

# Copycatting as a Threat to Public Identity

Stephen Reysen

*Texas A&M University–Commerce*

Mark J. Landau and Nyla R. Branscombe

*University of Kansas*

In 4 studies we examined individuals' reactions when another person intentionally copies their distinctive public identity characteristics. In Study 1, participants reacted with anger and a desire to confront the copycat when many (vs. few) public identity characteristics were copied. Study 2 showed that participants did not react negatively to unintended similarity, or when a third party verified participants' ownership of intentionally copied characteristics. In Study 3, negative reactions to copycatting were elevated when a third party erroneously attributed the copied characteristics to the copycat but were not when imagining another person's characteristics being copied. In Study 4, negative reactions to copycatting were attenuated among participants led to focus on intrinsic, versus publicly observable, characteristics of their identity. The results of the present studies provide initial evidence of the threat to one's public identity posed by copycatting.

Imagine entering the office one morning only to find another coworker dressed very similarly to you. Perhaps you would ask yourself why someone would dress like you, and whether this was an intentional act. How might you feel and react to such a transparent imitation of your public image? Both classic and contemporary self-presentation theorists emphasize people's motivation to maintain a unique public identity (Becker, 1971; Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2003). Research has shown that individuals attempt to manage other people's impressions of their chosen identities by displaying distinctive personality characteristics (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), clothing (James, 1890; Leary, 1995), and hairstyle (Simon, 2004). Existing theory and research also suggests that individuals seek feedback from others regarding their public displays of identity (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; Swann, 1983, 1999), and the feedback received can influence how people feel about themselves (Leary, 1995; Tice &

Wallace, 2003). Because maintaining a unique public identity (i.e., aspects of the self that, from observers' perspective, distinguish the self from other people) requires that other people identify the self with distinctive observable characteristics, we expect that people will be threatened by *copycatting*: when another person intentionally copies one's distinctive, publicly observable characteristics.

How might individuals respond to the threat posed by copycatting? According to Lazarus (1991), people commonly respond with anger when they perceive that others are intentionally trying to undermine a valued aspect of their self-concept. Drawing on this analysis, we hypothesized that, insofar as copycatting is perceived to be an intentional effort to threaten one's unique public identity, people will respond to copycatting with anger and intentions to confront the person seen as responsible for copycatting. Indirect support for this hypothesis comes from research on group impostors. Hornsey and Jetten (2003) found that ingroup members expressed irritation over group imposters because the intentional copying of group-defining characteristics threatens to undermine a valued group identity. We extend this research by examining whether copycatting

---

Correspondence should be sent to Stephen Reysen, Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University–Commerce, P.O. Box 3011, Commerce, TX 75429. E-mail: stephen.reysen@tamuc.edu

elicits anger and confrontational intentions at the personal identity level.

Prior research has suggested that greater similarity to others is associated with greater interpersonal attraction (Bailenson & Yee, 2005; Byrne, 1971; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Jones, 1964). For example, research on the chameleon effect (nonconscious mimicry of an interaction partner) has shown that mimicking increases liking of the imitator (Bailenson & Yee, 2005) and results in perception of a smoother and more harmonious interaction (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). In these cases, however, the degree of mimicry is relatively subtle, making it unlikely that the other individual is perceived as intentionally copying one's own characteristics. Other research has suggested that individuals desire a degree of differentiation from others (Brewer, 1991; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). For example, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) showed that people experience a greater intensity of negative emotions when they are led to believe that they resemble an increasing number of other people, implying that they are not unique. Complimenting past research concerning the desire for uniqueness, we suggest that when many characteristics are similar to another person, one's public identity may be threatened.

In an initial study of copycatting, Reysen, Landau, and Branscombe (2009) manipulated the number of public identity characteristics copied by another person. Participants were asked to imagine that they meet another person who comments that they like the participants' shirt. Participants then read that the other person is later seen with (a) the same shirt; (b) the same shirt and hairstyle; or (c) the same shirt, hairstyle, and observable personality characteristics (i.e., mannerisms and speech pattern) as themselves. The results showed that participants were unconcerned by minor imitation (only the shirt being copied), but when they imagined that the other person copied two or three public identity characteristics (vs. one), they were more likely to perceive the other person as intentionally copying them and consequently reported feeling angrier and more likely to confront the other person. This study provided initial evidence that viewing another person as intentionally copying many (vs. few) public identity characteristics can result in anger and confrontational intentions. However, the study design had important limitations. First, the use of vignettes to induce reactions to copycatting could produce different results from those that would be found in situations where copycatting was actually experienced. Second, the ordering of the public identity characteristics copied was not randomized (e.g., as a result, if personality had been the single characteristic copied, different reactions might have been elicited). In the present series of studies we address the limitations of this initial study, examine whether the reactions to copycatting are moderated by perceptions

of the resembling other's intention to copy, and examine conditions that may exacerbate and attenuate the effect of perceived copycatting on participants' emotional and behavioral responses.

## OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

In Study 1, we conceptually replicate Reysen et al.'s (2009) study in a realistic laboratory setting and examine participants' reactions to copycatting. Following Lazarus (1991), we hypothesize that the perception that another person is intentionally copying many (vs. few) self-aspects will result in the perception that one's public identity is harmed, greater experience of anger, and a desire to confront the copier.

In the remaining studies, we employ three different strategies to test whether copycatting threatens one's public identity. First, we tested whether negative reactions to copycatting are moderated by how participants imagine that third parties will interpret the copycatting. In Study 2, we had some participants imagine that a third party validated their ownership of the copied characteristics. Because this third-party interpretation suggests that the copycat was not effective at disrupting other people's recognition of one's unique public identity, we predicted that it would eliminate negative reactions to copycatting. Study 3 examined the converse of this process by leading some participants to imagine that a third party erroneously attributed ownership of the copied characteristics to the copycat. Because this third-party interpretation suggests that the copycat successfully threatened one's distinctive public identity, we predicted that it would exacerbate negative reactions to copycatting.

As a second empirical strategy, in Study 3 we manipulated whether the copycatting was directed at the self or another person's public identity. In this way we were able to assess whether negative reactions to copycatting are specifically in response to a threat to one's own public identity as we claim, or are instead elicited in response to any perceived instance of copycatting. We predicted that negative reactions to copycatting would only occur when one's own public identity, rather than someone else's, was at stake.

As a third empirical strategy, we tested whether negative reactions to copycatting are moderated by whether participants focus on publicly observable characteristics versus unobservable or "intrinsic" characteristics of their identity. Many theorists (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Goffman, 1959) have noted that public self-aspects require constant validation from other people, whereas intrinsic self-aspects are not defined by external sources and thus do not require constant social validation. Indeed, research shows that focusing

people on intrinsic bases of self-worth reduces their efforts to bolster their personal value over other people's value (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001) and reduces their sensitivity to social influence (e.g., less conformity, Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Building on this work, in Study 4 we tested whether negative reactions to copycatting are attenuated when people are led to focus on intrinsic, but not publicly observable, characteristics of their identity.

## STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 is to conceptually replicate past research (Reysen et al., 2009) in an experimentally realistic situation rather than relying on participants' imagined reactions after reading a vignette. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (a) no characteristics copied, (b) one characteristic, (c) two characteristics, or (d) three characteristics copied. Study 1 was conducted in a laboratory with a confederate who copied the participant. Participants' fan preferences (e.g., favorite television show) were chosen as self-aspects to be copied instead of more enduring and observable public identity characteristics (i.e., hairstyle, personality). Recreational activities and interests have previously been suggested as an interpersonal uniqueness characteristic (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). We predicted that, compared to participants in the no-characteristics-copied condition, participants in the one-characteristic-copied condition would not report increased anger (replicating Reysen et al., 2009), whereas participants in the two- and three-characteristics-copied conditions would perceive the other as intentionally copying, express greater anger, and express a stronger desire to confront the copycat.

### Method

**Participants.** Participants ( $N = 53$ , 60.4% women) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Their mean age was 22.70 years ( $SD = 6.85$ ). The original study sample size was 61 participants, but during the debriefing eight participants admitted to some awareness of the true purpose of the study; they were therefore excluded from the analyses.

**Design and procedure.** Participants entered the laboratory and were asked to read and sign an informed consent statement while they ostensibly waited for a second participant to arrive (a confederate). The confederate arrived 2 min after the participant. Once the confederate had also signed the informed consent, the experimenter explained the cover story. The experimenter said that the study was concerned with how fan interests

affect friendship formation and that they would be interviewed on camera discussing their favorite television show, music group, and hobby. The experimenter then left the lab to get the video camera that was said to be in a different room. This provided an opportunity for the confederate to ask the participant what his or her favorite fan interests were and to reveal his or her own (the confederate's initially stated fan interests were identical in every condition). This strategy ensured that the confederate was blind to the experimental condition at this stage and gave the participant an opportunity to learn the confederate's fan interests. Thus, at this stage of the study, the participant and the confederate had each stated their three fan interests to one another.

In the second room, the experimenter randomly selected the condition and an interview sheet before returning with the video camera. The confederate was made aware of the condition by the number of ink pens the experimenter displayed in a shirt pocket upon returning to the laboratory (e.g., one pen = copy one fan interest, two pens = copy two fan interests). The experimenter then set up the video camera and began the interview. The interview consisted of asking the confederate and then the participant their fan interests (television show, music, hobby). Six interview sheets were created to randomize the order of the fan interests (e.g., Sheet 1 was ordered as TV, music, then hobby; Sheet 2 was ordered as hobby, TV, then music). For example, in the one-fan-interest-copied condition, the confederate changed his or her first response during the interview (music, hobby, or TV depending on the ordering of the fan interests on the interview sheet) from his or her previously stated preferences to match the participant's fan interest but stated the scripted fan interests for the other two interests. In the two-fan-interests-copied condition, the confederate copied the first two fan interests during the interview. In the three-fan-interests-copied condition, the confederate copied all of the participants' stated interests.

After the interview, the confederate was moved to a separate room while the participant remained in the laboratory. Participants then completed the dependent measures assessing felt anger, perceived harm to one's public image, perception of intentionality, endorsement of confronting the confederate, importance of the three fan preferences to the self, and demographic items. Participants were then fully debriefed and thanked.

**Materials.** The dependent measures were assessed by having participants indicate their agreement with a set of statements. Responses were made using a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). To assess experienced anger, participants rated the extent to which they currently felt "angry," "disrespected," and "mad" about the interaction with

TABLE 1  
Main Effect of Number of Characteristics Copied on the Dependent Variables

Variable	None	One	Two	Three	$F(3, 45)$	$p$	$\eta_p^2$
Anger	1.00 (0.00) <sub>a</sub>	1.44 (1.08) <sub>a</sub>	1.91 (1.56) <sub>b</sub>	2.60 (1.66) <sub>b</sub>	3.53	.02	.19
Reflect on image	1.17 (0.52) <sub>a</sub>	1.33 (0.86) <sub>a</sub>	2.32 (1.75) <sub>b</sub>	2.40 (1.54) <sub>b</sub>	3.55	.02	.19
Intended to copy	1.07 (0.26) <sub>a</sub>	1.83 (1.68) <sub>a</sub>	4.64 (2.47) <sub>b</sub>	4.63 (2.39) <sub>b</sub>	12.29	.00	.45
Tell to stop	1.50 (1.04) <sub>a</sub>	1.88 (1.55) <sub>a</sub>	3.82 (1.60) <sub>b</sub>	3.97 (2.07) <sub>b</sub>	9.53	.00	.39

Note. Means with different subscripts are significantly different from the no characteristics copied condition ( $p < .05$ ). Seven-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

the confederate ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Two items measured the perceived extent of harm the other person is causing to one's public identity as a result of the confederate's actions ("This person is hurting my image" and "This person is reflecting poorly on me";  $\alpha = .82$ ). Two items assessed the perception of intentionality of the copier ("This person is intending to copy me" and "This person is purposefully copying me";  $\alpha = .98$ ). Two items assessed endorsement of confrontation ("I would confront this person about copying me" and "I would tell this person to stop copying me";  $\alpha = .82$ ). Participants also rated how important each of the copied characteristics was for how they think about themselves ("The following aspects of myself are important to how I see myself (my image) . . ."; i.e., television show, music group, hobby). All participants rated the importance of the three fan interests to serve as a control for differential importance of the copied characteristics across conditions.

## Results

We conducted one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs; number of shared characteristics: none, one, two vs. three) on each of the dependent measures while controlling for confederate gender as well as participants' ratings of the importance of each of the fan interests (i.e., hobby, music, television show) for their self-image. We then conducted  $t$  tests between each of the treatment conditions and the control (no characteristics copied) condition. See Table 1 for relevant means, standard deviations, and planned comparisons. As expected, participants' ratings of anger, reflection of copying on their public image, perceived intention of the other person to copy their fan preferences, and desire to confront the copycat did not differ significantly between the one-characteristic-copied condition and the control condition. As predicted, however, compared to participants in the no-characteristics-copied condition and the one-characteristic-copied condition, participants in the three-characteristics-copied condition expressed significantly more anger, belief that the copying was damaging their public identity, belief that the other

person was intentionally copying their fan preferences, and greater endorsement of confronting the other person.<sup>1</sup>

To further examine the hypothesis that copying a greater number of self-aspects results in greater negative reactions, we conducted linear trend analyses of the number of self-aspects copied (none, one, two, three) on each of the dependent measures. As expected, a significant linear trend was found for expressed anger,  $F(3, 49) = 4.46, p = .01$ ; perceived threat to public identity,  $F(3, 49) = 3.66, p = .02$ ; perceived intention of the other person to copy,  $F(3, 49) = 13.37, p < .001$ ; and endorsement of confronting the other person,  $F(3, 49) = 8.65, p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Study 1 tested the effect of copycatting on felt anger, perceived harm to one's public identity, perceived intentionality of the copycat, and behavioral intentions. Replicating the main findings of Reysen et al. (2009) in a more ecologically realistic context, results show that participants who believed that many (vs. few) characteristics had been copied by another person perceived that their public identity was harmed, felt angrier, and endorsed confronting the copycat more. These results support our central hypothesis that copycatting is a

<sup>1</sup>One characteristic versus no characteristics comparisons: angry,  $t(25) = -1.61, p = .12, d = .64$ ; reflect negatively,  $t(25) = -.62, p = .54, d = .25$ ; intentionality,  $t(25) = -1.75, p = .09, d = .70$ ; and confrontation intentions,  $t(25) = -.75, p = .46, d = .30$ . Two characteristics versus no characteristics comparisons: angry,  $t(24) = -2.27, p = .03, d = .93$ ; reflect negatively,  $t(24) = -2.48, p = .02, d = 1.01$ ; intentionality,  $t(24) = -5.60, p < .001, d = 2.29$ ; and confrontation intentions,  $t(24) = -4.49, p < .001, d = 1.83$ . Three characteristics versus no characteristics comparisons: angry,  $t(28) = -3.74, p = .001, d = 1.41$ ; reflect negatively,  $t(28) = -2.62, p = .01, d = .99$ ; intentionality,  $t(28) = -5.74, p < .001, d = 2.17$ ; and confrontation intentions,  $t(28) = -4.12, p < .001, d = 1.56$ . Three characteristics versus one characteristic comparisons: angry,  $t(25) = 2.08, p = .048, d = .83$ ; reflect negatively,  $t(25) = 2.14, p = .04, d = .86$ ; intentionality,  $t(25) = 3.43, p = .002, d = 1.37$ ; and confrontation intentions,  $t(25) = 2.90, p = .008, d = 1.16$ . Thus, the simple effect tests support the hypothesis that copycatting results in negative reactions when many (vs. few) characteristics of the self are copied.

threat to one's public identity and indicate that the responses obtained using a vignette methodology (Reysen et al., 2009) are similar to those obtained when participants are the actual recipients of copycatting by another person. Therefore, the remaining studies utilize vignettes to examine factors that may moderate reactions to copycatting. Because our initial study (Reysen et al., 2009) suggested, and Study 1 confirmed, that anger is a primary emotional response to copycatting, we employ anger as our main dependent variable in the following studies. In addition, because our initial study (Reysen et al., 2009) suggested, and Study 1 again confirmed, that another person resembling the self on many (i.e., three) characteristics is perceived as intentional copying, in the next three studies we had participants in the many-characteristics-copied conditions think of another person copying three characteristics of their public identity.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 experimentally tests whether the increased anger in response to copycatting observed in Study 1 was due to increased perceived intention of the other person to copy one's distinctive public characteristics. Similar to prior research (Reysen et al., 2009), we manipulate perceived intention by describing either a situation in which three characteristics (i.e., shirt, hairstyle, personality) were copied by a person who had the chance to observe the participant or a situation where a person resembled the participant on the same characteristics but did not have an opportunity to observe the participant prior to the resemblance. In other words, although the similar other person resembled the participant on many public identity characteristics, the other person either had an opportunity to copy the participant or did not.

Furthermore, insofar as copycatting elicits anger because it threatens one's public identity, then anger should be attenuated when a third party validates that the copied characteristics are part of one's distinctive public image. We therefore expected an interaction in which an intentional (vs. unintentional) resemblance will arouse anger, but this effect will be eliminated when a third party validates the participant as the originator of the copied public identity characteristics.

### Method

**Participants.** Participants ( $N=106$ , 72% men) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Their mean age was 19.08 years ( $SD=1.24$ ).

**Design and procedure.** Vignettes were created for a 2 (intention to copy vs. no intention to copy)  $\times$  2 (third-party validation vs. no validation) between-subjects design. Participants in the intention to copy condition read a vignette describing another person displaying their shirt, hairstyle, and personality after observing them. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine that they met an individual ("Person A") of the same gender as themselves. Participants were asked to imagine that Person A comments that he or she likes the participant's shirt. The vignette then describes how Person A is seen later on campus with the same shirt, hairstyle, and observable personality (i.e., mannerisms, speech pattern) as the participant. Prior theory suggests that these three characteristics are commonly perceived as publically observable characteristics that are interpersonally distinctive (James, 1890; Leary, 1995; Simon, 2004; Turner et al., 1987). Participants in the no-intention-to-copy condition read about a student who resembled them on the same characteristics but who was new to campus and did not previously observe the participant.

In the third-party validation condition, participants read that a friend acknowledges the similarity of Person A to the participant on his or her public characteristics; in the no-validation condition, no mention was made of a third-party interpretation. This manipulation was worded to suggest that the other person resembles the participant, rather than the participant resembling the similar other person (i.e., using the participant's public identity characteristics as the anchor with which to compare the similar other), thereby validating the participant as the originator of the public identity characteristics shared with Person A. After reading the vignette, participants rated their experience of anger by indicating the extent they felt angry, mad, disgusted, contemptuous, disrespected, and violated. Responses were made on an 8-point Likert-type scale and were averaged to compute composite anger scores ( $\alpha=.81$ ). Participants then completed some demographic items, were debriefed, and were thanked.

### Results

We submitted composite anger scores to a 2 (intention to copy vs. no intention to copy)  $\times$  2 (third-party validation vs. no validation) ANOVA. The predicted interaction was significant,  $F(1, 102)=4.87$ ,  $p=.03$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.05$ . Simple effect analyses revealed that when participants did not imagine a third party validating them as the originator of the relevant public identity characteristics, they reported more anger in response to a person who intentionally copied their characteristics ( $M=4.49$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ) than when they read about a

person who unintentionally resembled them on the same characteristics ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ),  $F(1, 103) = 11.75$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .10$ . When participants imagined a third party validating them as the originator of the identity, they did not report differential anger in response to the other person intentionally ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) or unintentionally ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) resembling them,  $F(1, 103) = 0.09$ ,  $p = .77$ . Among participants who imagined intentional copying, those who read about third-party validation reported less anger compared to participants who did not imagine third-party validation,  $F(1, 103) = 4.27$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $R^2 = .05$ .

## Discussion

Supporting our hypotheses, the results of Study 2 show that participants who imagined a person intentionally copying their public identity characteristics expressed more anger than participants who imaged a person who unintentionally resembled them on the same characteristics. These results conceptually replicate Study 1, and go further to show that the other's perceived intention to copy one's public identity characteristics is an important factor in moderating negative emotional reactions to self-other resemblance. Indeed, increased anger in response to copycatting was eliminated when participants imagined a third party validating them as the originator of the copied public identity characteristics. This finding suggests that third-party validation minimizes the threat to one's distinctive public identity that copycatting poses. In Study 3 we build on these findings by testing whether a third party can exacerbate the threat of copycatting by erroneously attributing ownership of the copied characteristics to the copycat.

## STUDY 3

Study 3 further examines the influence of imagined third-party interpretation of self-other resemblance on negative emotional reactions to copycatting. In Study 2 we found that copycatting elicited anger unless participants imagined that a third party validated the participant's ownership of the copied characteristics. Building on this finding, we hypothesized that anger in response to copycatting will be exacerbated if a third party erroneously accuses the participant of copying the relevant characteristics (i.e., implying that the copied characteristics originated in the copycat rather than the participant).

In addition, Study 3 tests whether negative emotional reactions to copycatting reflect a perceived threat to one's public identity, or, alternatively, simply reflects negative reactions to any act of copycatting. If, as we claim, copycatting is threatening when it undermines

one's own, but not another person's, public identity, then participants should not respond negatively when they imagine a person copying another person's distinctive public characteristics.

## Method

**Participants** Participants ( $N = 76$ , 58% men) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology course requirement. Their mean age was 19.39 years ( $SD = 1.36$ ).

**Design and procedure.** Similar to Study 2, participants were asked to read a vignette and then rate their anger (using the items and scale used in Study 2;  $\alpha = .77$ ). Vignettes were created for a 2 (copycatting target: self vs. other)  $\times$  2 (third-party invalidation vs. no invalidation) between-subjects design. Participants in the self-target condition read about another person copying three characteristics of their public identity, whereas participants in the other-target condition read about a copycat copying the same characteristics of another person. Participants assigned to the third-party-invalidation condition read about a third party accusing the participant (or the unknown target individual) of being the copycat and referring to the true copycat as originally possessing the copied characteristics. In the no-invalidation condition, no mention was made of this accusation.

## Results

Submitting anger scores to a 2 (copycat target: self vs. other)  $\times$  2 (third-party invalidation vs. no invalidation) ANOVA revealed a marginally significant interaction,  $F(1, 72) = 3.81$ ,  $p = .055$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . Simple effect analyses revealed that when the participant was the target of the copycatting, those who were accused by a third party of being the copycat felt angrier ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than those who were not accused ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ),  $F(1, 73) = 9.90$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $R^2 = .12$ . When the other person was the target of the copycatting, those who imagined a third party invalidating the other person did not report differential anger ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) compared to no invalidation of the other person ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ),  $F(1, 73) = 0.01$ ,  $p = .91$ . Further, when an accusation of copycatting was made, those whose own characteristics were copied felt angrier than those who read about another person's characteristics being copied,  $F(1, 73) = 8.39$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $R^2 = .10$ .

## Discussion

Supporting our hypotheses, the results of Study 3 show that participants reported increased anger when

imagining a third party invalidating their ownership of copied characteristics by attributing them to the copycat (compared to no such third-party invalidation). These results support our claim that copycatting represents a threat to one's public identity by showing that copycatting is especially threatening when it prevents third parties from recognizing one's distinctive public identity. We also found that copycatting elicited anger only when the self is the victim. Participants did not exhibit anger when another person was the victim of copycatting, even when a third party erroneously attributed ownership of that person's characteristics to the copycat. These results suggest that negative reactions to the copycat are not simply generalized reactions to copycatting; rather, they are specific to the intentional copying of one's *own* distinctive public characteristics. Together, these studies show that participants experience the copying of their own publicly observable characteristics as a threat. Changing participants' focus from observable characteristics to unobservable characteristics may serve to buffer the threat posed by copycatting. Study 4 examined this possibility.

#### STUDY 4

Study 4 tests whether focusing individuals on unobservable self-aspects will eliminate the increased anger in response to copycatting observed in the previous studies. Research shows that focusing people on publicly observable self-aspects (e.g., their appearance) makes them more likely to bolster their positive self-image and defend it against threats than focusing them on more private, "intrinsic" self-aspects (e.g., virtue; Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Based on this work, we reasoned that focusing participants on their intrinsic self-aspects will lead them to identify the self with inner qualities that are not subject to copying. Thus, we hypothesized that such intrinsic focus would attenuate negative reactions to the intentional copying of one's public characteristics as found in the prior studies.

#### Method

**Participants.** Participants ( $N = 50$ , 52% men) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Their mean age was 19.44 years ( $SD = 1.51$ ).

**Design and procedure.** Following Arndt et al. (2002, Study 2), we randomly assigned participants to write a short paragraph about either their inner qualities (intrinsic focus) or a neutral task they had recently

performed (control). In the intrinsic focus condition participants were asked to write about "an unchanging, inner quality," whereas participants in the neutral condition wrote about "something routine you did." Thus, we manipulated whether participants were focused on intrinsic characteristics or not, and then we exposed participants to the same copycatting threat used in Studies 2 and 3 (i.e., three characteristics copied). Participants then rated their felt anger on the same measure utilized previously ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

#### Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants induced to focus on their intrinsic self-aspects prior to imagining being the target of copycatting felt less angry ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) than participants in the control condition ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ),  $t(48) = -2.45$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $d = -.70$ . These results support our claim that copycatting threatens one's public identity by showing that negative reactions to copycatting are lessened when people are instead focused on their inner characteristics. An alternative explanation for this difference might be that participants were made aware of a greater number of positive self-aspects in the intrinsic focus condition and subsequently felt less threatened by copycatting because they were reminded of their many other positive aspects that were not copied. Further research is needed to determine whether focusing participants' attention on other self-aspects that are observable but not copied may also buffer against the threat of copycatting.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Four studies examined people's reactions to other people sharing their distinctive public characteristics, the conditions under which this resemblance is interpreted as intentional copying, and the effects of perceiving intentional copying on anger and confrontational intentions. Participants exhibited increased anger and confrontational intentions toward another person who resembled them on many (vs. few) distinctive public identity characteristics. Anger was not elicited when imagining a person resembling the self on many public characteristics if it was unlikely that the resemblance was due to intentional copying, or when imagining a person intentionally copying many of another person's public characteristics. Also, in line with our claim that copycatting poses a threat to one's public identity, anger in response to copycatting was attenuated when a third party validated the participant's original ownership of the copied characteristics, and was exacerbated when imagining a third party being convinced that the copied characteristics originated in the copycat. Increasing the

salience of “intrinsic” self-aspects buffered participant’s anger in response to copycatting, presumably because these participants viewed the self in terms of unobservable characteristics that cannot be copied. Copycatting was found to elicit similar anger in both the studies employing vignettes and a real situation where such copying was experienced. Together the studies provide evidence that copycatting is a threat to one’s public identity that results in anger and a desire to confront the copycat.

### Perceived Intention to Copy

In accordance with prior theorizing and research, participants’ perception of increasing similarity with another person resulted in anger when that similarity was seen as resulting from intentional copying. As this is the first set of studies to examine the psychological underpinnings of copycatting, we explored a number of moderators of the effect. As shown in Study 1, resemblance to others is interpreted as copycatting when many (vs. few) public identity characteristics are copied. Based on these results, we next assessed whether the perceived intention of the copycat would influence the degree of negative emotion expressed by participants. Indeed, Study 2 revealed the causal influence of participants’ perception of the resembling other’s intention to copy one’s public identity on subsequent anger. These results suggest that a key component of perceiving similarity as copycatting is the perception that the similar other is intentionally changing their responses to match the participant. More generally, the results lend support to the notion that the perception of intention of a blameworthy other is an antecedent to felt anger, and a desire to confront the other person is a likely behavioral response (Lazarus, 1991).

### Copycatting as a Public Identity Threat

We predicted and tested—using three approaches—whether copycatting is a threat to one’s public identity. Individuals are motivated to create and foster an identity that others concur with (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980), and they seek verification of that identity from others (Erikson, 1950; Swann, 1983, 1999). Because maintaining a unique public identity is contingent on other people identifying the self with distinctive observable characteristics, we predicted that the response of others would moderate negative reactions to copycatting. Study 2 showed that a third party who provides validation of the copied characteristics attenuated participants’ anger. Such validation of one’s public characteristics minimized the perception that the copycat could jeopardize one’s publicly recognized identity. In Study 3, we found that invalidation of

ownership of the copied characteristics exacerbated participants’ anger, presumably because the copycat effectively disrupted the public’s recognition of the participant’s distinctive public identity.

A second method to test whether copycatting is a threat to one’s public identity was to change the target of the copycatting. As shown in Study 3, participants expressed anger when their identity was copied but not when another person’s identity was copied. Last, a third approach found that switching the focus from participants’ public identity, which is normally presented to others, to that of an inner self reduced anger. Intrinsic self-aspects are not defined by external sources and may therefore not require social validation. As predicted, focusing participants’ attention on intrinsic self-characteristics buffered participants against anger when subsequently copied. Together, these results provide support for the notion that copycatting is a threat to the individual’s public identity.

### Limitations

The present studies are limited in potential generalizability due to the use of student participants. Erikson (1956) suggested that younger adults are more concerned about forming a unique public identity than are older adults. Therefore, the threat to older adults’ public identity posed by copycatting could elicit less negative reactions. In addition, cultures that hold an interdependent worldview may perceive being imitated as acceptable for the harmony of the group, and therefore the anger observed among our participants might not be experienced.

Because the last three studies relied on vignettes to induce the threat to the participant’s public identity, it could be argued that participants may have relied on their theories of how they would react to such affronts. Prior research (Robinson & Clore, 2001) and the results of Study 1 argue against this interpretation. Although manipulating the actual experience of being copied to the extent described in the last three studies would be difficult (and potentially unethical), Study 1 involved copycatting that was actually experienced, and participants did indeed react negatively when they believed that multiple aspects of their public identity had been intentionally copied.

### Future Research

The present studies highlight the negative reactions that occur in response to intentional copying of many (vs. few) distinctive public identity characteristics—copycatting. Additional research should consider other possible mechanisms that might be involved in responses to copycatting. First, participants in the present studies



may have shown negative reactions to copycatting due to a loss of distinctiveness or uniqueness. Indeed, in Study 1 as a greater number of characteristics were shown to be similar to another person, participants reacted with greater anger. We argue that participants reacted negatively to being copied due to a perceived loss of interpersonal distinctiveness. Participants were interacting with (Study 1), or asked to imagine (Studies 2–4), a peer attending the same university who was responsible for the copycatting. It is possible that the results obtained may have differed if the copycat had been an outgroup member. In that case, the threat created by an outgroup member copying oneself might be due to a concern with the potential loss of intergroup distinctiveness—that, in effect, increased similarity between the self and an outgroup member blurs the boundaries between one's own group and the outgroup. It is also possible that people dislike copycats because they do not wish to appear to be associated with another person who seemingly behaves non-normatively. Hence, participants might react with anger due to a concern that they will be perceived negatively because they are seemingly associated with someone who acts inappropriately.

One recent study (Liu, Vohs, & Smeesters, 2011) has shown that priming participants with images of money led to greater dislike of a confederate who mimicked them compared to a confederate who did not mimic them. Liu and colleagues suggest that priming money activates a motivation to pursue individual goals and to strive for personal freedom, and that being mimicked by the confederate threatened participants' freedom. Therefore, it might be that participants were reacting to a perceived threat to their moral right to display a unique public identity (Brehm, 1966; Goffman, 1959). This explanation would complement recent research showing that degree of mimicry depends on contextual social norms concerning the appropriateness of mimicry (Dalton, Chartrand, & Finkel, 2010). People become angry when another person violates their expectation to not be copied in specific social or relational contexts, but not all. For example, less anger may be experienced when a younger brother or sister copies oneself compared to an unfamiliar stranger. Further research is needed to explore when such contextual factors will affect the extent to which negative reactions are experienced as a result of copycatting.

## Conclusion

Copycatting is a potentially important but previously unexplored threat to one's public identity. When another person intentionally copies many of one's own distinctive identity characteristics, that identity is threatened. Copycatting engenders a negative reaction of anger and a desire to confront the copycat to restore

one's public identity. The effects of copycatting can be attenuated through third-party validation or a prior intrinsic self-focus, or they can be accentuated via third-party invalidation. Strong negative emotional reactions can be elicited in response to copycatting, and people appear to feel some imperative to protect their identity against intentional imitation. Further research is needed to examine the boundaries of this type of threat to one's public identity and the strategies people use to manage the impression that others hold of them when their distinctive personal attributes appear to be shared rather than unique.

## REFERENCES

- Arndt, J., Schimel, J., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2002). The intrinsic self and defensiveness: Evidence that activating the intrinsic self reduces self-handicapping and conformity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*, 671–683.
- Bailenson, J. N., & Yee, N. (2005). Digital chameleons: Automatic assimilation of nonverbal gestures in immersive virtual environments. *Psychological Science*, *16*, 814–819.
- Becker, E. (1971). *The birth and death of meaning*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Brehm, J. W. (1966). *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Brewer, M. B. (1991). The social self: On being the same and different at the same time. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *17*, 475–482.
- Byrne, D. (1971). *The attraction paradigm*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Chartrand, T. L., & Bargh, J. A. (1999). The chameleon effect: The perception–behavior link of social interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*, 893–910.
- Dalton, A. N., Chartrand, T. L., Finkel, E. J. (2010). The schema-driven chameleon: How mimicry affects executive and self-regulatory resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *98*, 605–617.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1995). Human autonomy: The basis for true self-esteem. In M. H. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem* (pp. 31–49). New York, NY: Plenum.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1956). The problem of ego identity. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, *4*, 56–121.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Hornsey, M. J., & Jetten, J. (2003). Not being what you claim to be: Impostors as sources of group threat. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *33*, 639–657.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jones, E. E. (1964). *Ingratiation*. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Leary, M. R. (1995). *Self-presentation: Impression management and interpersonal behavior*. Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark.
- Liu, J. E., Vohs, K. D., & Smeesters, D. (2011). Money and mimicry: When being mimicked makes people feel threatened. *Psychological Science*, *22*, 1150–1151.
- Reysen, S., Landau, M. J., & Branscombe, N. R. (2009, February). *Identity theft: When similarity breeds contempt*. Poster presented at the 10th annual meeting of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology, Tampa, FL.

- Robinson, M. D., & Clore, G. L. (2001). Simulation, scenarios, and emotional appraisal: Testing the convergence of real and imagined reactions to emotional stimuli. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 1520–1532.
- Schimmel, J., Arndt, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (2001). Being accepted for who we are: Evidence that social validation of the intrinsic self reduces general defensiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 35–52.
- Schlenker, B. R. (1980). *Impression management: The self-concept, social identity, and interpersonal relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Schlenker, B. R. (2003). Self-presentation. In M. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 492–518). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Simon, B. (2004). *Identity in modern society: A social psychological perspective*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Snyder, C. R., & Fromkin, H. L. (1980). *Uniqueness: The human pursuit of difference*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Swann, W. B., Jr. (1983). Self-verification: Bringing social reality into harmony with the self. In J. Suls & A. G. Greenwald (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 2, pp. 33–66). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Swann, W. B., Jr. (1999). *Resilient identities: Self, relationships, and the construction of social reality*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Tice, D. M., & Wallace, H. M. (2003). The reflected self: Creating yourself as (you think) others see you. In M. Leary & J. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 91–105). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.