Who Hates the Most: An Analysis of Symbolic Threats to Different Facets of Identity and the Effects of Centrality

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Abstract

This study examines how symbolic threats to different identity facets influence feelings of hate, considering the centrality of these identity facets. Prior research has emphasized identity threat as a key driver of hate but has overlooked the differentiation between threats to demographic, preference-based, and value-based identity facets. Using an experimental design, 489 American participants were randomly exposed to threatening messages tailored to their previously identified central identity facets. Subsequently, they rated their hate reactions using an adapted Passionate Hate Scale. An ANCOVA analysis revealed a non-significant difference between identity facets, suggesting similar responses across identity types. However, identity centrality was positively associated with stronger hate reactions, indicating that regardless of identity facet, the more central it is to individuals, the more intense the hate they experience when it is threatened. Contrary to expectations, threats to value-based identity facets did not elicit stronger hate reactions compared to other facets, nor was there a significant interaction effect between identity type and centrality. These outcomes might have been influenced by weak threat perception. Nevertheless, our findings highlight identity centrality as a crucial driver of hate reactions, contributing to our understanding of interpersonal interactions. Therefore, these insights might inform interventions aimed at mitigating social polarization by emphasizing the protection of central identity facets.

Keywords: Identity threat, Hate, Identity Centrality, Symbolic Threats

Who hates the most: an analysis of symbolic threats to different facets of identity and the effects of centrality

Hate has long been under-researched, and relatively little theorizing has been done about it. As Fischer et al. (2018) put it, this might be due to its rarity and complexity, or even to the social inappropriateness of the emotion. Even whether hate is considered an emotion is still a matter of debate (Fischer et al., 2018). Nevertheless, understanding more about hate remains an important endeavor. Previous research has established the relationship between identity threat and negative emotions (Martínez et al., 2022a), and among them, hate stands out as particularly harmful due to its intensity and lasting impact. Given the increasing social and political polarization, particularly in the United States (Hare & Poole, 2014), it is crucial to understand how identity threats facilitate the emergence of hate feelings to address intergroup hostilities and foster social cohesion. However, to our knowledge, there has been no examination of how threats to different *identity facets* affect hate reactions. Furthermore, hate as a reaction to particularly central identity facets has yet to be explored. We aim to fill this gap by testing whether people experience stronger feelings of hate when different facets of their identity are threatened, and whether this depends on the centrality of these facets. For this, in the following sections, we will first introduce hate as an emotion, then elaborate on social identity theory, the centrality of identity facets, and finally, differentiate between threats to inherent versus chosen identity facets.

Hate

Research shows that symbolic threats (threats to culture, values, or norms) rather than realistic threats (threats to well-being or resources) create more extreme forms of negative emotion, i.e., hate (Martínez et al., 2022a). While various theories of hate exist, such as the Triangular Theory of Hate (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008), there has not been a commonly

accepted view of it. Nonetheless, hate is most often understood to be a negative, enduring, and intense emotional experience characterized by feelings of hostility, aversion, and aggression towards the target (Martínez et al., 2022a; Sternberg, 2003). Compared to other negative emotions, like anger, disgust, or dislike, hate has a long-lasting and destructive nature, explicitly aimed at the psychological, social, or physical elimination of the hated individual or group (Fischer et al., 2018). However, hate and these other negative emotions are not mutually exclusive: particularly disgust and contempt are closely linked to it (Martínez et al., 2022b). Fischer et al. (2018) further explain that hate is not merely reactive but also proactive, often motivating individuals toward actions designed to eliminate the target, thereby distinguishing it from other emotions that lack such a definitive goal. Hate as an emotional appraisal is, therefore, especially intense, as its behavioral goal is to eliminate the target, either physically, psychologically, or socially (Fischer et al., 2018).

Identity, centrality, and threat

The nature of the self and identity has long been a central question in psychology (Hammack, 2008). Identity is a fundamental aspect of how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. It is generally understood to be the "[...] sense of self defined by a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics [...] and a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles" (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). This definition highlights that identity is understood to consist of multiple facets, including both personal attributes and social roles. Beyond individual characteristics, people derive a significant amount of their identity from their memberships in social groups, which provide them with a sense of belonging and meaning (Abrams & Hogg, 2010). People see themselves through the lens of their nationality, occupation, or even through being a fan of a sports team (Ashmore et al., 2004).

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explicitly highlights that identity is shaped by group memberships. Instead of purely viewing identity as an individual construct, the theory argues that who we are is largely determined by the social groups we belong to. Our self-concept is rooted in social categories such as our nationality, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and even the values that we share with others. The SIT posits that individuals categorize members of their group as the *ingroup*, while the others are understood to be part of the *outgroup* (Tajfel, 1970). Their ingroup shapes their thoughts and behavior through the internalization of group norms and values, which become part of their self-concept. Furthermore, the theory states individuals are then motivated to positively distinguish their ingroup from their outgroup to improve their self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 2010). When this positive distinctiveness is challenged, it poses a threat to social identity (Branscombe et al., 1999).

As highlighted by Tajfel and Turner (1979), when a threat occurs, individuals have the option to either leave their existing groups and find a more positively distinct group or to improve the positive distinctiveness of their group. Particularly, the latter option often leads to negative feelings and actions, such as discrimination, anger, and hate towards the outgroup, to restore the relative standing of their ingroup. Since self-esteem is directly linked to identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), people experience strong emotional reactions when their identity is challenged (Branscombe et al., 1999). When aspects of the identity are questioned or devalued, individuals often react negatively, experiencing emotions like anger, contempt, or, in some cases, hate (Branscombe et al., 1999; Rozmann, 2025). This is known as an *identity threat*, which occurs when an individual perceives that a part of their identity is being undermined, attacked, or misrepresented (Petriglieri, 2011). Particularly in intergroup contexts, identity threats create strong negative emotions. For example, Rozmann (2025) showed that the perception of an

outgroup undermining one's cultural identity is associated with increased hate towards that group.

However, not all social identity facets are equally important in shaping such emotional reactions. The concept of *identity centrality* highlights why some threats elicit stronger responses than others. Self-categorization theory (R. H. Turner, 1978) suggests that certain group memberships take a more central role in the individual's self-concepts. Identity centrality refers to the importance of the identity facet to the overall identity of the person (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) as well as the chronic salience of that facet (Ashmore et al., 2004). Interestingly, research by Leach et al. (2008) shows that higher centrality is associated with increased perception of threat, which suggests that the more central a facet is to the identity, the more hate the person might feel when the facet is threatened. Further evidence of this idea comes from a recent meta-analysis by Hinton et al. (2022), which showed that LGBTQ+ individuals show heightened perceptions of threats of discrimination when their LGBTQ+ facet was central. Additionally, the strength of identification seems to increase the emotional intensity in intergroup conflicts (Leach et al., 2015). While strength in identification and centrality are not the same, they tend to be connected, as strong identification involves higher centrality (Leach et al., 2008). Therefore, in this study, we expect that the more central an identity facet is, the stronger the hate reaction when it is threatened (H1).

Identity threats to different facets of identity

When looking at different facets of identity, it can be differentiated between inherent and chosen group memberships. People are either "born" into demographic groups like their ethnicity, sex, and nationality, or they choose certain groups over the course of their lives, for example, their political orientation, religion, and moral values (Gee, 2017). Research by

Ellemers et al. (1999) suggests that affective commitment to a group particularly depends on whether the group was assigned or chosen. However, similar to identity centrality, stronger affective commitment does not necessarily imply stronger identification with the group; rather, it reflects the emotional investment that forms part of the group's social identity (Leach et al., 2008). Nevertheless, this suggests people might identify more strongly when a particular identity facet is chosen, as opposed to inherent facets of identity. As Branscombe et al. (1999) suggest, this might then lead to a higher perception of threat and more hate feelings.

Additional support for the notion that threats to different identity facets lead to varying levels of hate comes from research on *moral convictions*. Importantly, chosen identity facets, in particular value-based identity facets, are more likely to be tied to moral convictions, which can amplify the emotional intensity of reactions to threats against those facets. Moral convictions are assumptions of universal rights or wrongs that are perceived to transcend all boundaries (Skitka, 2002). They differ substantially from equally strong, yet non-moral attitudes, and tend to provoke strong reactions when challenged (Skitka et al., 2005). Additionally, moral convictions lead to greater social and physical distancing and intolerance, which parallels hate's end goal of elimination (Skitka et al., 2005). Particularly, chosen identity facets grounded in social values such as environmental stance, political orientation, and religiosity become tied to an individual's moral convictions (Skitka et al., 2005). This suggests that identity facets grounded in strong moral convictions may elicit greater emotional intensity and potentially feelings of hate when threatened, compared to less morally charged facets (e.g., preference-based facets). Therefore, we expect threats to value-based identities, in particular, to lead to more hate feelings compared to the other two identity facets (H2).

The current research

This study aims to understand the relationship between hate and identity threat and explore how threats to different identity facets and their relative importance to individuals' self-constructs might influence this relationship. In particular, we predict that the more central an identity facet, regardless of its type, the bigger the increase in hate reactions when threatened (H1). Further, the chosen identity facets, particularly facets based on social values, may trigger stronger hate reactions when threatened (H2). Finally, we hypothesize that centrality will interact with the type of identity facet, such that the positive effect of centrality on hate will be the strongest for value-based identity facets (H3).

Methods

Participants

A prior power analysis was conducted to determine the required sample size for a model suitable for testing the hypotheses within a larger project, including a 3 (identity type) x (3 threat type) conditions and one covariate. The analysis was intended to detect medium effect sizes (f = 0.25), with an alpha level of .05 and a desired power of 0.9. Based on this, we planned to recruit N = 330 participants. However, due to technical setbacks with the randomization, we increased the sample size to N = 608 to ensure an equal number of participants in each condition and dropped the no-threat control condition due to imbalance in the cells. Four participants were excluded after withdrawing their consent, 19 failed the attention check, and two participants were removed because they gave identical descriptions in the personal prompt. Of the final sample (N = 489) recruited through Prolific, 251 were female (50.3%), 245 male (49.1%), and 3 other (0.6%). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 81, with a mean age of 39.45 years (SD = 13.707). All participants were citizens of the United States of America.

Instruments

Manipulation

As part of the questionnaire, participants were first asked to create a personal profile to match them with others who are similar to them. To improve the connection with their profile, participants were then asked to create a nickname and a short statement (max. 200 characters) of "How your best friend or someone who knows you really well would describe you?" which participants were told would be shown on their profile. They then continued with creating their actual profile based on their identity. For this, the participants were required to choose two specific aspects of their identity (identity facets) that best reflect them as a person and rank them accordingly. This happened for three different identity categories: demographics, preferences, and values. For each of these categories, participants were presented with a list of possible identity facets from which they had to choose. Following this, they should signal the overall centrality of the facet that they ranked first. Afterwards, the participants had the opportunity to change their profile again and were then asked to wait for another person to react to it. Following a 15-second waiting time, a threatening message targeting one of the chosen facets would appear. These messages were randomly chosen to target one of the three different identity categories and were tailored to the chosen identity facets, which were ranked first in the profile creation. Each participant only received one threatening message, which was based upon a categorization threat (e.g. "So you’re a [piped sex]? Yeah, because that totally tells me everything I need to know about you already.") or a distinctiveness threat (e.g. "Being a [piped political ideology] isn’t exactly a unique trait. There are entire movements filled with people just like you").

Centrality

Each participant had to rank their respective first chosen identity facet for all three identity categories. Based on this choice, they had to choose how important their first choice was to their overall identity on a 7-point Likert scale, 1 (*Not important at all)* to 7 (*Extremely important;* e.g., "How important is the category you ranked first?").

Hate

The assessment of Hate was conducted with an adaptation of the Passionate Hate Scale developed by Zeki & Romaya (2008). The scale is based on the triangular theory of hate (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008) and includes three subscales measuring anger, disgust, and contempt. Minor adjustments were made to check attention, and three items were reverse-coded. In total, the scale involved 13 items, including four items for each subscale and one attention check question. Examples of the items are "I cannot control my anger towards this kind of person" (anger), "this kind of person is really distrusting" (disgust), and "the world would be a better place without this kind of person" (contempt). These items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Procedure

Prior to the actual study, we conducted a pilot study to test the instrument and gather general feedback. Based on this, we adjusted the instrument slightly and improved it as needed. Participants of the pilot were gathered through a convenience sample and were not reimbursed for their efforts.

Before starting the online questionnaire, participants read a short overview of the study and gave their consent for data collection. Within the Qualtrics environment, following the threat

response, the participants were asked to rate the threat perception of the message on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not threatening at all*) to 7 (*extremely threatening*) and by a questionnaire to rate their hate feelings towards the fictional person who reacted to their profiles (adapted from the Passionate Hate Scale). At the end, participants were asked to provide their sociodemographic information. Finally, they gave their consent for the data collection after reading the debriefing. The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the University of Groningen. Furthermore, it took the participants an average of 18 minutes, for which they were compensated according to U.S. minimum wage.

Design and Analytical Strategy

Our study used an experimental design to understand the differences between groups through a cross-sectional analysis. For this, we employed a one-way between-subjects design with three identity conditions and the centrality of the threatened identity facet. An ANCOVA in Jamovi was used for the statistical analysis and to test the main effects of identity categories (factor) and centrality (covariate), as well as the interaction between the two on hate feelings.

Results

To answer our research question, we predict that higher centrality would lead to more hate reactions when threatened (H1). Further, value-based identity threats may trigger stronger hate reactions (H2). Finally, value-based identity facets are especially central to the overall identity and therefore create the strongest hate reactions when threatened (H3).

Preliminary Analysis

Before conducting the main analysis, we tested the data for normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. For the normality, a Q-Q plot was computed (see appendix A, figure 2). The plot showed no sign of non-normality, with a distribution close to the reference line. However, the Shapiro-Wilk test suggested a departure from normality (p = .016), but since n is large (N = 489) and the histogram of hate is roughly bell-shaped (see appendix A, figure 3), this is not a reason for concern. Homoscedasticity was also assessed with Levene's test and showed that the assumption was met (p = .409). Descriptive statistics for the main study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Hate, Centrality, and Perceived Threat

	N	Mean	Mode	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Hate	489	3.91	3	1.182	1.08	6.83
Value id centrality	489	6.15	6	0.852	2.00	7.00
Preference id centrality	489	6.24	6	0.749	3.00	7.00
Demographic id centrality	489	6.00	6	1.050	1.00	7.00
Threatened id centrality	489	6.15	6	0.933	1.00	7.00
Threat perception	489	3.16	1	2.040	1.00	7.00

Subsequently, a repeated-measure ANOVA was conducted to assess whether the centrality of the different facets differs significantly. Mauchly's test indicated a violation of the sphericity assumption, $W = 0.918$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the Greenhouse-Geisser estimate ($\varepsilon = 0.924$) was used to correct the degrees of freedom. The analysis revealed a significant result, $F(1.85, 901.63) = 14.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .029$, indicating that participants rated the facets as differing in

importance to their identity. A post-hoc analysis using Bonferroni correction to control for Type I error, showed a significant difference between preference-based facets and demographic-based facets (MD = 0.24, $p < .001$), as well as between values-based facets and demographic-based facets (MD = 0.15, $p = .005$). No significant difference was found between value-based facets and preference-based facets (MD = 0.09, $p = .071$). Results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Post Hoc comparison of centrality of the identity facets

Comparison							
Centrality		**Centrality**	**Difference**	**SE**	**df**	**t**	$\mathbf{p_{bonferroni}}$
value	-	**preference**	-0.086	0.0379	488	-2.27	0.071
	-	**demographic**	0.153	0.0485	488	3.16	0.005
preference	-	**demographic**	0.239	0.0473	488	5.06	<.001

Manipulation Check

Since the control group had to be excluded from our analysis, we could not assess the significance of our manipulation. Subsequently, no test was performed. However, the low mode of 1 (see Table 1) on the threat perception scale indicates that most participants did not perceive the message as threatening.

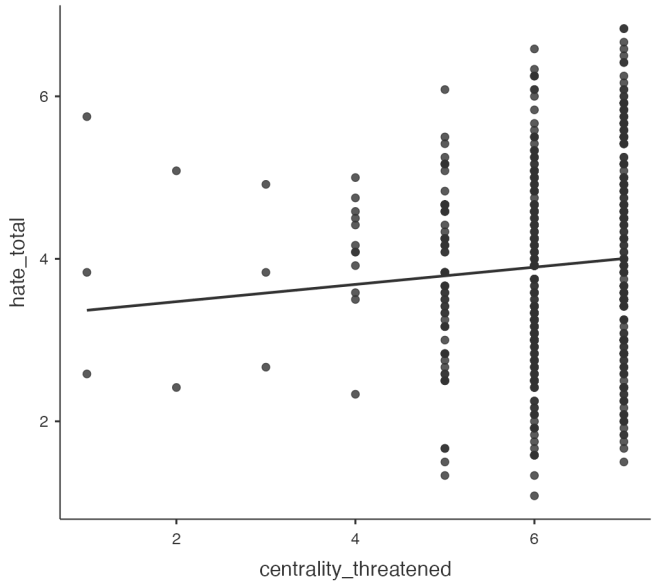
Main Analysis

For our first hypothesis, we explored the main effect of centrality on hate. This analysis revealed a significant effect, $F(1, 483) = 4.81$, $p = .029$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.010$, such that greater centrality of the

threatened identity facet predicted an increase in hate, giving support to our second hypothesis (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Scatterplot of the main effect of centrality on hate scores



Further, we examined the main effect of threats to different identity facets on hate. The ANCOVA result showed a non-significant main effect of threats to a particular identity facet on hate, $F(2, 483) = 1.77$, $p = .172$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.007$. These results suggest that threats to different facets of identity lead to not significantly different levels of hate.

Finally, we analyzed the interaction effect between the identity facet and centrality. The analysis of this interaction effect showed a non-significant result, $F(2, 483) = 1.50$, $p = .225$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.006$. These results indicate that centrality does not affect the relationship between threats to different identity facets and hate.

Discussion

Using an experimental design, we aimed to investigate the effects of threats to different identity facets and their respective centrality on the strength of hate feelings experienced. For this, we hypothesized that threats to more central identity facets (H1), as well as threats to value-based identity facets independently of one another and the centrality of them, lead to more hate (H2). Furthermore, we hypothesized that value-based identity facets would be especially central and thus lead to stronger hate feelings when these facets are threatened (H3). The findings suggest that threats to different identity facets lead to a non-significant difference in hate feelings. Additionally, our research showed a significant positive effect of centrality on hate feelings. The more central a facet is to the identity, independently of which facet, the more hate feelings the individual will experience after a threat to it. Finally, the analysis of the interaction between centrality and value-based identity facet did not reveal a significant relationship, suggesting that the effect of centrality is independent. It appears that the increase in hate caused by centrality does not differ between the different identity facets.

Our analysis revealed a rather low level of threat perception (M = 3.16), with a mode of 1. This highlights the weakness of our manipulation and might at least partially explain the non-significant results of H2 and H3, as well as the small effect size of the significant results of H1 ($\eta_p^2 = 0.010$). The lack of perceived threat may explain why the study could not find a difference between threats to different identity threats. An explanation for the lack of threat perception is the lack of intimacy. Interpersonal hate, as scrutinized by our study, needs some kind of relationship between the hater and the target. In the present study, the participants were shown the username of the person writing the message, but had no other connection to this person. As such, they could have possibly just put off their message as someone rude, but not

perceive them as an inherently bad person. While these are speculations, research still shows that we feel the most hate for people we are somewhat close to (Aumer-Ryan & Hatfield, 2007). This makes sense, as we can only feel strong emotions for someone we have a connection with. If we are indifferent to the person, we are probably going to ignore them rather than feeling intense emotional responses, like hate (Leach et al., 2008). While this explanation does not paint the full picture of the results, it is still an important insight that should be taken into account when interpreting the other results.

Nonetheless, we found a significant main effect of centrality. This is in line with the research of Leach et al. (2008), which suggests that threats to more central identity facets lead to greater perception of ingroup and outgroup events. Therefore, centrality seems to be a potential influence on the emotional reaction to symbolic threats, independent of identity type. Similar results were also found by McCoy and Major (2003), who showed that Latinos for whom their racial identity was strongly central had a greater perception of threat when reading about pervasive racism against Latinos compared to those who identified less strongly with their racial identity. Our research reinforces that emotional reactions, especially hate, intensify when individuals perceive threats against highly important or central facets. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed a rather low effect size. An explanation for this could be found in the hypothesis made by Branscombe et al. (1999), who suggested that higher centrality might act as a buffer against symbolic threats. They theorized that particular minority group identification might lead to attributing negative treatment to discrimination or prejudice. However, our study did not control for the social status of the groups, and therefore, we cannot say this with certainty. Furthermore, this hypothesis is still contested, as McCoy and Major (2003) did not find evidence for it in their study. An alternative explanation could be found in the design of our study. The questionnaire

asked the participants to choose identity facets that best reflect them as a person. After this initial selection, they then rated the centrality of these facets. This approach naturally encourages participants to choose facets which they feel strongly about, leading to the clustering and inflation of the centrality ratings (mode 6 out of 7). Consequently, the centrality measure was affected by a ceiling effect, leading to reduced statistical sensitivity (Podsakoff et al., 2003). It is worth noting that participants had to choose identity facets for all three identity categories. As such, meaningful variation in centrality was still present, as reflected in the significant difference in the centrality between identity facets found in the preliminary analysis. Therefore, the ceiling effect might have affected the effect size, but did not restrict the ability to detect the relationship.

Building upon the research of Ellemers et al. (1999), we assumed that self-selected identity facets (value- and preference-based identity facets) would have higher affective commitment and therefore lead to more hate when threatened. We further argued, in accordance with Skitka (2002), that arguments grounded in moral convictions would lead to particularly strong emotional reactions. Therefore, we assumed that value-based identities are especially likely to trigger stronger hate feelings when threatened. However, while our preliminary analysis showed that self-selected identity facets show more centrality compared to inherent identity facets, this did not translate into more hate experience when these facets were threatened. Furthermore, the ANCOVA revealed no significant difference in hate scores across the identity facet. As our first hypothesis revealed a significant effect for centrality, we would have assumed that the difference in centrality would also translate into the hate scores. Notably, even though a non-significant difference, threats to preference-based identity facets evoked the highest hate scores. Therefore, a first explanation for the lack of significant results might be that moral conviction could not be triggered due to the weak manipulation. Additionally, not all value-based

identity facets are grounded in moral conviction (Skitka et al., 2005). For example, someone might hold a seemingly morally charged argument, like believing in the fight against climate change for moral reasons, whereas another might do so primarily for economic reasons or because it creates jobs. Therefore, whether a given issue elicits moral conviction depends on the individual's interpretation and not solely on the topic itself. Furthermore, previous findings have shown an attitude-behavior gap, where even strongly held values often do not translate into meaningful reactions (Carrington et al., 2014). These factors might have influenced the perception of threats to value-based identity facets, and therefore, they were less influential and showed less hate reaction than anticipated.

Finally, the analysis revealed no significant interaction between identity categories and centrality. This suggests that the effect of centrality on hate did not vary across the three identity categories. In other words, while more central identity facets generally led to stronger hate reactions, this effect did not vary across identity facet types. Further, value-based identity facets were not uniquely sensitive to centrality in eliciting hate responses compared to the other facets. This indicates that the subjective importance of a facet might be more influential than the category in regulating the response to a threat, and is consistent with our main findings that centrality predicts hate across all identity facets.

Implications

The present findings significantly augment existing academic research and broaden our understanding of interpersonal interactions. They show the nuances of identity and further improve our knowledge about reactions to symbolic threats. Particularly, the centrality of an identity facet seems to be one of the main drivers behind the hate experienced as a reaction to symbolic threats. This is in line with social identity and self-categorization theory (Tajfel &

Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987), reinforcing the importance of centrality for understanding identity and highlighting that the self-relevance of the group membership will shape one's response to group-relevant events. Further, previous research and theories have particularly focused on the centrality of threatened stigmatized minority identities (see Hinton et al., 2022; McCoy & Major, 2003). Notably, the Intragroup Status and Health model (Begeny & Huo, 2018) focuses on the centrality of ethnic minority identities. The model explains that particularly central identities lead the individual to view the world through the lens of that identity, giving a minority group more opportunities to see the discrimination they face. Our research suggests that this effect of particularly central identity facets is not limited to minority identities, but can be applied generally to all facets. This idea is also consistent with (Ellemers et al., 2002), which highlights identity centrality as the main determinant of the reaction to a threat. Their taxonomy underscores substantial differences in cognition, affect, and behavior to threats caused by variations in the strength of group identification. Therefore, what seems to matter is not if one is chronically stigmatized, but rather that one is threatened, to evoke strong, hateful reactions.

Our research generated novel insights into the role of threats to different identity facets. The lack of differences between the different identity facets suggests that general models of symbolic threat and hate, as a result, may apply across a wide range of identities. Hate as an emotional reaction to symbolic threats can be activated by any valued identity. Previous studies have already shown that attacks on numerous different identities, such as racial identity (Sellers & Shelton, 2003) or feminist identity (Cichocka et al., 2013), can create strong perceptions of threats. While our research did not lead to a definitive answer to this question of whether different identity facets have equal reactions to threats, it still suggests that this might be the

case. Future studies could investigate these dynamics further and uncover if these differences might still exist.

From a practical standpoint, our research holds particular relevance for grappling with social polarization and interpersonal hostilities. The findings that centrality is one of the main drivers of hate as a reaction to threat suggest that interventions designed to reduce hate should aim to find especially central identities to target before creating them. Centrality seems to be a risk factor for being more prone to hate those who threaten that identity. These insights could be used to address increasing polarization by identifying highly central identities and fostering a more complex or multifaceted identity. Research by Brewer and Pierce (2005) shows that greater identity complexity is linked to increased out-group tolerance; people who have multiple identities might spread their emotional attachment to these identities and therefore may react less hatefully to any one threat. As such, the development of more complex identities might decrease the vulnerability to hate. Another practical implication relates to the integration of immigrants into their host countries. Immigrants often face threats to their cultural identity when integrating into a host country (Croucher, 2013). These might be especially strong when they are pressured to alter facets central to their identity. Integration policies should therefore adopt a more individualistic approach to immigration that respects and accommodates immigrants' central identity facets to foster well-being and social cohesion.

Strengths

A notable strength of this research regards its innovative experimental approach we took to investigate the effects of threats to different identity facets and their centrality. We created an environment in which we could systematically manipulate identity threats in a controlled environment. Our manipulation created a path for further exploration into the reactions to diverse

forms of identity threats, which were previously rare due to ethical and practical concerns. By having participants create their profiles and then exposing them to tailored insulting comments, we achieved a personal relevance and a degree of realism. This allowed participants to show authentic emotions and us to observe genuine (if mild) hate reactions. Our study also benefited from a relatively large sample size ($N = 489$), which improves the generalizability of the findings. This sample size gave us decent statistical power to detect even small effects, such as the effect of centrality. Finally, our measurement of hate was based upon the Passionate Hate Scale, based upon (Sternberg, 2003), providing a multidimensional and theory-grounded assessment of hate.

Limitations and Future Directions

We also need to acknowledge our study's limitations. First, despite our efforts, the experimental manipulation may have been too weak to create strong hate in our participants. The implication and possible cause have already been briefly discussed. Still, it is important to note that in an online setting, people show less outrage to inflammatory comments made anonymously compared to a face-to-face interaction (Puryear & Vandello, 2019). This might be due to the lack of intimacy with the hater, the perceived realism, or the general strength of the threat. While future studies might address the first two issues by creating a more realistic profile of the attacker, making them less faceless, the latter might be harder to correct without crossing ethical lines. Additionally, the study still might be bound to be affected by reactivity bias, due to the artificial context of an online study. We also need to highlight the lack of a control group in our study. Due to this, it was difficult to assess the strength of our manipulation. As a result, we could not determine whether the observed hate reactions were a result of the threat, or if they may have reported similar responses in the absence of it. Including a control group in future

research would therefore allow a more precise assessment of the effects of symbolic threats on hate. Lastly, we must call to attention that there are generalizability considerations. Our sample, even though large, was exclusively American adults, meaning that these results might only hold in a U.S. context.

Conclusion

Our study provides new and valuable insights into the question posed in the title: "*Who hates the most?*" Our findings suggest that this is not simply members of one particular group who have a greater propensity to hate when their identity is threatened. Rather, the intensity of hate depends on the centrality of the identity facet to the individual's self-concept. Furthermore, our study suggests that threats to participants' different identities elicit similar levels of hate across the identity facets, underscoring that theoretically any identity can become affected equally by threats. Our identities are multifaceted, and whether it is our birth traits, lifestyle, or beliefs, any facet can potentially be weaponized by an outgroup attacker if it is sufficiently central. Additionally, our study generated evidence for a general model of hate response across identity facets, helping to move beyond the idea that hate is uniquely tied to certain groups. Practically, the findings carry cautious optimism, as the lack of a particular guaranteed trigger of hate leads to fewer potential targets for further polarization. Additionally, this means there are multiple targets to defuse hate. Still, the role of identity centrally highlights that strong identification can be a double-edged sword. It might provide individuals with meaning and belonging, but it leaves them vulnerable to extreme emotional reactions when that identity is challenged. Future research could build upon our findings by creating a more realistic and threatening manipulation and addressing the issues of generalization by including a broader sample. Ultimately, "who hates the

most" is not a fixed designation of any one group, but a situational outcome; one that is most likely to occur when symbolic threats attack what we hold dear to us.

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Appendix A

Figure 2

Assumption check: linearity of residuals

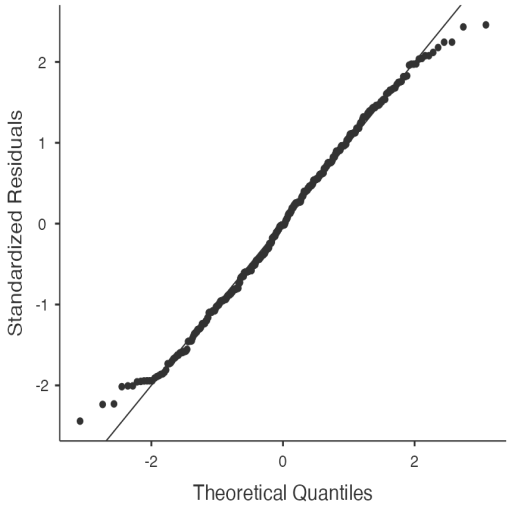
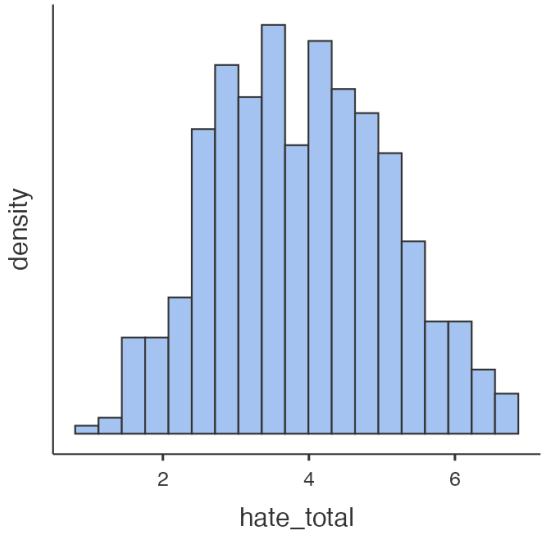


Figure 3

Histogram: Hate



Appendix B

Acknowledgements

This thesis was checked by ChatGPT and LanguageTool for Grammar and spelling mistakes. Furthermore, ChatGPT was used for brainstorming and reflecting upon ideas. I acknowledge the use of AI for this thesis.