



## Articles

# Victims' Reactions to the Interpersonal Threat to Public Identity Posed by Copycats

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## Abstract

Interpersonal threats to public identity consist of situations where another person intentionally attempts to illegitimately undermine one's ability to display a valued and distinctive public identity. In three studies, we examined victims' reactions to copycatting as an interpersonal threat to public identity to test each component of this definition. In Study 1, participants expressed the greatest degree of anger when the copying was illegitimate and intentional. In Study 2, participants expressed a greater degree of anger to copying of an important (vs. unimportant) characteristic. In Study 3, we manipulated the number of identity characteristics copied. A structural model showed that as the number of copied characteristics increased, participants' perception of the situation as illegitimate and the copying as intentional predicted a threat to one's freedom, which in turn predicted felt reactance predicting an unfavorable impression and a desire to confront the copycat. Together, the results support the definition of interpersonal threats to public identity and copycatting as such a situation.

*Keywords:* copycat, identity, reactance, anger, intention, illegitimacy

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Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Computer, often said, “good artists copy, great artists steal” (Cringely & Sen, 1996). The statement suggests that copying is not only normative, but also expected by artists and businesses. Furthermore, the maxim “imitation is the sincerest of flattery” (Colton, 1849, p. 127), also frames copying as an activity that is viewed positively. However, theorists suggest that individuals seek to promote and maintain a unique public identity that others recognize (Becker, 1971; Buss, 2001; Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1964; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980). A wealth of theory and research show that individuals actively produce their desired public identity and seek validation from others regarding that identity (Baumeister, 1986; James, 1890; Jones, 1964; Mead, 1934; Schlenker, 1980; Swann, 1999). The feedback or reflections that others provide back to the individual can shape one's public identity (Leary, 1995; Tice & Wallace, 2003). The extent that others misconstrue or malign one's display of public identity can threaten how others view the self. Such a circumstance reflects an interpersonal threat to public identity—a situation where another person intentionally attempts to illegitimately undermine one's ability to display a valued and distinctive public identity.

## Interpersonal Threats to Public Identity

Recent research shows interpersonal threats to public identity arise in contexts such as when an individual is plagiarized (Gibson & Reysen, 2012), a romantic partner dissolves a relationship (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013), or one is the victim of gossip (Snider & Reysen, 2011). Across this research, situations that represent interpersonal threats to public identity contain four important features: (1) victims perceive that the perpetrator's behavior is intentional, (2) victims perceive that the situation is illegitimate, (3) the victim values the characteristics, or aspects, of the public identity that are threatened, and (4) the perpetrator's actions undermine the victim's freedom to display a unique and valued identity. Unlike other threats to public identity (e.g., public failure, embarrassment), there is an identifiable perpetrator of the threat. Victims react with anger, a desire to confront the perpetrator of the threat, and an unfavorable view of the perpetrator (e.g., dishonest, unlikeable).

## Copycatting

Maintaining a unique public identity requires that other people perceive distinct characteristics associated with the self. Social behaviors undermining this process pose a threat to one's public identity. Copycatting—a situation in which a person intentionally copies distinctive and valued characteristics of another person's public identity—is a fitting example of an interpersonal threat to public identity (Reysen, Landau, & Branscombe, 2012). Other forms of synchronous actions, such as nonconscious mimicry, may induce a collective spirit, enhancing cooperation, interdependence, and affiliation (Ashton-James, van Baaren, Chartrand, Decety, & Karremans, 2007; Stel, van Baaren, & Vonk, 2008; van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami, & van Knippenberg, 2004). In contrast, copycatting is both conscious and intentional. It threatens distinctiveness needs by decreasing one's degree of differentiation from others, which induces a battery of negative emotions (Brewer, 1991; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980).

In a series of experiments, Reysen, Landau, and Branscombe (2012) examined victims' reactions to being copied. In Study 1, participants were exposed to a confederate, who after learning the participant's consumptive practices (e.g., favorite television show) copied none, one, two, or three of the participant's fan preferences during an interview session. When many (vs. few) preferences were copied, participants viewed the copying as intentional, felt the copying damaged their public identity, expressed anger, and endorsed confronting the other person. Importantly, as the number of characteristics copied increased, participants' perception of the confederate's intention to copy them and experience of anger also increased. Subsequent studies supported the notion that copycatting threatened victims' public identity. For example, participants' anger was exacerbated when they imagined that other people attributed the copied characteristics (clothing, hairstyle, personality) to the copycat, and anger was attenuated when another person validated the participant as the originator of the distinctive identity characteristics. In other words, manipulating how others viewed one's public identity influenced victims' experience of the threat. Although the results show victims of copycatting react negatively when many (vs. few) public identity characteristics are copied in realistic laboratory and imagined situations, the underlying mechanisms of copycatting as an interpersonal threat to public identity and victims' experience of anger are unexplored.

## Emotional Reaction

The four proposed features of interpersonal threats to public identity connote an explanation of why copycatting results in victims' experience of anger. Appraisal theories of emotion suggest that events that elicit anger are appraised as threatening to one's identity (Lazarus, 1991), incongruent with one's goals (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Lazarus, 1991), and another person is to blame for the threat (Clore & Ortony, 1991; Lazarus, 1991). Furthermore, events that are unfair or illegitimate (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Frijda et al., 1989; Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990) and involve a perpetrator intentionally trying to harm oneself (Averill, 1982; Dodge, 1993; Orobio de

Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002) lead to anger. Situations described as interpersonal threats to public identity (i.e., situation is illegitimate, intention to harm identity, specific person is to blame) mirror the appraisals shown to elicit anger. Interpersonal threats to public identity are also posited to undermine individuals' freedom to display a valued and distinct public identity.

### Psychological Reactance

Jack Brehm's theory of psychological reactance (1966) posits that threats (real or imagined) to one's freedom lead to a motivational state to restore that freedom. The importance of the freedom to the individual and the magnitude of the threat influence the intensity of reactance aroused (see Chadee, 2011). Although Brehm originally posited that reactance is not measurable, subsequent researchers have operationalized reactance as negative emotions (e.g., dislike, irritation) due to limited freedoms (Lindsey, 2005), and a combination of anger and negative thoughts (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Within the domain of health communication, research continues to show that perceived threats to freedom are associated with the experience of anger (see Quick, 2012), and the magnitude of the threat (i.e., degree of impact on the individual's freedoms) predicts greater reactance (Rains & Turner, 2007).

Quick (2012) tested a model of reactance where the stimulus event (or freedom threatening message) leads individuals to perceive their freedom is threatened. The perception of threat predicts reactance (a combination of self-rated anger and number of negative thoughts regarding the message), and reactance then predicts motivation to act on the threat and a negative appraisal of the source of the event or message (e.g., trustworthiness). Based on the theory of psychological reactance, Quick and Stephenson (2007) suggest that the behavioral motivation following from a sense of reactance can take three forms. In order to reassert one's freedom individuals can (1) directly challenge the threat, typically by engaging in the opposite behavior (termed "boomerang"), (2) perform indirect behaviors that are similar to the threatened freedom ("related boomerang"), or (3) attach the self to or observe others who are performing a freedom-restoring behavior ("vicarious boomerang").

### Reactions to Interpersonal Threats to Public Identity

The influence of the other components of interpersonal public identity threats (e.g., illegitimate, intent to harm) upon reactance is also worth considering. While Brehm (1966) makes it clear that illegitimacy is not a necessary condition for reactance, he does posit that a lack of justification for threats to freedom influences the magnitude of reactance. Specifically, legitimated threats are often specified to a limited set of behaviors. For instance, if the copycat legitimizes the copied behavior by saying that he or she is practicing for a role in a school play, then it is clear that the threat serves the function of practicing the role. This also assures the victim that threats to freedom are less likely to occur in the future and for a valid goal. Indeed, recent research has found that when teachers' requests toward students are perceived as legitimate, reactance is mitigated (Zhang & Sapp, 2013). Along a similar line of reasoning, perceived intentions to harm may undermine assurance that threats to freedom are limited to a small set of behaviors or instances. For these reasons, the perception that the situation is indeed a threat to one's freedom and degree of reactance may also depend upon the extent that the other features of public identity threats are fulfilled.

In general, by considering the four proposed components of interpersonal threats to public identity within the context of appraisal theories of emotion and psychological reactance, it becomes clearer why public identity threats result in anger. According to our description of interpersonal threats to public identity, victims perceive the situation as illegitimate and the perpetrator as intentionally attempting to harm the victim's valued public identity (Gibson

& Reysen, 2012). Following appraisal theories of emotion, victims should respond to the illegitimate and intentional actions of the perpetrator with anger. Furthermore, we propose that the perpetrator of the threat limits the victim's freedom to display a unique and valued public identity, which, following reactance theory, should also induce anger. Finally, the degree of the freedom's importance to the individual is associated with the level of reactance or anger aroused. Overall, the extent that copycatting victims perceive that another person's copying is intentionally and illegitimately threatening the freedom to display a valued public identity should predict victims' intensity of reactance (operationalized as the experience of anger).

## Overview of Research

The purposes of the present set of studies are to examine copycatting as an interpersonal threat to public identity and explore the underlying components of this threat. To view copycatting as an interpersonal threat to public identity victims should (1) view the act of copying as illegitimate, (2) perceive the copycat as intentionally attempting to harm their public identity, (3) value the copied identity characteristics, and (4) perceive the copying as undermining their freedom to display a valued public identity. If manipulating these features influences participants' experience of anger in the expected direction, then we will have strong support for our definition of interpersonal threats to public identity. In Study 1, illegitimacy and perceived intention to harm are manipulated to examine change in participants' intensity of felt anger. In Study 2, the importance of the public identity characteristic is manipulated to examine whether the value of the identity characteristic threatened influences participants' experience of anger. Lastly, in Study 3, participants' perception of the threat to the freedom to display one's public identity is examined as a mediator of copycatting context and a reactance index. Overall, copycatting victims are hypothesized to express anger when another person is perceived to be illegitimately and intentionally threatening participants' freedom to display a valued public identity.

## Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine illegitimacy and intention to harm one's public identity as moderators of copycatting victims' felt anger. Participants were asked to imagine that they were copied legitimately or no explanation was given for the copying, and the copycat had no intention to harm the participant's public identity or no mention was made of an intention on the part of the copycat. Participants are predicted to express the highest anger scores when the copycat is illegitimately and intentionally attempting to harm the participants' public identity.

## Method

**Participants and procedure** — Participants ( $N = 90$ , 78.9% women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 26.19$ ,  $SD = 9.11$ ) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. All participants were asked to imagine that they met another person (referred to in the vignette as "Person A") at a party who is the same gender as the participant. Person A is reported to compliment the participant's shirt, and is found at a future time to have copied the participants' shirt, hairstyle, and personality (i.e., mannerisms and speech pattern). This copycatting vignette has been shown to successfully elicit anger in participants (see Reysen, Landau, & Branscombe, 2009, 2012). Thus, all participants were asked to imagine that another person has copied three public identity characteristics. In the illegitimate and intention to harm condition no additional information was presented. In the illegitimate and no intention to harm condition participants were asked to imagine that a friend had heard that the copycat admired the participant. In the legitimate with no intention to harm condition participants were told that a friend had heard that the copycat was preparing for a role as a hero in a school play. Lastly, participants randomly assigned to the legitimate with

intent to harm condition were informed that the copycat was preparing for a role as a village idiot in a school play. After reading the vignette participants were asked to rate three emotion terms (angry, mad, disrespected) on a 7-point Likert-type response scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) that were combined to create an anger scale ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

## Results and Discussion

As predicted, there was an interaction between illegitimacy and intention to harm on the experience of anger,  $F(1, 86) = 9.50, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .10$  (see Figure 1). Simple effects analyses revealed that when the copying was legitimate there was no significant difference between participants' anger in the no harm condition ( $M = 3.49, SD = 1.19$ ) and the harm condition ( $M = 3.72, SD = 1.78$ ),  $F(1, 86) = 0.20, p = .654, R^2 = .27$ . However, participants who read about an illegitimate situation scored higher on the anger measure when the copycat intended to harm their public identity ( $M = 4.55, SD = 1.79$ ) than when the copycat did not intend to harm their identity ( $M = 2.33, SD = 0.93$ ),  $F(1, 86) = 30.74, p < .001, R^2 = .27$ . In other words, participants who were asked to imagine that the copycat did not intend to harm them scored lower on the anger measure when the copying was legitimate compared to illegitimate,  $F(1, 86) = 5.87, p = .017, R^2 = .27$ . Participants who read about a copycat who intended to harm their public identity scored marginally significantly lower on the anger measure when the copying was legitimate compared to illegitimate,  $F(1, 86) = 3.67, p = .059, R^2 = .27$ .

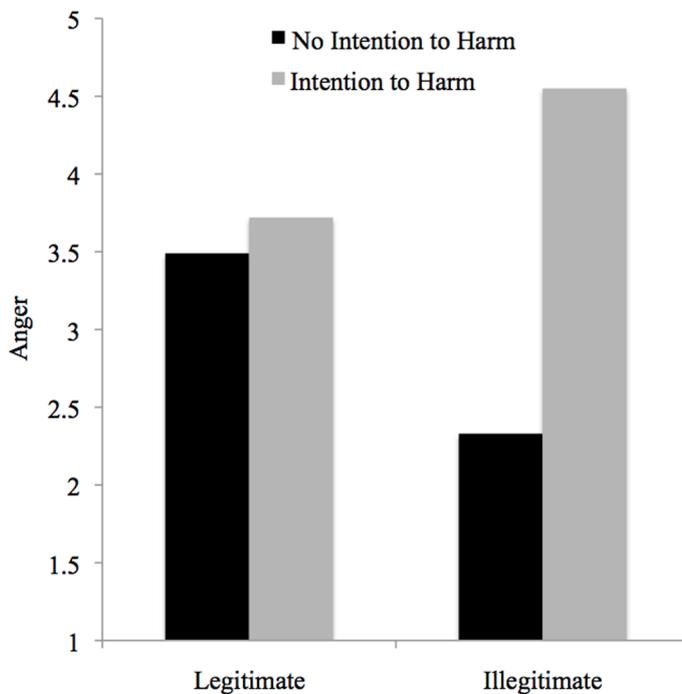


Figure 1. Interaction between legitimacy and intent to harm public identity on anger.

Participants agreed most with the anger measure when the copycat illegitimately and intentionally attempted to harm the participants' public identity. The results support two components of the definition of interpersonal threats to public identity (i.e., victims view the act of copying as illegitimate, victims perceive the copycat as intentionally attempting to harm their public identity). In Study 2, the notion that the importance or value of the public identity characteristic will influence participants' ratings on the anger measure is examined.

## Study 2

Interpersonal threats to public identity are hypothesized to elicit anger when the identity characteristic(s) threatened is valued by the victim (Gibson & Reysen, 2012; Reysen & Katarzaska-Miller, 2013; Snider & Reysen, 2011). Similarly, the theory of psychological reactance posits that the importance of the threatened freedom will influence reactance arousal (Brehm, 1966; Chadee, 2011). Therefore, the importance of the identity characteristic that is copied is manipulated to examine the impact on felt anger. Participants are predicted to score higher on the anger measure when the identity characteristic is valued (vs. not valued).

### Participants and Procedure

Participants ( $N = 50$ , 64% women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.10$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Only individuals that did not have a tattoo (indicated on a prescreening measure) were eligible to participate. Participants were randomly assigned to imagine they either had a tattoo that was especially meaningful to them or a tattoo that was acquired on whim, and was therefore not meaningful. Similar to the prior studies, another person is reported to compliment the participant's tattoo and is later seen with an identical tattoo. Participants then completed the same anger index as Study 1 ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

### Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants expressed greater anger when the tattoo was valued ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) compared to when the tattoo was unimportant ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) to their public identity,  $F(1, 48) = 13.39$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .22$ . The results support the notion that interpersonal threats to public identity, and copycatting more specifically, elicit anger when the threatened identity characteristic is important (vs. unimportant) to the victim. Furthermore, the results highlight the victims' experience of anger when only one (but highly valued) public identity characteristic is copied. In Study 3, the fourth component of interpersonal threats to public identity—the perception that the perpetrator of the threat undermines one's freedom to display a unique public identity—is examined.

## Study 3

The results of Studies 1 and 2, and prior research on other forms of interpersonal threats to public identity (Gibson & Reysen, 2012), suggest that the perception of illegitimacy and intentions to harm one's public identity are antecedents to victims' anger. However, the experience of anger is also a common outcome of situations that elicit reactance (see Quick, 2012). The underlying processes of the anger experienced by victims of interpersonal threats to public identity may represent a specific form of reactance (i.e., personal threat where another individual directly blocks a freedom). Therefore, participants' perception that the copycat is threatening one's freedom to display a public identity is assessed in Study 3. If victims' reactions to copycatting, and interpersonal threats to public identity more generally, are a form of reactance, then a larger number of copied identity characteristics should result in a greater perceived threat to one's freedom. Furthermore, if the magnitude of reactance partially depends upon the legitimacy (Brehm, 1966; Zhang & Sapp, 2013) and intention to harm, then these variables should act as mediators between number of characteristics copied and the experience of threat. The purpose of Study 3 is to examine Quick's (2012) model of reactance with the addition of perception of illegitimacy and intent to harm one's identity.

Specifically, we predict that as another person copies more public identity characteristics, victims will perceive the situation as illegitimate and the similar other as intentionally attempting to harm one's identity, which in turn, will predict viewing one's freedom to display a unique identity as threatened. Following Quick's (2012) model of reactance, this perceived threat to one's freedom would predict the experience of reactance (operationalized as self-rated anger, number of negative cognitions, and additionally the number of anger related words used to express those thoughts). The experience of reactance should then predict a motivation to act (boomerang, related boomerang, and vicarious boomerang) and a negative impression of the source of the threat. If this model is supported, the results will provide a strong indication that reactance is an underlying mechanism of interpersonal threats to public identity.

### Participants and Procedure

Participants ( $N = 563$ , 70% women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 27.15$ ,  $SD = 9.65$ ) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Participants were assigned to read one of eight vignettes. In the vignette participants were asked to imagine that another person copies, none, one (either shirt, hairstyle, or personality), two (shirt and hair, shirt and personality, or hair and personality), or three public identity characteristics (shirt, hairstyle, and personality). Participants then rated their agreement on measures regarding anger, perception of the situation and the copycat, cognitions regarding the situation, and endorsed actions. Unless noted otherwise, all responses were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

### Experimental Materials

**Vignette** — Vignettes were adopted from prior research (Reysen et al., 2009, 2012). Participants were asked to imagine that they met a friend of a friend who was the same gender. The person (termed "Person A" in the vignette) complimented the participant's shirt. In the no characteristics copied condition, no additional information was presented. In the one characteristic condition, Person A is seen by the participant at a later time with the participant's same shirt, hairstyle, or personality. In the two characteristic conditions, participants were informed that Person A was later seen with shirt and hairstyle, shirt and personality, or hairstyle and personality. Responses from the single and double characteristic conditions were combined to form a one characteristic copied and a two characteristic copied condition. In the three characteristics condition, Person A is later seen with the same shirt, hairstyle, and personality as the participant.

**Dependent measures** — Three emotion terms (angry, mad, disrespected) were combined to create an anger scale ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Eight items (e.g., "This person is honest") were combined to assess participants' perceived honesty of the copycat ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Nine items (e.g., "This person is likeable"), adapted from Reysen (2005), assessed the perceived likeability of the copycat ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Four items (e.g., "The situation is unfair") were combined to form a measure of illegitimacy ( $\alpha = .72$ ). The items, "This person is trying to hurt my public image," and "This person is trying to cause me harm," were combined to assess perceived intention to harm the participant's public identity ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Three items ("Person A is threatening my unique style and personality," "Person A is threatening my freedom to display my public identity," and "Person A is interfering with my right to have a distinct identity) were combined to assess threat to freedom ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

After rating the above measures, participants were asked to write about thoughts that came to mind while reading the vignette. Participants were then instructed to rate each thought as either positive, neutral, or negative. The amount of negative thoughts was combined to form a negative cognition index ( $\alpha = .80$ ). In addition, the thoughts were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzales,

& Booth, 2007) to assess the number of words related to anger. Participants then rated their endorsed behaviors using a modified version of Quick and Stephenson's (2007) reactance restoration scale. The measure contains three subscales (each containing four items), including boomerang ("Right now, I am motivated to tell Person A to stop,"  $\alpha = .97$ ), related boomerang ("Right now, I am motivated to go out of my way to show everyone my public identity,"  $\alpha = .97$ ), and vicarious boomerang ("Right now, I am motivated to be around other people who display a unique and positive public identity,"  $\alpha = .96$ ) dimensions. Lastly, participants indicated their age and gender.

## Results

**Mean differences** — To examine mean differences, a one-way (none, one, two, vs. three characteristics copied) between-subjects MANOVA was conducted on the dependent variables. The overall analysis was significant, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .68$ ,  $F(11, 549) = 6.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$  (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and main effects). Overall, a general trend shows that as a greater number of public identity characteristics are copied, participants scored higher on measures regarding illegitimacy, intentionality, threat to one's freedom, reactance (as indicated by self-rated anger, number of negative cognitions, and number of anger related words in those thoughts), and actions. Additionally, participants scored lower on measures regarding perception of the similar other (i.e., honesty, liking) when more (vs. none or one) identity characteristics were similar to the participant.

Table 1

Means (Standard Deviation) by Number of Characteristics Copied, Study 3

Variable	Number of Public Identity Characteristics Copied				$F(3, 559)$	$p$ -value	$\eta_p^2$
	None	One	Two	Three			
Illegitimacy	3.11 (0.75) <sub>a</sub>	3.34 (1.22) <sub>a</sub>	3.83 (1.18) <sub>b</sub>	3.70 (1.31) <sub>b</sub>	10.94	<.001	.055
Intent to Harm	1.48 (0.84) <sub>a</sub>	2.09 (1.17) <sub>b</sub>	2.41 (1.26) <sub>b</sub>	2.35 (1.33) <sub>b</sub>	15.62	<.001	.077
Threat to Freedom	1.53 (0.99) <sub>a</sub>	2.65 (1.58) <sub>b</sub>	3.42 (1.73) <sub>c</sub>	3.16 (1.71) <sub>c</sub>	35.10	<.001	.159
Self-Rated Anger	1.32 (0.77) <sub>a</sub>	2.41 (1.33) <sub>b</sub>	3.03 (1.49) <sub>c</sub>	3.03 (1.55) <sub>c</sub>	42.58	<.001	.186
Negative Cognitions	1.06 (1.70) <sub>a</sub>	2.02 (2.33) <sub>b</sub>	2.73 (2.52) <sub>bc</sub>	3.05 (2.72) <sub>c</sub>	16.27	<.001	.080
LWCA Anger	1.00 (2.66) <sub>a</sub>	2.18 (5.85) <sub>ab</sub>	3.08 (7.44) <sub>b</sub>	4.14 (7.80) <sub>b</sub>	5.04	.002	.026
Likability	4.60 (0.99) <sub>a</sub>	3.98 (1.16) <sub>b</sub>	3.43 (1.12) <sub>c</sub>	3.24 (1.16) <sub>c</sub>	35.86	<.001	.161
Honesty	4.58 (0.84) <sub>a</sub>	4.14 (1.13) <sub>b</sub>	3.73 (1.13) <sub>c</sub>	3.57 (1.16) <sub>c</sub>	20.89	<.001	.101
Boomerang	2.09 (1.34) <sub>a</sub>	2.93 (1.76) <sub>b</sub>	3.68 (1.77) <sub>c</sub>	3.79 (1.79) <sub>c</sub>	25.69	<.001	.121
Related Boomerang	3.02 (1.63) <sub>a</sub>	3.06 (1.67) <sub>a</sub>	3.65 (1.71) <sub>b</sub>	3.32 (1.68) <sub>ab</sub>	4.55	.004	.024
Vicarious Boomerang	3.97 (1.71) <sub>a</sub>	4.12 (1.72) <sub>ab</sub>	4.52 (1.48) <sub>b</sub>	4.28 (1.50) <sub>ab</sub>	3.10	.026	.016

Note. Means with different subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ , Tukey's post hoc).

**Structural model** — To test the influence of the number of similar identity characteristics manipulation on perception of the situation, felt reactance, endorsed behaviors, and perception of the similar other, we conducted a structural equation model using Amos 19 (bias-corrected bootstrapping, 5,000 iterations, 95% confidence intervals). Because of the large number of items for perceived likability and honesty, the items were parceled prior to testing the model. Due to the related nature of illegitimacy and perception of intent of the similar other person, we allowed the disturbance terms for these sets of variables to covary. Model fit was evaluated using the normed fit index (NFI) and the comparative fit index (CFI), for which values greater than .90 are acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1995).

Following Browne and Cudeck (1993), we set the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of .08 as an acceptable level.

Items significantly loaded on each of the factors, including illegitimacy (.24 to .96), intent to harm (.90, .97), perceived threat to freedom (.90 to .93), self-rated anger (.83 to .94), boomerang (.92 to .96), related boomerang (.93 to .95), vicarious boomerang (.90 to .96), likability (.86 to .94), and honesty (.78 to .91). Additionally, the three anger related factors loaded on the higher order latent construct of reactance. The predicted model adequately fit the data,  $\chi^2(547, N = 563) = 2094.87, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .071, CI{.068; .074}, NFI = .904, CFI = .927.

As shown in Figure 2, the manipulation of identity characteristics similar to participant (no characteristics = 0, one characteristic = 1, two characteristics = 2, three characteristics = 3) predicted illegitimacy ( $\beta = .29, p < .001, CI = .210$  to  $.361$ ) and intent to harm identity ( $\beta = .26, p < .001, CI = .184$  to  $.334$ ).<sup>1</sup> Illegitimacy ( $\beta = .47, p < .001, CI = .362$  to  $.569$ ) and intent to harm ( $\beta = .43, p < .001, CI = .335$  to  $.531$ ) predicted the perceived threat to the freedom to display a distinct identity. Threat to freedom ( $\beta = .84, p < .001, CI = .787$  to  $.892$ ) predicted reactance. Reactance, in turn, predicted motivation to behave ( $\beta = .85, p < .001, CI = .781$  to  $.914$ ) and appraisal of the source of the threat ( $\beta = -.70, p < .001, CI = -.760$  to  $-.633$ ).

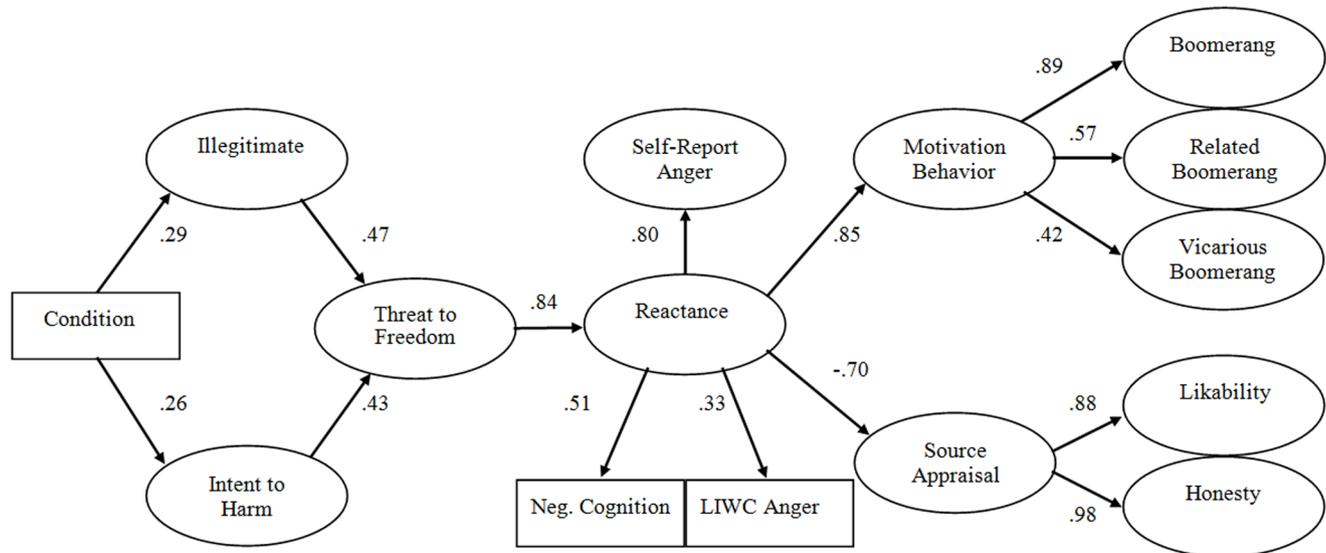


Figure 2. Structural model of influence of copycatting on perceived threat, reactance, and motivation for behavior and appraisal of the copycat. All standardized betas are significant ( $p < .002$ ).

The indirect effect of the manipulation (number of similar characteristics) predicted the experience of a threat to one's freedom to present a distinct public identity (through perceived illegitimacy of the situation and intention of the other person to harm one's identity), reactance (through illegitimacy, intent to harm, and threat to freedom), and motivation to act and an unfavorable opinion of the similar other (through illegitimacy, intent to harm, threat to freedom, and reactance) (see Table 2 for standardized betas of indirect effects and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals; all indirect effects were significant at  $p < .002$  two-tailed). Of the three behaviors to reduce reactance (i.e., boomerang, related boomerang, and vicarious boomerang), the strongest associations between the condition, threat to freedom, and felt reactance was with boomerang. The model suggests that as a greater number of public identity characteristics are copied participants view the situation as unjust and the similar other as intentionally attempting to harm one's identity, which, in turn, predicts a feeling of threat to one's identity predicting reactance.

Felt reactance then predicts an unfavorable evaluation of the other person and a desire to confront the similar other.

Table 2

*Indirect Effects (Lower and Upper Confidence Intervals) of Similarity Manipulation, Illegitimacy, Intent to Harm, Threat to Freedom, and Reactance*

Variable	Manipulation			Illegitimacy			Intent to Harm			Threat to Freedom			Reactance		
	$\beta$	CI <sub>L</sub>	CI <sub>U</sub>	$\beta$	CI <sub>L</sub>	CI <sub>U</sub>	$\beta$	CI <sub>L</sub>	CI <sub>U</sub>	$\beta$	CI <sub>L</sub>	CI <sub>U</sub>	$\beta$	CI <sub>L</sub>	CI <sub>U</sub>
Threat to Freedom	.25	.182	.310	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Reactance	.21	.152	.267	.40	.298	.493	.36	.284	.441	–	–	–	–	–	–
Motivation Behavior	.18	.127	.234	.34	.249	.435	.31	.242	.382	.72	.644	.793	–	–	–
Boomerang	.16	.112	.210	.30	.223	.390	.28	.212	.346	.64	.560	.709	.76	.656	.829
Related Boomerang	.10	.067	.138	.19	.130	.265	.18	.131	.228	.41	.318	.498	.49	.389	.573
Vicarious Boomerang	.08	.048	.107	.14	.093	.209	.13	.092	.180	.31	.220	.399	.36	.267	.459
Source Appraisal	-.15	-.193	-.105	-.28	-.352	-.208	-.25	-.317	-.198	-.59	-.648	-.531	–	–	–
Likability	-.13	-.171	-.092	-.24	-.313	-.183	-.22	-.282	-.174	-.52	-.576	-.458	-.62	-.680	-.542
Honesty	-.14	-.189	-.103	-.27	-.346	-.202	-.25	-.309	-.194	-.58	-.640	-.520	-.69	-.746	-.620

*Note.* Standardized betas and 95% confidence intervals, bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 iterations, all indirect effects are significant at  $p < .002$ .

## Discussion

The results of Study 3 suggest that victims' reaction to the interpersonal threat to public identity posed by copycats is a form of reactance. Victims' perception of the illegitimacy of the copying and the intentionality of the perpetrator to harm one's identity predict the perception that one's freedom to display a public identity is threatened, which then predicts reactance, predicting a motivation to act and an unfavorable impression of the similar other. The findings also support the fourth component of interpersonal threats to public identity (i.e., perpetrator of the threat undermines one's freedom to display a unique public identity). Furthermore, the results are consistent with prior appraisal theories of emotion (Frijda et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman et al., 1990) whereby an emotion eliciting event (victim of copying) predicts appraisals (e.g., illegitimacy), which then predicts emotion (i.e., anger), which then predicts action tendencies (e.g., confrontation with the perpetrator).

## General Discussion

The purposes of the present series of studies were to examine whether copycatting represents an interpersonal threat to public identity and to explore the underlying processes of victims' experiences of anger. As predicted, illegitimacy and intention to harm one's public identity affected the degree of anger in Study 1. When the identity characteristics were unimportant to one's identity, victims' anger was attenuated (Study 2). Lastly, the structural equation model of reactance tested in Study 3, supported the notion that victims' reaction to copycatting are a form of reactance to the perceived threat of the freedom to display a unique public identity. Together, the present analysis substantiates the definition of interpersonal threats to public identity. The results support the notion that victims' reactions to such threats, and to copycatting specifically, are a form of reactance to the illegitimate and intentional threat to one's freedom to display a unique and valued public identity.

Copycatting is defined as a situation in which a person intentionally copies distinctive and valued characteristics of another person's public identity. Because individuals strive to promote and maintain a unique and valued public identity that others recognize (Becker, 1971; Buss, 2001; Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1964; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980), copycats threaten how others view one's identity. Supporting past, realistic laboratory research (Reysen et al., 2012), participants scored higher on measures of anger, damage to public identity, intentionality, and desire to confront the copycat when many (vs. few) public identity characteristics were copied (Study 3). Furthermore, supporting past vignette research (Reysen et al., 2009), participants scored lower on measures regarding the honesty and likability of the copycat when many (vs. few) identity characteristics were copied. Although prior research shows that nonconscious similarity (i.e., mimicry) leads to more positive interpersonal interactions (Ashton-James et al., 2007; Stel et al., 2008; van Baaren et al., 2004), the present results reinforce the notion that once the similarity is perceived to be intentional and illegitimate, negative reactions are elicited. Previous research consistently shows victims of copycatting to express anger, however no research has empirically examined the underlying causes of this reaction.

Consistent with appraisal theories of emotion (Frijda et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman et al., 1990) and psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966), victims' perception of the copycat as illegitimately and intentionally threatening their freedom to display a valued and distinctive identity predicted anger scores. In Study 3, participants' perception of illegitimacy and intention to harm one's identity predicted the perception that one's freedom to display a public identity was threatened. The perceived threat to freedom predicted reactance that, in turn, predicted an unfavorable view of the perpetrator of the threat and behavioral intention to confront the perpetrator. Together, the results show that copycatting victims' anger is a form of reactance to the subjective appraisal that another person is illegitimately and intentionally threatening one's freedom to display a valued and distinctive public identity.

Although the findings that illegitimacy and perpetrator's intention to harm add to an already large body of theory and research showing that these appraisals predict anger (e.g., Averill, 1982; Dodge, 1993; Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Frijda et al., 1989; Orobio de Castro et al., 2002; Roseman et al., 1990), the antecedents to anger observed in the present studies hold novel implications for research examining interpersonal threats to public identity and the theory of psychological reactance. First, the outcomes of copycatting were significantly influenced by the features of interpersonal threats to public identity. Greater anger was expressed by participants when the act of copycatting was (1) illegitimate, (2) intentional, (3) the victim valued the copied identity characteristics, and (4) the copying was viewed as undermining their freedom to display a valued public identity. Second, prior reactance research (e.g., Lindsey, 2005; Quick, 2012) shows that perceiving a threat to one's freedom leads to greater anger (which is operationalized as a component of reactance arousal).

The model in Study 3 provides initial evidence that victims' response to copycatting is a form of reactance. However, the present results suggest that additional antecedents may also influence the perception that one's freedom is threatened. When another person is clearly the perpetrator of the threat, participants' perception of the illegitimacy of the situation and the intention of the perpetrator may also contribute to the perception that a freedom is threatened. Although interpersonal threats to public identity are a specific form of psychological reactance (i.e., social threat with personal implications), the antecedents may be fruitfully extended to other forms of threats to freedoms (e.g., insults, group derogation). Further research, with the model presented in Study 3 of the antecedents, reactance and confrontation behavior associated with threats to freedom, is needed.

Beyond their agreement with appraisal and reactance theories, the results also support prior theorizing regarding individuals' desire to protect one's public identity (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1964). As individuals seek to produce recognizable public identities (Becker, 1971; Buss, 2001; Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1964; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980) and seek validation of those identities (e.g., Swann, 1999), copycats threaten how others will view one's public identity. Rather than a threat to uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), the present results suggest that victims of copycatting view one's right to display a distinct identity as a threat to one's freedom (Goffman, 1959). Thus, although, as stated by Steve Jobs, great artists may steal (Cringely & Sen, 1996), victims of copycatting do not view imitation as any sort of flattery.

The present studies are limited by the use of undergraduate participants. The current samples of participants consisted of undergraduate students. As previously suggested (Reysen et al., 2009), older adults or individuals with an interdependent worldview may experience copycatting differently. Older adults may be less concerned with maintaining a unique public identity than giving back to the younger generation (Erikson, 1956). Furthermore, individuals with an interdependent worldview may be more concerned with the harmony of the group than defending the self from threats to one's public identity. However, research examining reactance has shown the effect in settings with cultural patterns of interdependence (Quick & Kim, 2009). Because the present set of studies relied on vignettes to engender the threat of copycatting, participants may have relied on lay theories of how to react to such situations rather than responding to the situation as they would in real life. However, prior research (Robinson & Clore, 2001) show vignettes to elicit similar emotions as those in real life situations, and the results are consistent with the manipulation of copycatting in a realistic laboratory experiment (Reysen et al., 2012). Lastly, the mean responses on the anger measure were above the midpoint of the scale in Studies 1 and 2 for the hypothesized conditions, but participants' scores were below the midpoint in Study 3. Consistent with the focus of the research, participants' responses on the measures changed in the expected direction with the manipulation of degree of copying. However, self-report measures may have dampened participants' degree of response. Indirect measures (e.g., assignment of hot sauce to the copycat, physiological measures such as heart rate or skin conductance) may provide higher ratings and fruitful alternative measures of anger than self-report.

Across three studies, copycatting was shown to represent an interpersonal threat to public identity. Victims of copycatting express anger, view the copycat unfavorably, perceive the situation as illegitimate and the copycat as intentionally acting to harm one's public identity, view the act as a threat to one's freedom, and endorse confrontation with the copycat. Copycatting victims' experience of anger is predicted by the perception of illegitimacy of the copying, intentionality of the copycat to harm one's public identity, and the perceived threat to the freedom to display a valued public identity. Lastly, victims' reaction to copycatting is a form of reactance to the loss of freedom to display one's public identity. Given that individuals face a variety of interpersonal threats to public identity (e.g., plagiarism, gossip, relationship breakups), further research is needed to examine methods of reactance reduction.

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