated group — psychologically (self or new adjustment) or physically (social mobility, leaving the group) thereby protecting and enhancing their social identity (e.g., Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001; Mummendey et al., 1999).

Social Identity Theory does not directly refer to the concepts of attitudes, perceived similarity, or subjective norms, but that people use attitudes and evaluation of similarity-difference in the categorization process. Moreover, the beliefs and values of other important

people influence individuals when they evaluate social groups positively and negatively; the choice of group affiliation directly contributes to the formation of social identity.

Theoretical Framework

According to Tajfel, social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept that derives from (...) his knowledge of (...) membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63).

The following four elements contribute to the process of the formation of social identity:

- Categorization: process when we group people into different categories
- Identification: we belong to particular groups, which serve to strengthen our self-esteem.
- Comparison: we compare our groups with other groups and evaluate the group we belong to more favorably.
- Psychological Distinctiveness: we desire our identity to be distinct from other groups and be positively compared with other groups.

We divide the world into an "us" and "them" based on a process of social categorization. The consequence of self-categorization is highlighting the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, simultaneously highlighting perceived differences between the self and out-group members on the other hand. In the stage of social identification, we adopt the group's identity to which we have given our loyalty and sense of belonging. A person's self-esteem will become bound up with group membership. We then tend to compare that group with other groups in the last stage (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Ellemers & Rijswijk, 1997). The result of the social comparison process is enhanced outcomes for the self. A person's self-esteem is enhanced by evaluating the in-group positively and the out-group negatively.

Research on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) has been largely focused on the cognitive and motivational factors based on which intergroup discrimination takes place. However, the role of the individual's perceived similarity to the positively evaluated group has been less central. Similarity can be considered as a crucial dimension of cognitive processing. Humans unconsciously compare themselves to the social profile of others and evaluate the extent of similarity between themselves and the objects of their comparison (Selfhout, Denissen, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Tidwell, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2013). Based on a perceived similarity, people often develop positive attitudes and behaviors toward others (e.g., Riolo, Cohen, & Axelrod, 2001; Wilson, DeRue, Matta, Howe, & Conlon, 2016).

In summary, the perceived similarity is a significant variable leading to relevant outcomes on the individual and group levels. However, limited studies show the role of similarity as indicative of positive social identity. This research considers perceived similarity as a general perception of a person belonging to a specific social group.

The Theory of Social Identity does not directly refer to the concept of attitude. Attitude is an intrapersonal construct that determines a person's favorable or unfavorable response to specific social objects and/ or events. According to the SIT, individuals' attitudes towards members of the internal and external groups are related to their desire to belong to specific

groups that are relatively superior to enhance their self-esteem (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001). Many studies show (Billig, & Bundy, 1971, Hogg & Abrams, 1988) that as a result of these processes, individuals perceive in-group members as similar to themselves, express favoritism in attitudes and behaviors and express their desire to stay as a group member. The present study focuses on attitudes' effect on social identity and group identification processes.

Social identity is a social process where significant others perform important functions. In dealing with significant others, we recognize similarities and differences, and in the process, we create social identities. Research shows a correlation between group norms and group members' representation of such norms (Hogg., Reid, 2006). Individuals cognitively represent social categories as prototypes and attributes (e.g., attitudes and behaviors) that distinguish one group from others. People in one group in the same context share their prototype. Thus, group prototypes are group norms (Turner, 1991). The more a person believes that membership in a particular social group is acceptable and important for the significant others, the stronger the consequent identification with the social group formed, allowing for a positive social identity to coalesce.

Research Hypothesis
This study explores the assumption that when a person becomes a member of a positively evaluated group, psychological mechanisms such as attitudes of a person towards membership within the new reference group, the person's subjective norms of group membership and any perceived similarities with the same group lead to strong identification with the social group and the formation of positive social identity. It is hypothesized that the positive social identity is determined by a person's attitude toward the membership of the reference group, social norms and perceived similarity with the same group.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure
All participants in the study were psychology students of two state universities in Tbilisi (Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University) with almost a similar rating and size, specifically freshmen, who comprised the whole reference group. The total sample (n=270) consisted of first-year psychology faculty students. A convenience sample was used to recruit the participants from the target universities. The sample consisted of 83% female and 17% male participants in the study ranging in age from 18 -22 years old (M = 19.6, SD=.96).

The research was conducted following ethical norms in a self-administered form. All respondents gave "informed" consent to participate in the research. They could stop participating in the study at any stage of the research.

Research instrument
Participants completed a questionnaire consisting of the scales of social identity, attitudes (the Cronbach's a-value for 5 items was .84), subjective norms (the Cronbach's a-value for these 3 items was .850) and perceived similarities (the Cronbach's a-value for these 5 items

was .841). The first section was about demographic data, gender, age, ethnicity and marital status (see appendix A).

Data Analysis
SPSS 26 was used to perform quantitative data analysis; descriptive statistics were used as part of the data analysis. Correlational analysis was applied when relevant, such as for continuous variables to assess bivariate associations. Regression analysis was carried out to test the research hypothesis.

RESULTS
The average age was 19.6 (*SD*=.90) (minimum -18 and maximum – 23). The majority of survey respondents were females (93%), while 7 % were males. All demographic data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Data

Variables	Percentage
Sex	
Female	93
Male	7
Ethnicity	
Georgian	89.1
Azeri	4.8
Armenian	6.1
Age groups	
18-19 years	60.4
20-23 Years	39.6
Marital status	
Single	85
Married	14
Divorce	1

Research results showed that 81.9% of students indicated that studying psychology was a personal choice and 71.5% chose Tbilisi State University based on individual preference. Others took into account suggestions and opinions of others in the selection of faculty and the university, namely- friends and family members. 94.8% of the respondents do not want to leave the faculty.

Social Identity
As indicated above, respondents were asked to evaluate themselves, and the first-year psychology students on a 5-point a 10 bipolar scale. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Evaluation of the group of first-year psychology students and themselves

		Psychology students	Respondent	*T* criteria
1.	Lazy - Hardworking	3.5	3.5	0.57
2.	Intellectually average – Intelligent	3.8	3.7	1.54
3.	Undereducated – Educated	3.9	3.8	1.39
4.	Unmotivated - Motivated	3.9	3.3	0.87
5.	Unsuccessful – Successful	3.6	3.4	2.13
6.	Unrealized -Fulfilled	3. 5	3.3	4.10*
7.	Insecure - Confident	3.4	3.3	2.13
8.	Dissatisfied – Satisfied	3.0	3.2	-3.17*
9.	Unstable – Stable	3.3	3.4	-0.93
10.	Regressive – Progressive	3.9	3.8	2.54*

* is significant at .05 level

As the table shows, participants think that the first-year psychology student body, in general, are more successful, realized, confident, and progressive then they are as individuals, but less satisfied and less stable. The difference between the means of the group of others (*M* =3.58) and themselves (*M* =3.47) on a 10-point scale is not significant (*t*=1.66; *df*=269; *p*>.05); Thus, the analysis shows that participants strongly identify themselves with first-year psychology students. The average of the four scales designed according to the measure of Smith and others is 3.30 (*SD*=1.14).

Attitudes toward being a Student at the Psychology Faculty
In measuring the attitude of participants towards being a first-year psychology faculty student, the average of three scaled value statements was calculated.
1. Unimportant - Important
2. Uninteresting - Interesting
3. Non-prestigious – Interesting
4. Indication of no success - Indication of success
5. Non-perspective - Perspective.
Participants display positive attitudes towards being a psychology faculty student, with an average of 4.5 on a 5-point scale.

Subjective Norms
The participants also were asked to evaluate their perception about the attitudes of their significant others towards being a psychology faculty student. Data analysis shows that the subjective norm is positive – with a mean = 4.47 (*SD*=0.54; minimum 1, maximum 5).

Perceived Similarity
As table 3 shows, the average score on a 5-point scale is 3.6 (*SD*=.78), confirming that the participants perceive themselves as individuals to be quite similar to the entire student body

of first-year psychology faculty students, especially in terms of education (M=3.72; SD=.88) and in general (M=3.68; SD=1.05).

Table 3
Perceived Similarity

	M	*SD*
1. Similarity in general	3.68	1.05
2. Similarity in education	3.72	0.88
3. Similarity in socioeconomic status	3.55	0.97
4. Similarity in interests	3.52	1.02
5. Similarity in values	3.55	0.99
6. Total	3.60	0.78

Correlation and Regression Analysis
A correlation analysis was run among 3 measures of social identity: attitudes, subjective norms, perceived similarity and social identity. The highest correlation was between social identity and perceived similarity (.79), followed by Subjective norms (.74) and attitudes (.63) (see Appendix B). The correlation between the social identity scale measured as a function of behavioral attitudes, perceived similarity, and subjective norms with the measure of Weimeich's method is .631 (p<.05) and with the measure designed according to Smith et al. is .778 (p<.05).

Linear multiple regression analysis was run with the following variables: direct measure of social identity as a dependent variable, and attitudes, subjective norms and perceived similarity as independent variables. We also added gender and ethnicity variables to the independent variables, to verify that gender, ethnicity and social identities do not overlap. Based on the regressive analyses gender is not a function of the social identity construct.

The analysis shows that R=.986, *R square* = .973, *F*=1131.972, p<.05 and there is a causal relationship between the independent variable and three dependent variables (see Appendix B); the social identity is determined by a person's attitude toward the membership of the reference group, social norms and perceived similarity with the same group; thus the research hypothesis was supported by the statistical analysis. Gender was not a factor for the social identity variable.

The EFA was conducted with a sample of students (n = 270). In this study, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of Sphericity were used to assess the factorability of the data. High Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test was .718 and Bartlett's Sphericity 87.027 (p < .001). Orthogonal rotation with varimax was used resulting in a factorial structure composed of 3 factors that accounted for 81.02% of the total variance (see Appendix B)

DISCUSSION

This research explores the assumption that when a person becomes a member of a well-evaluated new group, psychological mechanisms such as personal attitudes towards group membership, subjective norms of group membership and perceived similarities with the same group lead to formation of a positive social identity.

Social Identity Theory does not directly refer to the concepts of attitudes, though perceived similarity, or subjective norms, people use attitudes and evaluation of similarity-difference in the categorization process. In addition, the beliefs and values of significant others do influence individuals when it comes to positive and negative evaluations of social groups, and the choice of group affiliation contributes directly to social identity formation.

According to the Social Identity Theory individuals' attitudes towards internal and external group members stem from their desire to belong to relatively superior groups as a means of empowerment. According to Wilder, an individual's attitude towards a particular group is due to the natural categorization processes. Though, there might be a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior as people do not always behave in ways that reflect their underlying attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fazio & Olson, 2003). The study of Terry and his colleagues is particularly important to our study, which claims that people are more likely to express their attitudes in behavior if they strongly identify with a group for which that attitude is normative (e.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996, 2001). Thus attitudes and behavior are likely to be highly consistent so long as social identity is salient.

As social identity is a group-based identity, the beliefs of important others about whether they approve or disapprove of the group membership have an influence on social identity formation. At the group level, the support received from significant others and the feeling that it is possible to establish significant relationships with group members (e.g., Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001) positively affect identity formation. Significant others and their support can play an important role in integrating with the social group. In the context of social identity development, the support provided by significant others such as family members, friends, teachers, and colleagues is crucial (e.g., Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992; Ruble et al., 2004).

The norms of those groups that are important to the individual define behavior. Social Norms contain descriptive and instructional elements (Cialdini et al., 1991). The current research focused on both norms that were consistent with each other and affected social identity. Researchers proposed that behavior is more likely to occur when the descriptive and injunctive norms align, which was demonstrated in the health behavior domain (Gockeritz et al., 2010).

Perceived similarity is an essential factor in categorization, identification, and comparison. When the groups are positively evaluated, perceived similarity with their members and goals should increase our desire to have a strong identity with the group to be distinct from other groups and be positively compared with other groups. Perceived similarity with the group

further increases the attraction of joining and should increase the person's desire for identification with the social group.

Other studies have shown (Hogg & Reid, 2006) that individuals cognitively represent group norms as prototypes of a category-defining group that reflect similarities and differences between groups. In the process of social categorization, we attribute to ourselves and others the internal or external group attributes of the corresponding prototype. It is how people internalize group norms as prototypes that guide their attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors; They behave according to the group's norms. In this sense, group prototypes are group norms (Turner, 1991). It should be noted that norms are not fixed properties of social groups; but instead, they are fluid representations and context-dependent, reflecting the group with other groups. Group norms are developed, maintained, and changed through communication about the group prototypes and the context of the contextualization process (Hogg & Reid, 2006).

The correlation between the social identity measured as a function of behavioral attitudes, perceived similarity and subjective norms with the measure of Weimeich's method is lower but significant than the measure designed according to Smith et al. The difference in correlation might be explained by the fact that the scale utilized according to the Weimeich's, approach (1980), seems to assess how positively or negatively people feel about a newly acquired social group membership. The scale designed according to Smith et al. approach examines more "strength" of identity that is closer to the concept utilized in the current research.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, the current research hypothesis was approved - positive social identity is determined by a person's attitude towards the membership of the reference group, perceived similarity with the same group, and social norms that can be considered as a novelty of this research.

The analysis shows that participants have positive attitudes towards being psychology students. Participants perceive themselves as quite similar as individuals to the whole group of first-year psychology students. Their subjective norm is positive, and students are motivated to consider what significant others think they should do. Most of them have strong student identities and are not motivated to leave the reference group. A factor analysis confirmed a factorial structure composed of 3 factors that accounted for 81.02% of the total variance.

Though most participants were females and Georgians, the analysis showed gender and ethnicity were not social identity factors. The correlation between the social identity scale measured as a function of behavioral attitudes, perceived similarity and subjective norms with the measures of Weimeich's and Smith et al. methods is positive and significant, showing the reliability of the current research instruments.

Limitations of this Study

An experimental study was not used to verify the causal relationships between independent and dependent variables. Findings from such an experimental study can further clarify the relationship between the variables and may help elucidate their practical implications. More comprehensive

research is needed to develop reliable and valid social identity measurements based on the above mentioned factors.

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Appendix A: Research Instruments

Social identity Scale

The following section measured social identity using the Weimech's tool and questions designed according to identification model developed by Smith et al (2009).

According to Weimech's tool ten constructs were developed based on the semi-structured interviews with 30 participants. These were:

1. Lazy - Hard working
2. Intellectually average – Intelligent
3. Undereducated – Educated
4. Unmotivated - Motivated
5. Unsuccessful – Successful
6. Unrealized – Fulfilled
7. Insecure - Confident
8. Dissatisfied – Satisfied
9. Unstable – Stable
10. Regressive – Progressive

Each pair of values was measured on a 5-point scale. Participants were asked to evaluate first the group of first-year psychology faculty students according to these scales (*a*=.87) and then themselves (*a*=.90); the variance in the mean data was used to measure social identity. Low score refers to a stronger social identity.

In addition, there were also 4 scales utilized based on the university identification model developed by Smith and others (2009). These scales were 1) "I am proud to think of myself as students at the psychology faculty" 2) "I feel like a member of the psychology faculty" (4) "I often thought about transferring to a different faculty" (reverse scored), and (5)"I regret-ted the decision to come to the psychology faculty". One question was excluded as these items affected total Cronbach's a-value of the scale- "avoided telling people that they at-tended the university. The Cronbach's a-value for these 4 items was .78. The average score of these scales was used to measure social identity.

Attitude Scale

Five pairs were used to measure student attitudes towards being a psychology student.

Being a first-year psychology student for me is:

1. Unimportant - Important
2. Uninteresting - Interesting
3. Non-prestigious –prestigious
4. Indication of no success   - Indication of success
5. Non-perspective - Perspective.

The average score of these 5 scales was used as a measure of attitudes.

Subjective norms Scale
The following statement was measured on a 5-point scale for measuring the subjective norm, where 1 was not agree at all and 5 fully agree.
1. It is acceptable for people significant for to me to be a psychology student
2. People important to me supported me being a psychology student
3. People who are important to me appreciate the fact that I am a psychology student
   The average score of these 3 scales was used as a measure of subjective norms.

Perceived Similarity scale
Perceived similarity between individual participants and psychology faculty first-year students was measured on five statements on a five-point Likert-type scale, where 1 meant strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree.
The scale is given below:
1. I think I have a lot in common with psychology faculty students of my university
2. I think my level of education is similar to the level of education of psychology faculty students
3. I think my socio-economic status is similar to the socio-economic status of psychology faculty students
4. I think I have similar interests to students of the psychology faculty students
5. I think I have similar values to the psychology faculty students.
   (a=.847)

The average score of these 5 scales was used as a measure of perceived similarity.

Appendix B: correlational and regression analysis

Table 1

The correlational analysis

	M	SD	Attitudes	Subjective norms	Perceived similarity	Social identity
1. Attitudes	4.47	.53				
2. Subjective norms	3.86	.68	.43**			
3. Perceived similarity	.3.60	.78	.28**	.29**		
4. Social identity	.06	.60	.63**	.74**	.79**	

* significant correlation at 0.05 level
** significant correlation at 0.01 level

Table 2

Regression Analysis

Variables	B	Beta	t	Sig
Attitudes towards being a member of a reference group	11.841	.496	23.889	0.000
Subjective norms	15.463	.389	39.724	0.000
Perceived similarity	17.274	.321	53.760	0.000
Gender	0.541	0.006	.522	0.602
Ethnicity	.275	0.006	.448	0.655

Table 3
AFE with rotation in three factors

	1	2	3
Attitudes	.983		
Subjective norms		.968	
Perceived similarity			.967

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