

“Doing Isn’t Enough: Why "I Am" and "We Are" Is More Autonomously Motivating
Than "I Do"

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how subtle differences in identity-referencing language affect motivation and behavior. Specifically, it compares copular phrases (e.g., “I am a runner”) to verbal action phrases (e.g., “I run”) across two empirical papers. The first paper demonstrates that copular phrasing strengthens identity-congruent behavior and team performance by increasing integrated autonomy. The second paper identifies boundary conditions based on self-construal: individuals with independent self-views respond more strongly to “I am” phrasing, while those with interdependent self-views are equally or more motivated by action-based language. Together, these studies show that identity-expressive language not only influences goal pursuit but also interacts with how people define themselves. This research offers theoretical and practical insights into the role of language in shaping motivation, performance, and identity-driven decision-making.

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Preface

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Management, with a concentration in Marketing and Behavioural Science, at the Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa.

It is presented in the manuscript-based format and includes two research articles prepared during my time in the program. All research was conducted while I was enrolled in the M.Sc. at the University of Ottawa.

Ethical approval to conduct the studies described in this thesis was obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board prior to data collection (Protocol #: S-04-23-8792).

Below, I outline the contribution of each co-author and my role in the development of each article:

The first article, *“I am a worker” versus “I do work”*: Using copular identity-referencing phrases predictably affects autonomous motivation and performance, was co-authored with Dr. Keri L. Kettle, Dr. Americus Reed III, Carter Morgan, and Rohan Garg. I conducted the literature review, conceived the study designs, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the initial and subsequent drafts of the manuscript. Dr. Kettle provided guidance on study design and feedback on manuscript drafts. Dr. Reed, Carter Morgan, and Rohan Garg contributed to conceptual discussions and provided manuscript revisions. This manuscript is prepared for submission at *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (July 2025).

The second article, *“I am” versus “We are”*: When and for whom identity-referencing and self-construal affect behavior, was co-authored with Dr. Keri L. Kettle. I was responsible for the literature review, study conceptualization and design, data analysis, and manuscript writing. Dr.

Kettle contributed to conceptual framing, study design, and provided feedback throughout the writing process. This manuscript is currently in preparation for submission.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Preface.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
General Introduction	1
Chapter 1: “I am a worker” versus “I do work”: Using copular identity-referencing phrases predictably affects autonomous motivation and performance	4
Abstract.....	4
Keywords	4
Introduction.....	5
Linguistic Theory: Copular vs. Verbal Phrases	8
Identity-Based Motivation	10
Self-Determination and Integrated Autonomous Motivation	10
Study 1	13
Methods & Procedure	13
Context.....	13
Participants.....	13
Experimental Design.....	14
Manipulation.....	14
Timeline	14
Team-Level Performance.....	15
Results.....	15
Game Outcomes.....	15
Points Scored	16
Points Allowed.....	17
Game Attendance.....	18
Attrition Rate	18
Integrated Autonomous Motivation & Identity Self-Importance	19

Discussion	20
Study 2	20
Methods & Procedure	20
Participants.....	20
Design	20
Procedure	21
Results.....	21
Discussion	22
Study 3	22
Methods and Procedure.....	23
Participants.....	23
Design	23
Procedure	23
Measures	25
Integrated Autonomous Motivation.....	25
Policy Support.....	26
Identity-Congruent Behaviors.....	26
Results.....	26
Integrated Autonomous Motivation.....	26
Support for the Carbon Tax	27
Identity-Congruent Behaviors.....	28
Discussion	30
General Discussion	31
Synthesis of Key Findings	32
Theoretical Contributions	33
Practical Applications	34
Educational and Developmental Contexts	35
Political and Civic Engagement.....	35
Health Communication and Behavior Change	35
Workplace Engagement and Organizational Identity	36
Volunteerism and Prosocial Behavior	36

Limitations and Future Directions	37
Conclusion	38
References.....	39
APPENDICES	47
Appendix A.....	47
Table A1. Summary of Key Results Across Studies	47
Appendix B: Intramural Email Content.....	48
Copular Phrase Condition Weekly Email	48
Verbal Phrase Condition Weekly Email.....	48
Appendix C: Intramural Weekly Survey	49
Copular Phrase Condition Weekly Engagement Survey	49
Verbal Phrase Condition Weekly Engagement Survey	49
Appendix D: Intramural Study Timeline	50
Appendix E: Intramural Integrated Autonomous Motivation Measure	51
Copular Condition.....	51
Verbal Condition.....	51
Appendix F: Intramural Identity Self-Importance Measure	52
Copular Condition.....	52
Verbal Condition.....	52
Appendix G: Student Integrated Autonomy Measure	53
Intrinsic	53
Integrated	53
Identified.....	53
Introjected	53
External.....	53
Amotivated.....	53
Appendix H: Political Identity Integrated Autonomy Measure	54
Appendix I: Carbon Tax Support Measure.....	55
Appendix J: Carbon Tax Identity Congruent Behaviors Measure.....	56
Chapter 2: “I am” versus “we are”: When and for whom identity-referencing and self-construal affect behavior.	57

Abstract	57
Keywords	57
Introduction.....	58
Theoretical Background.....	59
Language as a Tool for Identity Construction	59
Framing Identity: Singular versus Collective Selves.....	60
The Self in Context: Why Self-Construal Matters.....	61
What Drives Identity-Congruent Motivation? The Role of Integrated Autonomy.....	62
Hypotheses	63
Overview of Studies.....	64
Study 1	65
Participants.....	66
Design	66
Procedure	66
Measures	67
Self-Construal Scale (SCS-SV).	67
Relative Autonomy Index (RAI).	67
Hypothesized Results.....	67
Results.....	68
Discussion.....	72
Study 2	74
Methods & Procedure	74
Participants.....	74
Design	74
Procedure	75
Measures	76
Integrated Autonomous Motivation (IA).	76
Behavioral Intentions	76
Manipulation Check.....	77
Hypothesized Results.....	77
Results.....	78

Direct Effects of Phrasing and Identity Type on Motivation.....	78
Moderated Mediation via Self-Construal.....	79
Effects of Self-Construal on Motivation and Behavior	82
Discussion.....	83
General Discussion	85
Limited Direct Effects, Conditional Indirect Effects	85
Implications for Language, Identity, and Motivation	86
The Role of Political Context	87
Limitations and Opportunities for Improvement	87
Future Directions	88
Conclusion	89
References.....	90
Appendices.....	95
Appendix A.....	95
Table A1: Results Summary Table Across Studies	95
Appendix B: SCS Measure	96
Independent Measures	96
Interdependent Measures	96
Appendix C: Political Manipulation	97
Copular-Singular.....	97
Verbal-Singular.....	97
Copular-Plural.....	97
Verbal-Singular.....	97
Appendix D: Political Identity Relative Autonomy Index Measures	98
Copular Conditions	98
Verbal Conditions	98
Appendix E: Political Identity All Subscale Results	99
Table E1: Subscale Result Summary	99
Appendix F: Blood Donation Manipulation	100
Copular-Singular.....	100
Verbal-Singular.....	100

Copular-Plural.....	100
Verbal-Plural.....	100
Appendix G: Blood Donation Integrated Autonomous Motivation Measure.....	101
General Discussion	103
Integration and Synthesis of Findings.....	103
Theoretical Contributions	104
Practical Implications.....	105
Limitations	106
Future Research Directions.....	107
Conclusion	108
Additional References.....	109

General Introduction

Imagine two individuals training for a marathon. One says, “I am a runner.” The other says, “I run every morning.” Although both statements describe the same behavior, they differ in psychological tone: the first frames running as an identity—something core to the self—while the second frames it as an action—something one does. This subtle linguistic distinction can profoundly influence how people think about themselves, feel motivated, and persist in pursuing their goals. Understanding these effects is the focus of this dissertation, which examines how differences in identity-referencing language, specifically the contrast between copular phrases (“I am a runner”) and verbal phrases (“I run”) shape motivation, performance, and identity-congruent behavior.

Language is a powerful tool for expressing and constructing the self. The words and grammatical structures people use do more than communicate information; they actively shape one’s sense of identity and influence motivation and behavior (Clark, 2016; Evans & Green, 2006). A key linguistic distinction in identity expression lies between copular phrases and verbal phrases. Copular verbs, typically forms of “to be,” link the subject directly with an identity category. For example, the phrase “I am a runner” uses the copular verb “am” to equate the speaker with the identity “runner,” which allows the individual to affirm who they are at their core (Saeed, 2009). In contrast, verbal identity-referencing phrases such as “I run every morning” describe actions without explicitly connecting them to one’s identity, focusing on doing rather than being.

Though this distinction may appear subtle, it carries important psychological consequences. From a motivational standpoint, copular phrasing strengthens the link between identity and behavior by affirming self-concept, which can enhance commitment and persistence toward goals (Lyons et al., 2021). Theoretical frameworks including self-consistency theory and

identity integration suggest that behaviors seen as expressions of one's core self are more deeply internalized and sustained over time (Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan et al., 2013). By framing actions as integral to who a person is, identity-based language encourages intrinsic motivation and tighter alignment between self and behavior.

Despite evidence supporting the motivational power of identity-referencing language, key questions remain. The specific psychological mechanisms through which copular constructions influence motivation—such as whether they enhance feelings of integrated autonomy or self-importance—require further exploration. Additionally, the boundary conditions under which identity-based phrasing is effective are not well understood. Individual differences, such as self-construal styles that shape how people define themselves as independent or interdependent, may moderate these effects (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Furthermore, certain contexts or populations may respond differently to identity-based language, potentially limiting its impact or even causing unintended consequences.

This dissertation addresses these gaps through two complementary papers. The first empirically tests how copular versus verbal identity-referencing phrases affect motivation and performance, examining integrated autonomy as a key psychological mechanism. The second paper explores moderators of this effect, focusing on individual differences in self-construal and social context. Together, these studies offer a more nuanced understanding of how subtle linguistic differences shape motivation and identity-congruent behavior.

By advancing theory on language, identity, and motivation, this research has practical implications across multiple fields, including consumer behavior, organizational identity, and health communication. Understanding when and for whom identity-based language enhances goal pursuit can inform interventions aimed at promoting persistence, team cohesion, and behavior

change. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes both theoretical insight and actionable knowledge about the profound role language plays in shaping who we are and what we do.

Chapter 1: “I am a worker” versus “I do work”: Using copular identity-referencing phrases predictably affects autonomous motivation and performance

Manuscript prepared for submission at *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (July 2025).

This article was co-authored with Keri L. Kettle, Americus Reed III, Carter Morgan, and Rohan Garg. My specific contributions are detailed in the Preface.

Abstract

Are you a lawyer, or do you practice law? Do you conduct research, or are you a researcher? This paper examines the behavioral implications of using copular (“I am a lawyer”) versus verbal (“I practice law”) identity-referent phrases for the individual who uses them. Integrating linguistics theories and self-determination theory, we demonstrate that using copular identity-referent phrases increases integrated autonomous motivation and performance. Study 1 offers a field demonstration of this performance-enhancing effect of copular identity-referent phrases. Studies 2 and 3 provide support for the mediating role of integrated autonomous motivation. Our theory and results offer meaningful insights into how and when different identity-referent phrases increase versus inhibit performance.

Keywords

Linguistics, identity, motivation, self-determination theory

Introduction

Life frequently requires people to describe what they do and/or who they are (Bem, 1972; Swann, 1987). For instance, people are routinely asked, “What do you do for a living?” or “What is your job?” – questions that can lead people to reference their work in different ways (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). To these questions one might naturally respond “I am a lawyer” (copular phrase) or “I practice law” (verbal phrase) – phrases that use different structures to express the same information (Evans & Green, 2018; Langacker, 2008). Individuals and organizations alike use verbal and copular phrases interchangeably to reference work, such as job descriptions that use verbal phrases (e.g., “You will work with a team”) and/or copular phrases (e.g., “You will be a team member”) (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

Though people have the intuition that words and phrases shape their perception (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Verkuyten, 2018), there is limited scholarly insight regarding how the identity-referent phrases people use to describe themselves may affect their own motivation and performance. Prior research on this topic has assumed that performance ought to be unaffected by whether one expresses “I work in accounting” versus “I am in accounting” or “I provide customer support” versus “I am a customer service representative,” likely because each of these phrases are presumed to activate the associated work identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Oyserman, 2009). Despite the similarity of these phrases, linguistic theories of the copula suggest that using linking verbs (as in a copular phrase) rather than action verbs (as in a verbal phrase) can shape individuals’ perceptions (Klein, 1994). We posit that using copular versus verbal identity-referent phrases can also affect how people perceive themselves and their source of autonomous motivation (Bodenhausen & Hugenberg, 2009; Gee, 2014; Moore, 2012).

In this paper, we examine the autonomous motivational implications of using copular versus verbal identity-referent phrases to describe oneself. Autonomous motivation is a critical driver of workplace engagement, persistence, and productivity (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagné & Deci, 2005), with autonomously motivated employees consistently demonstrating high job satisfaction, resilience, and overall effectiveness (Van den Broeck et al., 2016; Manganelli et al., 2018). Scholars have long sought to understand drivers of autonomous motivation. Some research has emphasized structural and interpersonal influences, such as leadership (e.g., transformational leadership; Bass, 1985), job design (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and incentives (Bonner & Sprinkle, 2002) as means to affect motivation. Despite the link from professional identity to motivation (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006), no research has examined the role of different identity-referent phrases in driving motivation.

Linguistic theory suggests that language serves both symbolic and interactive functions: the words and phrases people use both represent (symbolic) and influence (interactive) how people perceive the world (Cicourel 1981; Evans & Green, 2018). The symbolic function of language implies that people use identity-referencing phrases such as “I practice law” and “I am a lawyer” to represent their identity to others. The interactive function of language suggests that saying these phrases may also shape how one perceives themselves and thus influence the role of that identity within one’s self-concept, making it more integral to one’s sense of self (Clark 1996). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a framework to understanding the interactive function of using identity-referencing phrases through integrated autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), yet linguistics theories and SDT remain largely unintegrated. To date, linguistic theories do not specify how using identity-referent phrases may affect motivation, and SDT does not consider how using different phrases may affect extrinsic versus intrinsic

motivation. By linking these perspectives, our research provides a comprehensive understanding of how language shapes motivation.

Building on the identity and inherence theories of the copula (Fiorin & Delfitto, 2025; Malcolm 1979), we propose that using copular identity-referent phrases (e.g., “I am a worker”) versus verbal identity-referent phrases (e.g., “I do work”) strengthens integrated autonomous motivation, leading to commensurate effects on performance. Integrated autonomous motivation, a core component of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), results when an individual fully integrates their motivation for a particular behavior into their sense of self. We suggest that, when an identity is referenced with copular phrases, it becomes more inherent to – and integrated into – one’s self-concept, leading individuals to experience their effort as more identity-relevant and personally meaningful. This promotes integrated autonomous motivation and enhanced performance (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Vallerand, 1997; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010).

We identify language as a facilitator of integrated autonomous motivation and thus extend prior work suggesting that subtle variations in language can alter behavior. For example, Bryan et al. (2011) report that individuals encouraged to “be a voter” (noun-based framing) were more likely to vote than those encouraged to “vote” (verb-based framing), with the suggestion that the noun-based phrasing increased the self-relevance of the act. Similarly, Bryan, Adams, and Monin (2013) find that individuals exposed to trait-based framing (“Don’t be a cheater”) were less likely to cheat than those exposed to action-based framing (“Don’t cheat”). Although the work by Bryan and colleagues show that different linguistic phrases can affect behavior, the exact psychological mechanism remains unclear. Bryan et al. (2011, 2013) assumed that identity-referent phrases differentially affect behavior through situational self-relevance but stopped short of examining

whether these phrases affected the integration of the identity into the self. We posit that, if language serves an interactive function, it should do more than momentarily activate a relevant identity; it should also integrate the identity in the self-concept, thus shaping behavior over time. We examine the use of different identity-referencing phrases through a motivational framework (SDT) that offers a theoretical foundation to understand how identities are internalized and sustained over time.

We extend prior work in three critical ways. First, we integrate linguistic theory and SDT to develop a novel framework that explains how using copular (e.g., “I am a Republican”) versus verbal (e.g., “I vote Republican”) identity-referent phrases influence motivation: we show that it affects identity internalization and the motivational processes that sustain identity-congruent behavior. Second, we introduce integrated autonomous motivation (IA) as the psychological mechanism through which using different identity-referent phrases affects behavior – an explanatory factor neither linguistic theory nor SDT research has explicitly tested. Third, we empirically validate these effects across diverse identity domains (sports team, political affiliation, student identity) using a combination of controlled experiments and a large-scale field study, demonstrating the robustness of these effects in both real-world and experimental settings.

Linguistic Theory: Copular vs. Verbal Phrases

Language is a fundamental tool for constructing and reinforcing identity, shaping how individuals internalize aspects of the self. A key distinction in linguistic theory lies in the contrast between copular (e.g., “I am a Republican”) and verbal (e.g., “I vote Republican”) constructions. While prior research has explored how language influences identity and behavior, little work has directly tested how these linguistic structures shape the depth of identity internalization and its downstream consequences for sustained motivation (Clark, 1996; Evans & Green, 2018).

Copular phrases, such as “I am a lawyer” or “I am strong” employ a linking verb (such as “am”) to connect the subject (“I”) to a complement (noun such as “lawyer” or adjective such as “strong”) that describes the subject (Moro, 2017). The inherence theory of the copula suggests that using a copular phrase implies the complement is inherent to the subject (De Rijk 1973): for example, stating “I am strong” implies that being strong is an inherent aspect of the individual using the phrase. Similarly, the identity theory of the copula suggests that in a copular phrase the subject and the complement refer to the same thing, and, therefore, the subject stands for all the same things for which the complement stands (Malcolm 1979) for example, stating “I am a lawyer” implies that the individual “I” and the noun “lawyer” refer to and stand for all the same attributes. Consistent across the inherence and identity theories of the copula is the tight overlap between the complement and the subject: “I am a lawyer” implies that the lawyer identity is core to the individual, and that they represent the same characteristics (Gelman & Heyman, 1999). By contrast, verbal phrases such as “I practice law” or “I lift heavy weights” employ an action verb to connect the subject to a complement leaving greater room to interpret the overlap between the subject and the complement (Hardt 1999). Whereas the copular phrase signals inherence and permanence, the verb-based form suggests extraneousness and transience (Reed & Forehand, 2016). This aligns with research on psychological essentialism, which suggests that describing identities in noun form strengthens perceptions of them as enduring and intrinsic (Gelman & Heyman, 1999). Where copular phrases suggest the complement is a stable, inherent part of the subject, verbal phrases maintain separation between the subject and the complement. Consistent with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), which suggests that exposure to self-referential phrases shapes the self-concept over time, we posit that use of copular versus verbal identity-referent phrases is likely to affect how individuals view the referenced identity within their sense of self.

Identity-Based Motivation

Identity theories point to behavioral implications of integrating an identity into one's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Reed et al, 2012). Identity salience theory and identity-based motivation theory both posit that the extent to which an identity guides one's behavior increases the more that identity is integrated into one's self-concept (Brenner et al., 2014; Morris 2013; Oyserman 2009; Reed & Forehand, 2016). Building on our proposition that using copular (versus verbal) identity-referent phrases is likely to integrate the referenced identity within the self-concept, we suggest that using copular (versus verbal) identity-referent phrases should increase identity-based motivation, thus making it a stronger determinant of behavior. This premise is consistent with prior work from Ashforth & Mael (1989) suggesting that employees who use copular expressions (e.g., "I am a designer") demonstrate stronger role commitment and lower turnover intentions than those who describe their work with verbal expressions (e.g., "I design products"). Likewise, Bryan et al. (2011) found that asking individuals to "be a voter" rather than to "vote" significantly increased voting turnout, and individuals who label themselves with copular phrases (e.g., "I am a runner") rather than verbal phrases (e.g., "I run") were more likely to engage in the associated running activity over time (Oyserman, 2009).

Hypothesis 1: Using copular (versus verbal) identity-referencing phrases increases motivation in identity-relevant activities.

Self-Determination and Integrated Autonomous Motivation

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) offers a framework to understand how individuals internalize and regulate identities, presenting a structured way to analyze the motivational consequences of different linguistic constructions. Where inherence and identity

theories of the copula suggest that using copular (versus verbal) identity-referent phrases may affect identity integration into the self-concept, SDT explains the psychological processes through which using these phrases affect motivation and behavior. By integrating these perspectives, we can better understand how identity-referencing language fosters motivation.

A core proposition of SDT is that individuals regulate behaviors along a continuum ranging from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), a sub-theory of SDT, describes how external regulations become progressively internalized, transforming initially controlled behaviors into self-endorsed actions (Deci & Ryan, 1991). The degree to which an identity or behavior is internalized determines whether it fosters long-term engagement and psychological well-being. We posit that using copular identity-referencing phrases such as “I am a Republican” likely facilitate internalization by building a sense of self-congruence, where behavior linked to that identity is valued and fully integrated into one's self-concept. This aligns with the highest level of internalization in OIT – integrated regulation – where identity-congruent behaviors are perceived as emanating from the self and are sustained over time. By contrast, verbal identity-referent phrases such as “I vote Republican” likely only reach the level of identified regulation, where the action is consciously valued but not fully assimilated into the self (Burton et al. 2006).

Integrated autonomous motivation manifests when an individual perceives a behavior as inherently aligned with their values and identity (Deci & Ryan, 2017). This source of motivation is powerful because it is fully integrated with how a person sees themselves: in addition to promoting persistence, it enhances well-being and adaptive self-regulation (Gunnell et al., 2014). Consistent with the interactive function of language (Clément, 1986), we posit that the phrases people use to reference their identity can promote integrated autonomy by shaping how individuals

view themselves. Using copular identity-referent phrasing may help position identity-congruent behaviors as more integrated with one's self-concept, thereby reinforcing a sense of integrated autonomy in determining one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 2008). For example, describing oneself as "I am a Republican" is likely to elicit stronger and more enduring pro-Republican conduct than stating "I vote Republican." This has implications for long-term motivation: when behaviors are integrated into the self-concept, individuals experience fewer motivational conflicts and are more likely to persist in identity-congruent behavior even in the absence of external rewards or pressures (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Hypothesis 2: Using copular (versus verbal) identity-referencing phrases increases integrated autonomous motivation.

The integration of linguistic theory and SDT offers a novel perspective on how language shapes identity internalization and motivation. While prior research has examined how identity-referencing language influences behavior (Bhattacharjee, Berger, & Menon 2014; Bryan et al., 2011, 2013), few studies have directly tested how using different forms of identity-referent phrasing may affect motivation through integrated regulation. By explicitly linking linguistic theories to SDT's internalization continuum, we provide a theoretical rationale for how using copular identity-referent phrases promotes long-term motivation. Moreover, our framework opens avenues for investigating when and for whom these effects are most pronounced. Individuals with higher baseline autonomous motivation may be more susceptible to the effects of identity-based linguistic framing, while those with lower intrinsic interest may require additional contextual support to achieve full integration. By establishing a direct link between linguistic framing and motivational internalization, this research advances the identity, motivation, and linguistics literatures and provides a foundation for future empirical work.

Study 1

We conducted Study 1 in conjunction with a university intramural sports program in which over 1000 athletes registered as individuals across different team sports. In this program, when an individual registers they are randomly placed onto a team with others who have also registered as individuals. In contrast to many team-based studies where participants self-select into groups or already share social bonds, the randomized team formation offers an opportunity to examine the effects of identity-referencing language where individuals have no prior relationships with their team members. Thus, any observed effects of identity-referent phrases on performance and motivation can not be explained by pre-existing relationships or identities.

Methods & Procedure

Context

We conducted this study in conjunction with a university intramural program comprising 101 teams spread across seven sports (basketball, dodgeball, flag football, ice hockey, ultimate frisbee, soccer, volleyball). All teams in this program were composed of individuals who registered independently and were subsequently randomly assigned to teams by the intramural staff. Team names were created by intramural staff and randomly assigned. Anonymized data is available on the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/4v9s6/>.

Participants

We recruited participants by contacting (via email) all 1339 individuals who had registered for the intramural program. In exchange for their efforts, participants were entered into a raffle to win one of twenty \$50 Amazon gift cards. Participants registered for the study by either (1) responding to the email or (2) using a QR code provided at intramural games. In total, 367

individuals registered to participate in the study, with 98 of the 101 intramural teams having at least one study participant.

Experimental Design

We employed a single-factor (identity-referent phrasing: Copular vs. Verbal) between-subject design. We randomly assigned condition at the team level prior to data collection, with all participants on a team being in the same condition.

Manipulation

The manipulation was implemented through the weekly email subject line, email content, and survey descriptions. Participants in the Copular phrasing condition received emails with copular identity-referencing language (e.g., “You are a member of the [Team Name]”), whereas participants in the Verbal phrasing condition received emails with verbal identity-referencing language (e.g., “You play for the [Team Name]”). We embedded these phrasing differences in all communication materials: we provide a sample weekly email in Web Appendix B and the weekly survey in Web Appendix C.

Each week we sent emails at 6:00 PM the evening before participants’ games, and participants had until 11:59 PM on the night of their game to complete the survey. Each league had its games on the same night and allotted time slot each week: for example, the Monday recreational basketball league games ran from 8:00 to 10:00 PM on Mondays.

Timeline

The intramural season lasted 11 weeks (see Appendix D for a detailed study timeline). To make balanced teams, the intramural staff re-organized a few players after two weeks: thus, we provided no experimental manipulations until week 3. The study focused on weeks 3-11, which

included 7 weeks of regular season games, a one-week break, and one week of championship playoffs. From weeks 3-11, each participant received weekly emails and surveys that included the language manipulations.

Attrition, or participant dropout over time, is a factor in all longitudinal studies. To minimize the potential impact of attrition, we included the language manipulation in the title of the weekly email participants received. Thus, even if a participant did not respond to the weekly email, exposure to the title of the email provided the between-subject manipulation. To assess potential attrition, for each individual participants we tracked weekly survey response rate (Yes/No) and weekly game attendance (Yes/No) as binary variables.

Team-Level Performance

No individual player statistics were recorded, so we analyzed team performance by game: all game scores were publicly available on the university intramural website. We examined three team performance metrics: (1) game result (win/loss), (2) points scored, and (3) points allowed. To compare performance across sports with different scoring systems, we standardized point-based performance metrics (e.g., points scored, points allowed) using z-scores within each sport. We analyzed team scores and outcomes (win/loss) across 470 recorded games: we had to exclude 51 games in which at least one team forfeited due to low attendance, leaving 419 games with an outcome.

Results

Game Outcomes

We analyzed game outcome (0 = Loss, 1 = Win) using a mixed-effects binomial regression with condition as the independent variable (0 = Verbal condition, 1 = Copular condition), with a random intercept for participant and a random intercept for team. A significant main effect of

condition emerged ($B = 0.407, t[630] = 2.21, p = .027$): as expected, teams in the Copular condition were significantly more likely to win ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 56.8\%$) than teams in the Verbal condition ($M_{\text{Verbal}} = 46.7\%$) (see figure 1).

Because some games involved two opponents from the same condition, we conducted a separate analysis focusing solely on the 265 games in which the teams playing each other in a game were in opposing conditions (i.e., one team was in the Copular condition and the other was in the Verbal condition). In these games, teams in the Copular condition won 157 of the 265 games (59.2%). a mixed-effects binomial regression reveals this effect is significant ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 59.2\%$, $M_{\text{Verbal}} = 40.8\%$, $t[592] = 2.54, p = .011$).

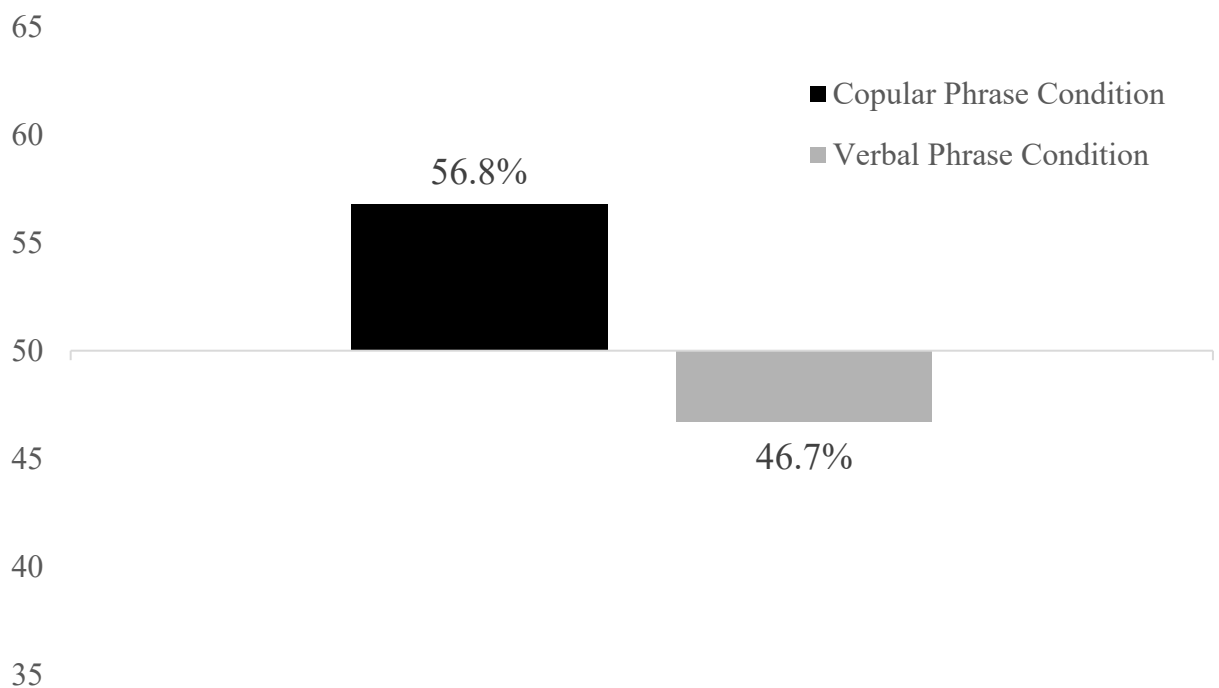


Fig.1. Team Win Percentage by Condition.

Points Scored

We analyzed points scored (standardized) using a linear mixed-effects regression with condition as the independent variable (0 = Verbal condition, 1 = Copular condition), with a random

intercept for participant and a random intercept for team. A significant main effect of condition emerged ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 0.12$, $M_{\text{Verbal}} = -0.12$, $t[592] = 2.01$, $p = .039$): teams in the Copular condition scored significantly more points than teams in the Verbal condition (see figure 2).

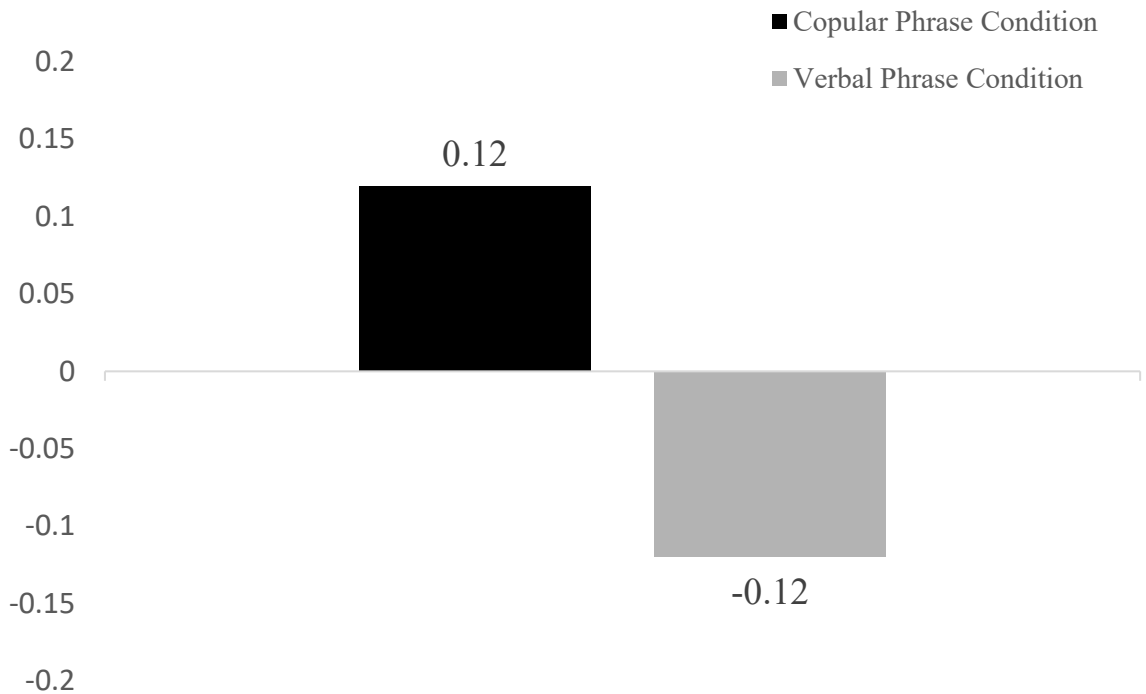


Fig.2. Team Points For Z-Score by Condition.

Points Allowed

We analyzed standardized points allowed using a linear mixed-effects model with condition as the independent variable (0 = Verbal, 1 = Copular), including random intercepts for both participant and team. The main effect of condition was not significant, $t(592) = 1.23$, $p = .224$. Although not statistically significant, teams in the Copular condition allowed slightly fewer points ($M = -0.04$) than those in the Verbal condition ($M = 0.09$), as shown in figure 3.

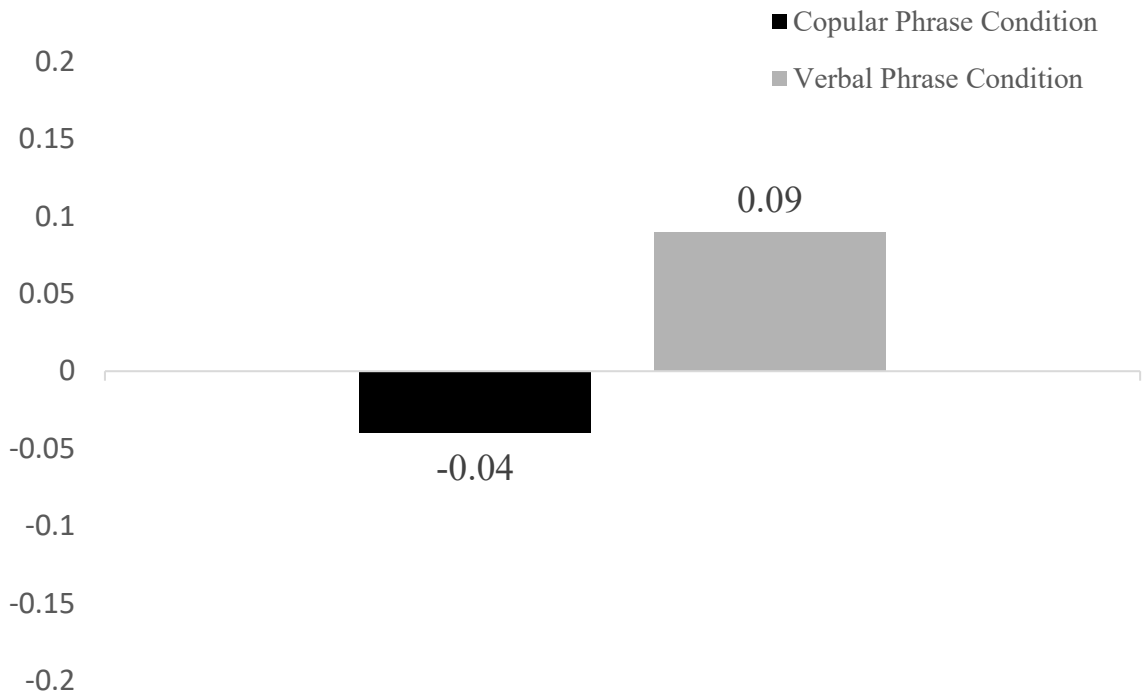


Fig.3. Team Points Allowed Z-Score by Condition.

Game Attendance

To assess whether the effects may have been driven by different levels of attendance across conditions, each week we measured the proportion of team attendance (the number of team members in attendance divided by the total roster size). A mixed-effect binomial regression reveals that team-level attendance did not differ significantly across conditions ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 68.6\%$, $M_{\text{Verbal}} = 68.2\%$, $t(686) = 0.85$, $p = .396$).

Attrition Rate

To assess whether study attrition varied across conditions, we analyzed weekly survey response (No = 0, Yes = 1) using a mixed-effects binomial regression, with study week (3-10) and condition as the independent variables, and random effects for individual participant and team.

There was no significant difference in weekly response between conditions ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 0.54$; $M_{\text{Verbal}} = 0.55$; $OR = 0.98$, 95% CI: [0.59, 1.62], $p = 0.94$).

Integrated Autonomous Motivation & Identity Self-Importance

We asked participants to complete the Integrated Autonomous Motivation (IA) Scale and the Identity Self-Importance (ISI) Scale at two timepoints: Week 4 and Week 10). Due to the nature of longitudinal field data collection, the response rate was low: only 213 of 367 participants responded at Week 4, and only 159 of 367 responded at Week 8, and only 119 participants completing both measures. Thus, we interpret (non-)effects with caution owing to nonresponse bias.

Both scales were measured on a -3 to 3 Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater integrated autonomous motivation (IA) or stronger identity self-importance (ISI) (see Appendix E & F for scale items). All models used Condition as the independent variable, with the Verbal condition as the reference group.

Regression analyses revealed no significant effect of condition on either integrated autonomous motivation (IA) or identity self-importance (ISI) at either point in the study. At week 4 participants in the copular condition reported lower IA scores ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 0.23$, $SD = 1.46$) than those in the verbal condition ($M_{\text{Verbal}} = 0.42$, $SD = 1.49$; $b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(210) = -0.96$, $p = .339$), whereas at week 10 IA scores were higher in the copular condition ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 0.76$, $SD = 1.52$; $M_{\text{Verbal}} = 0.72$, $SD = 1.48$, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(156) = 0.16$, $p = .873$). Similarly, ISI scores did not differ across conditions at either week 4 ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 0.18$, $SD = 1.44$; $M_{\text{Verbal}} = 0.32$, $SD = 1.46$; $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(210) = -0.67$, $p = .501$) or at week 10 ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 0.72$, $SD = 1.47$; verbal: $M_{\text{Verbal}} = 0.55$, $SD = 1.46$, $b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(156) = 0.75$, $p = .456$).

Discussion

The results of study 1 demonstrate the effects of using different identity-referencing phrases on performance. Teams whose participants were assigned to reference their team identity using Copular (“I am a member of [Team Name]”) phrases significantly outperformed teams whose participants used Verbal (“I play for [Team Name]”) phrases, scoring significantly more points and winning more games. Despite the strong effects on performance in Study 1, the limitations of collecting process measures in the field produced null effects on integrated autonomous motivation. We designed Studies 2 and 3 as controlled experiments to directly test the proposed psychological process by which identity-referencing phrases affect motivation and behavior.

Study 2

Study 2 investigates how using copular versus verbal identity-referencing phrases affects integrated autonomous motivation. To generalize to a different identity, we used the college student identity to explore this process.

Methods & Procedure

Participants

We aimed to recruit 400 college students via CloudResearch by restricting eligibility to individuals currently enrolled in college. A total of 400 participants completed the study.

Design

We employed a single factor between-subject design with two experimental conditions (identity-referent phrasing: Copular versus Verbal). In each condition, we provided participants with a text box and asked them to complete the thoughts. In the Copular condition, participants responded to “*Please describe how you are a student. I am a student ...*”, while the Verbal condition responded to “*Please describe how you study. I study...*” (see figure 4).

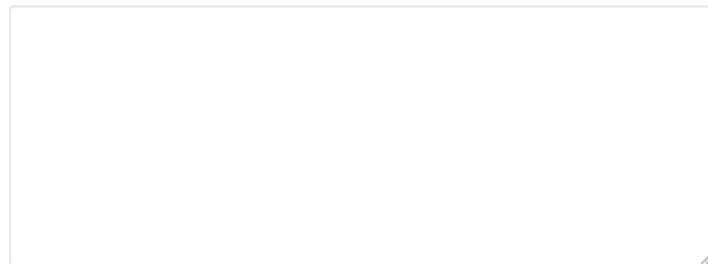
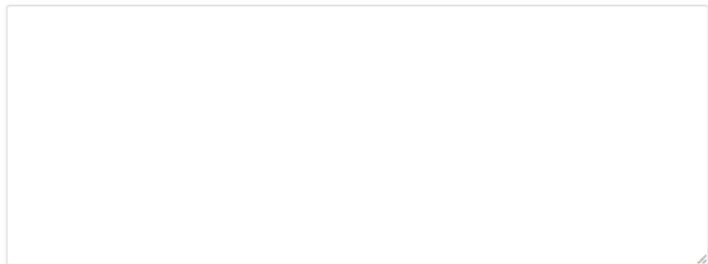
Please describe how you are a student.	Please describe how you study.
I am a student...	I study...
	

Fig.4. Student Copular and Verbal Condition Manipulation

Procedure

We conducted the study online, recruiting participants via CloudResearch. After consenting to participate, participants were randomly assigned to a condition. Participants first completed the focal task involving the text box manipulation, then completed an 18-item version of the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) adopted from Ryan and Deci (2000), which assessed their motivations for engaging in school-related tasks (See Appendix G).

Results

A linear regression predicting integrated motivation from language condition revealed a significant effect of condition, $B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(398) = 2.30$, $p = .022$. Supporting H2, participants in the Copular condition reported higher integrated autonomous motivation ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 4.64$) compared to those in the Verbal condition ($M_{\text{Verbal}} = 4.32$; see figure 5).

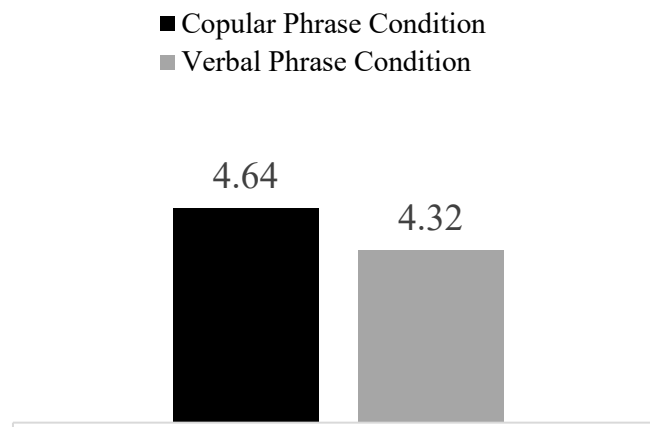


Fig.5. Student Integrated Autonomy by Condition

Discussion

The findings from Study 2 demonstrate that using a copular identity-referencing phrase (“I am a student”) increases integrated autonomous motivation as compared to using a verbal identity-referencing phrase (“I study”). These findings are consistent with self-determination theory, which posits that motivation becomes more autonomous when actions are experienced as aligned with one’s core self. We now turn to study 3 to investigate the hypothesized mediating role of integrated autonomous motivation on identity congruent behavior.

Study 3

Study 2 investigates how using copular versus verbal identity-referencing phrases affects integrated autonomous motivation and subsequent behavioral intentions. To generalize to a third identity, we used American political identities (Democrat, Republican). Building on study 1's field evidence of behavioral effects and study 2's evidence of effects on integrated autonomous motivation, in study 3 we test whether integrated autonomous motivation mediates the effect of using identity-referent phrases on subsequent identity-congruent behavior.

Methods and Procedure

Participants

We aimed to recruit roughly 400 US Citizens with a preference for either the Democrat or Republican party. Using CloudResearch, we posted a study about "Political Identity." We first asked participants to indicate which political party they preferred, with four options: Democrat, Republican, Other, and Either/Or. Participants who selected "Other" or "Either/Or" were redirected to a separate study. Our final sample was 365 U.S. citizens who indicated a preference for the Democrat or Republican party.

Design

We employed a single-factor (identity-referent phrasing: Copular vs. Verbal). between-subject design.

Procedure

After indicating their political preference, participants completed the identity-referencing task corresponding to their assigned condition (see figure 6). In each condition, we provided participants with a text box and asked them to complete a sentence. Participants in the Copular condition completed the sentence, "I am a [Democrat/Republican] ..." whereas those in the Verbal condition participants completed the sentence, "I vote [Democrat/Republican] ..." with the name

of party in each condition auto-filled by the party they had expressed a preference for. Following the condition task, participants completed the integrated autonomous motivation scale (IA), which served as a mediator in this study. Next, participants were presented with a hypothetical news article adapted from Fielding et al. (2020) that described their political party's support for a fictional carbon tax (see figure 7). The article was framed to align support for the carbon tax with partisan values, emphasizing ecological benefits for Democrats and fiscal responsibility for Republicans¹. After seeing the article, participants were asked to indicate their support for the policy and their likelihood of engaging in three identity-congruent political behaviors (signing a petition, discussing the policy, and voting for a supportive candidate).

Please describe how you support the Republican party.
I support the Republican party

Please describe how you are a Republican.
I am a Republican

Please describe how you support the Democrat Party.
I support the Democrat Party

Please describe how you are a Democrat.
I am a Democrat ...

Fig.6. Study 3 Text Box Manipulation

¹ While Republicans often oppose taxation and climate policies (McCright & Dunlap, 2011), Fielding et al. (2020) found that identity framing influences policy support across ideological lines. Since our study follows their approach, examining identity-expressive language rather than direct tax endorsement, baseline political differences are not suspected to systematically affect the results.



Members of the Democratic Party endorse a Carbon Tax plan

Members of the Democratic Party support a carbon tax, a climate solution that addresses climate change and protects America's environment.

The carbon tax would put a tax on carbon dioxide emissions at the first point where fossil fuels are produced and enter the economy. It is the most efficient and effective way to reduce carbon emissions.

All revenue from the carbon tax would be returned to the American people via dividend checks, deposits or contributions to retirement accounts, in order to compensate any increase in cost of living.

“Through taxing big corporate polluters, the Carbon Tax plan holds industries accountable for their impact on the environment.”

Through taxing big corporate polluters, the Carbon Tax plan holds industries accountable for their impact on the environment.

The plan would slow the pace of climate change helping to preserve America's natural environment, biodiversity and coastlines.



Members of the Republican Party endorse a Carbon Tax plan

Members of the Republican Party support a carbon tax, a climate solution that uses market forces to bolster America's national security and economy.

The carbon tax would put a tax on carbon dioxide emissions at the first point where fossil fuels are produced and enter the economy. It is the most efficient and effective way to reduce carbon emissions.

“The carbon tax plan would shrink the overall size of government and reduce regulation. It would also protect American competitiveness.”

All revenue from the carbon tax would be returned to the American people via dividend checks, deposits or contributions to retirement accounts, in order to compensate any increase in cost of living.

By cutting existing red tape, the carbon tax would shrink the overall size of the government and reduce regulation.

The carbon tax would accelerate the transition to a low-carbon economy which would increase America's energy independence, strengthen national security and protect American competitiveness.

Fig.7. Study 3 Carbon Tax Plan

Measures

We defined identity-congruent political behavior as a composite index averaging participants' responses to the three political behaviors. This measure served as our primary dependent variable. Policy support was treated as a secondary outcome. Only the behavioral composite was included in the mediation analysis, reflecting our theoretical emphasis on action as the downstream expression of internalized identity motivation. The model tested whether integrated autonomous motivation mediated the effect of identity-referent phrasing on behavioral intentions.

Integrated Autonomous Motivation

Integrated autonomous motivation was measured with a three-item subscale adapted from the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants indicated the extent to which their partisanship reflected their identity on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 =

strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater integrated autonomous motivation, see Appendix H.

Policy Support

Participants rated their agreement with the proposed carbon tax on a slider scale (-50 = strongly oppose, 50 = strongly support). See Appendix I for scale question and measure.

Identity-Congruent Behaviors

Participants indicated their likelihood of engaging in three identity-aligned political actions: (1) signing a petition supporting the tax, (2) discussing the policy with their social network, and (3) voting for a candidate who endorses the tax. Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely) (See Appendix J). These three items were combined into a composite index representing identity-congruent political behavior (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$).

Results

Integrated Autonomous Motivation

Participants in the Copular condition exhibited higher mean IA scores compared to those in the Verbal condition, regardless of political affiliation. Specifically, Copular Republicans reported a mean IA of 4.65 (SD = 1.38), and Copular Democrats reported a mean of 4.54 (SD = 1.53). In contrast, Verbal Republicans and Democrats reported mean IA scores of 3.52 (SD = 1.13) and 3.74 (SD = 1.03), respectively (see figure 8).

A 2 (Condition: Copular vs. Verbal) \times 2 (Political Affiliation: Republican vs. Democrat) linear regression revealed a significant main effect of condition on IA, $b = 0.48$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(361) = 6.25$, $p < .001$, with higher IA in the Copular condition. There was no significant main effect of

political affiliation, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(361) = 0.32$, $p = .75$, nor a significant Condition \times Political Affiliation interaction, $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(361) = -1.07$, $p = .29$, indicating the effect of condition was consistent across party lines.

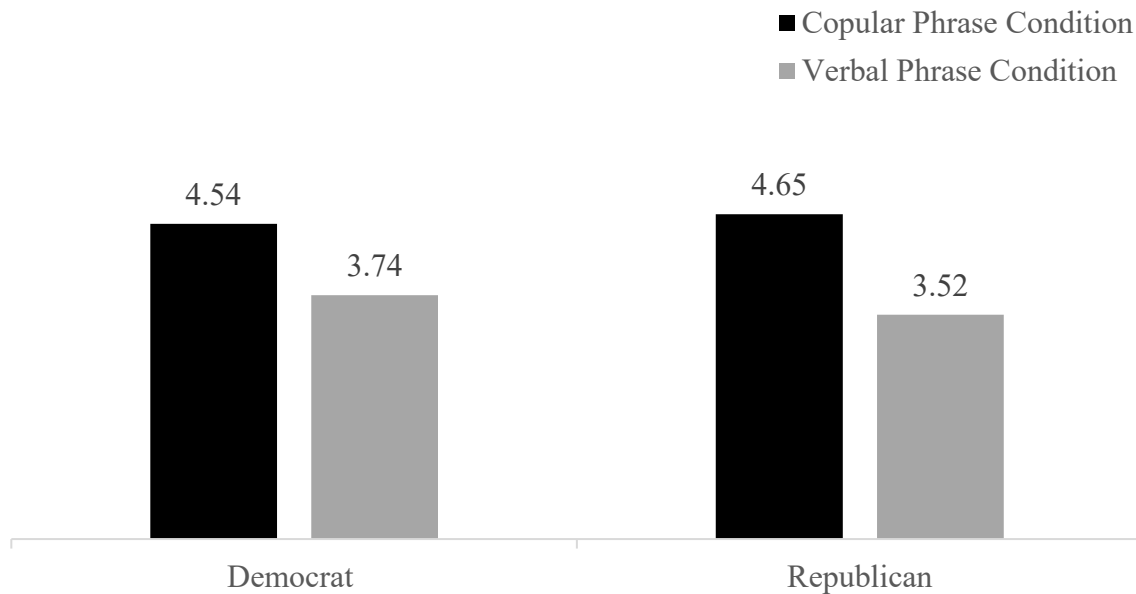


Fig.8. Integrated Autonomy by Condition and Political Party

Support for the Carbon Tax

We next examined whether phrasing condition influenced participants' support for the carbon tax policy. Means and standard deviations for support are reported separately by condition and political party affiliation: Democrats in the Copular condition reported the highest support ($M = 31.7$, $SD = 17.9$), followed by Democrats in the Verbal condition ($M = 32.4$, $SD = 16.7$). Republicans showed low support in both Copular ($M = 0.85$, $SD = 32.4$) and Verbal conditions ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 32.3$).

A regression analysis controlling for political party affiliation revealed no significant main effect of phrasing condition on support, $\beta = -0.25$, $SE = 1.32$, $t(361) = -0.19$, $p = .85$. Political party affiliation significantly predicted support, $\beta = 15.52$, $SE = 1.32$, $t(361) = 11.71$, $p < .001$, with Democrats showing greater support than Republicans. There was no significant interaction between condition and party, $\beta = -0.08$, $SE = 1.32$, $t(361) = -0.06$, $p = .95$, indicating that phrasing did not differentially influence support across party lines.

Identity-Congruent Behaviors

We assessed whether identity phrasing influenced participants' intentions to engage in identity-congruent political behaviors, using a composite of three items ($\alpha = .82$): signing a petition supporting the carbon tax, discussing the policy with their social network, and voting for a candidate who endorses the tax. Participants in the Copular condition reported slightly higher behavioral intentions ($M_{\text{copular}} = 4.92$, $SD = 1.57$) than those in the Verbal condition ($M_{\text{verbal}} = 4.72$, $SD = 1.50$), but this difference was not statistically significant, $b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.24$, $t(357) = 1.16$, $p = .25$.

A 2 (Condition: Copular vs. Verbal) \times 2 (Political Affiliation: Democrat vs. Republican) linear regression revealed a significant main effect of political affiliation, $b = 0.86$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(361) = 10.25$, $p < .001$, such that Democrats reported greater behavioral intentions than Republicans. The main effect of condition was not statistically significant, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -0.14$, $p = .89$, nor was the condition-party interaction, $b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -0.74$, $p = .46$. Although condition did not directly predict behavior, mediation analyses (reported below) revealed a significant indirect effect through integrated autonomous motivation, consistent with the proposed mechanism.

To test the psychological mechanism underlying these effects, we examined whether integrated autonomous motivation mediated the relationship between phrasing condition and identity-congruent political behaviors. A bootstrapped mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of condition on behavioral intentions through integrated autonomous motivation ($\beta = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.43]), indicating partial mediation. These results suggest that Copular phrasing enhances the internalization of political attitudes, which in turn fosters greater intentions to engage in identity-aligned political actions.

Given the potential for political orientation to influence how individuals internalize identity-relevant messages, we tested whether political party affiliation ($-1 = \text{Republican}$, $1 = \text{Democrat}$) moderated the effect of phrasing condition on integrated autonomous motivation. The moderation test was not significant ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = .48$), indicating that the manipulation had a comparable effect on strengthening identity across party lines. This finding suggests that the phrasing manipulation promotes internalization of political attitudes similarly among Republicans and Democrats, underscoring the robustness of this effect regardless of political affiliation.

The mediation model including this moderation is presented in Figure 9. The direct effect of phrasing on behavior was non-significant ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = .36$), indicating that the influence of phrasing on political behavior operates primarily through integrated autonomous motivation rather than through a direct pathway. Policy support was analyzed separately and is not included in this mediation model. A full summary of key statistical results across all studies is provided in Appendix A, Table A1.

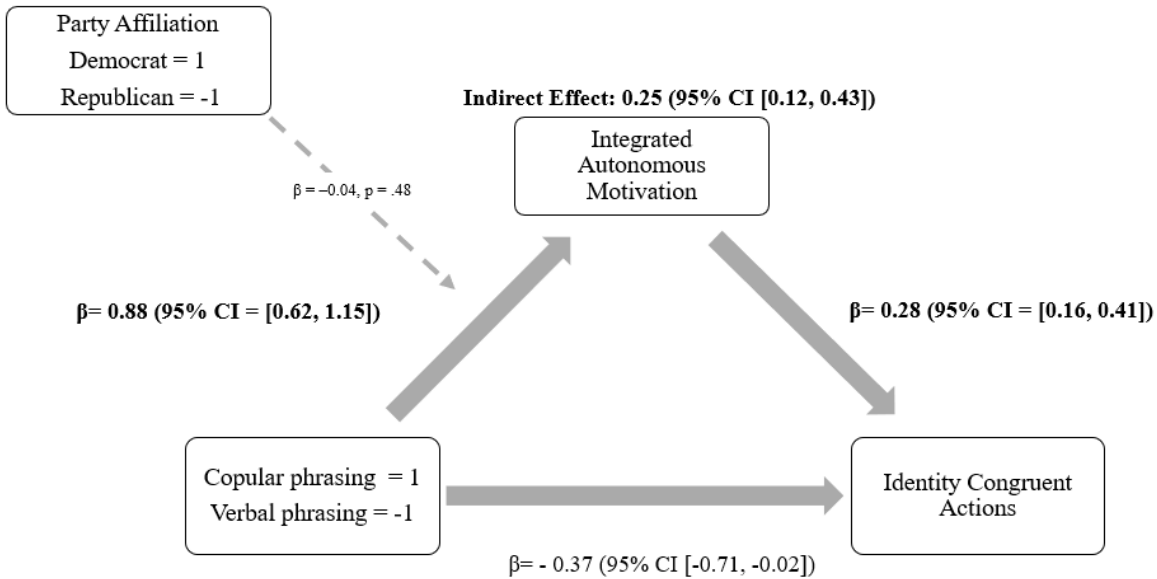


Fig.9. Integrated Autonomy Moderated Mediation Model

Discussion

Study 3 extends the effects of identity-referencing language to the political domain, showing that copular identity-referencing strengthens political identity and increases motivation for identity-congruent actions. These findings align with those from Studies 1 and 2, reinforcing the idea that self-concept plays a crucial role in shaping motivation and behavior.

As in Studies 1 and 2, where copular language deepened participants' engagement with their team or academic role, this study demonstrates that framing political identity using copular identity-referencing fosters a stronger personal connection to that identity. Participants in the Copular phrase condition reported significantly higher autonomous motivation ($M_{\text{Copular}} = 6.08$) than those in the Verbal phrase condition ($M_{\text{Verbal}} = 4.69$), suggesting that the way political identity is referenced influences how deeply individuals internalize it. This finding aligns with self-determination theory which suggests that people are more likely to engage in behaviors congruent with their identity when they see it as central to their self-concept.

Interestingly, while copular phrasing increased motivation and policy support, its effect on explicit political behaviors (e.g., petition signing, advocacy) was less pronounced. This may reflect the complex interplay between individual and group identity processes. While identity-referencing strengthens internal motivation, external factors—such as social norms, political climate, and access to opportunities—also shape behavioral expression (Reed & Forehand, 2016). Future research could examine whether social reinforcement—such as public affirmation of identity—further amplifies political engagement.

In practice, these findings may inform political messaging, advocacy, and mobilization strategies. Campaigns and organizations aiming to increase political engagement may benefit from emphasizing identity-based framing (e.g., "You are a voter" rather than "You vote"). However, it is also essential to consider potential drawbacks, such as deepening partisan divides or reducing openness to alternative perspectives. Future research should explore whether emphasizing collective identity (e.g., "We are Democrats/Republicans") has different effects than individual identity framing, as group-oriented language may further reinforce social cohesion and collective action.

Overall, Study 3 provides strong evidence that identity-referencing language shapes political motivation and engagement by reinforcing the salience of political identity. The dual role of political identity—as both a personal commitment and a social affiliation—suggests that linguistic framing influences not only individual behavior but also broader patterns of group cohesion and collective action. By integrating insights from motivation theories and social identity frameworks, this research deepens our understanding of how language constructs and sustains political engagement.

General Discussion

The findings across three studies provide evidence that subtle differences in identity-referencing language—specifically, copular versus verbal constructions—shape motivation and behavior. Together, the results suggest that identity-referencing phrases play a powerful role in aligning action with identity, with meaningful implications across domains such as education, team performance, and political participation.

Synthesis of Key Findings

Study 1 demonstrates that copular identity-referencing increases team performance in a real-world intramural sports context. Despite teams being randomly assigned and having no pre-existing cohesion, those in the copular condition achieved a 59.2%-win rate, compared to 40.8% for verbal teams—a performance differential more typically seen between top- and bottom-tier professional sports teams². This suggests that identity-referencing language can catalyze performance-relevant motivation even among newly formed groups.

Study 2 tests the underlying psychological mechanism in a controlled lab setting. Participants prompted with copular language (e.g., “I am a student”) reported higher levels of integrated motivation than those exposed to verbal phrasing (e.g., “I study”). These findings suggest that copular phrasing may foster autonomous motivation by embedding goal pursuit within the self-concept.

Study 3 extends these effects to the political domain, building on prior research showing that invoking identity in voter mobilization (e.g., “Be a voter” vs. “Vote”; Bryan et al., 2011) can influence behavior. Copular phrasing increased support for identity-congruent policies and

² In 2024, for example, the New York Yankees—an MLB playoff contender—finished with a win percentage near 60%, while the Oakland Athletics ended closer to 40%. This real-world performance gap illustrates the magnitude of the effect observed between identity-framing conditions

enhanced political motivation. Mediation analyses confirmed that these effects were driven by increases in integrated autonomy where participants saw political behavior as more self-relevant and identity-consistent.

Theoretical Contributions

This research extends foundational theories of identity and motivation by identifying a novel, low-cost linguistic mechanism, identity-referent phrases, as a driver of identity internalization. While prior work has highlighted structural or social antecedents of identity salience and integration, we show that subtle differences in phrasing (copular vs. verbal) can shift motivation by embedding behaviors more firmly within the self-concept. In doing so, we bridge previously disconnected literatures on identity salience, self-determination, and linguistic framing, offering an integrative model of how language activates and anchors identity-congruent behavior.

First, this research offers a novel linguistic mechanism for understanding identity salience. While identity salience theory (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) emphasizes structural role commitment and situational activation, our findings show that brief, syntactically distinct identity-referencing phrases can increase identity accessibility and influence downstream behavior. Copular phrasing embeds identity within the self-concept more durably than verbal phrasing, providing a subtle yet powerful cue that can affect motivation and decision-making without altering structural role engagement.

Second, this work extends Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) by demonstrating how linguistic cues facilitate the internalization of identity-linked behaviors. Specifically, we show that copular phrasing fosters integrated autonomous motivation—the form of motivation most closely associated with sustained behavioral engagement—by increasing the perceived alignment between identity and action. While SDT has traditionally focused on social

and psychological antecedents of integration (e.g., autonomy support), our findings suggest that identity-referent phrases themselves can cue integration, independent of structural supports or externally imposed goals. This represents a previously underexplored but theoretically meaningful route to sustained motivation. This highlights a previously underexplored, low-cost pathway for promoting identity-consistent motivation.

Third, our findings clarify and extend past research on identity-framed appeals (e.g., Bryan et al., 2011), which often demonstrate behavioral effects without clearly specifying underlying motivational mechanisms. By directly measuring integrated regulation, we provide evidence that these effects are not merely due to category salience or essentialist reasoning, which emphasize surface-level identity cues or trait-based inferences. Instead, the observed motivational shift reflects deeper internalization, a transformation in how individuals experience and endorse the behavior as self-congruent. Although we cannot fully rule out overlapping constructs, our data suggest that integrated motivation accounts for the behavioral effects above and beyond alternative explanations.

Together, these contributions demonstrate how a subtle linguistic distinction—between saying who one is versus what one does—can meaningfully shape identity-linked motivation. In doing so, this work offers both a theoretical extension and a mechanistic clarification of prior identity-framing research by bridging literatures on identity salience, self-determination, and language. It also provides a practical framework for how organizations, educators, and policymakers can design communications that promote long-term identity-congruent behavior.

Practical Applications

The present research highlights the powerful role of identity-referencing language in shaping motivation and behavior, offering low-cost, scalable strategies that can be leveraged

across multiple applied domains. Because identity phrasing can be easily manipulated through subtle linguistic choices, these insights can be implemented without structural changes to programs, policies, or interventions.

Educational and Developmental Contexts

In educational settings, small shifts in how educators frame roles and responsibilities can meaningfully affect student engagement. Referring to students as “learners” or “scientists” (e.g., “You are a reader”) rather than describing what they do (e.g., “You read books”) may increase identity congruence with academic domains, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds who may be less likely to self-identify with school-based roles. This complements existing work on belonging interventions and growth mindset, providing a linguistic tool to deepen students’ motivational alignment with valued roles.

Political and Civic Engagement

Identity-framed appeals have been shown to increase civic behavior such as voting and volunteering (Bryan et al., 2011), but the mechanisms have remained underexplored. Our findings suggest that using copular identity phrasing (e.g., “Be a voter”) can foster more enduring civic self-concepts, which may in turn increase sustained political participation. These insights are particularly relevant for political campaigns, nonprofit organizations, and civic education programs seeking to move beyond short-term nudges toward longer-term engagement.

Health Communication and Behavior Change

Health campaigns often encourage people to adopt specific behaviors (e.g., “Exercise regularly,” “Eat more vegetables”). Our findings suggest that identity-framed language—such as inviting people to view themselves as “an active person” or “a healthy eater”—may foster stronger internalization and lead to more sustained behavior change. This has implications for public health

messaging, clinical interventions, and habit formation, particularly in contexts where long-term commitment is critical.

Workplace Engagement and Organizational Identity

In organizational contexts, how roles and responsibilities are described may influence employee motivation and retention. Encouraging employees to adopt identity-framed language (e.g., “I am a designer” vs. “I design”) can enhance their sense of role centrality and intrinsic motivation. These insights are especially relevant to organizational behavior, where identity-congruent motivation predicts outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and role persistence. For instance, onboarding materials that refer to employees as “team members” or “innovators” rather than focusing on their tasks may increase early-stage identity internalization and reduce attrition. Moreover, copular phrasing could reinforce professional identity during key transitions—such as promotion, cross-functional role change, or return-to-work—when the integration of new self-concepts is particularly salient.

Volunteerism and Prosocial Behavior

Nonprofits and prosocial campaigns often rely on behavior-based appeals (e.g., “Support a cause,” “Donate today”). Our research suggests that encouraging people to view themselves as “a supporter” or “a volunteer” may promote longer-lasting engagement. These shifts can be especially useful for organizations working with episodic volunteers or first-time donors, where strengthening identity alignment may increase repeat engagement and long-term affiliation.

In sum, our findings demonstrate that small linguistic shifts can produce large motivational effects when they target identity. Because copular phrasing increases the likelihood that individuals internalize roles as part of the self, it provides a powerful and underutilized tool for designing more effective interventions across diverse sectors.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this research advances understanding of how linguistic framing shapes identity internalization and motivation, several limitations offer productive avenues for future inquiry. Although Study 1 tested the effects of identity referencing in a field setting, we were unable to measure integrated motivation directly. This constrained our ability to capture the psychological mechanism in real time. Future work could incorporate digital journaling, passive sensing, or wearable devices to assess fluctuations in motivation as they unfold, offering richer insight into how identity-congruent language sustains engagement over time.

While integrated autonomy consistently emerged as the strongest mediator across studies, it is unlikely to be the sole psychological driver. Mechanisms such as essentialist reasoning, identity salience, or self-importance may also shape identity-congruent behavior. Future research could experimentally compare or model these constructs simultaneously to identify their independent or interacting effects. At the same time, identity-reinforcing language may introduce trade-offs. While copular phrasing strengthens identity commitment, it may also reduce psychological flexibility. In situations requiring role exit, value shifts, or recovery from failure, strongly essentialized identities may be harder to modify or disengage from. This may be especially relevant in fast-changing organizational environments, where employees must adapt to new roles or business models. Understanding when identity framing empowers versus constrains will be crucial for responsible application

Another open question concerns the role of audience and agency. Our studies primarily focused on self-endorsed or neutrally framed identity statements, but identity labels may function differently when assigned by others. For example, being told “You are a helper” could feel

affirming in some contexts and coercive in others. Future research should examine how the source and delivery of identity language shape its motivational impact.

Taken together, these directions suggest a broader research agenda that examines how language not only reflects but actively constructs an identity agenda with implications for motivational theory, behavioral intervention, and the psychology of the self.

Conclusion

This research highlights the transformative power of copular identity-referencing in shaping motivation and behavior. Across three studies, we demonstrate that copular identity-referent phrasing fosters deeper engagement, stronger identity salience, and sustained motivation compared to verbal identity-referent phrasing. By embedding actions within self-concept, copular identity-referencing enhances long-term commitment and goal adherence in educational, organizational, and political settings. Future research should continue exploring the nuances of linguistic framing to better understand how identity construction through language influences behavior in both positive and potentially restrictive ways. These insights offer valuable guidance for practitioners and researchers seeking to optimize motivation and performance across varied domains.

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Appendices

Appendix A

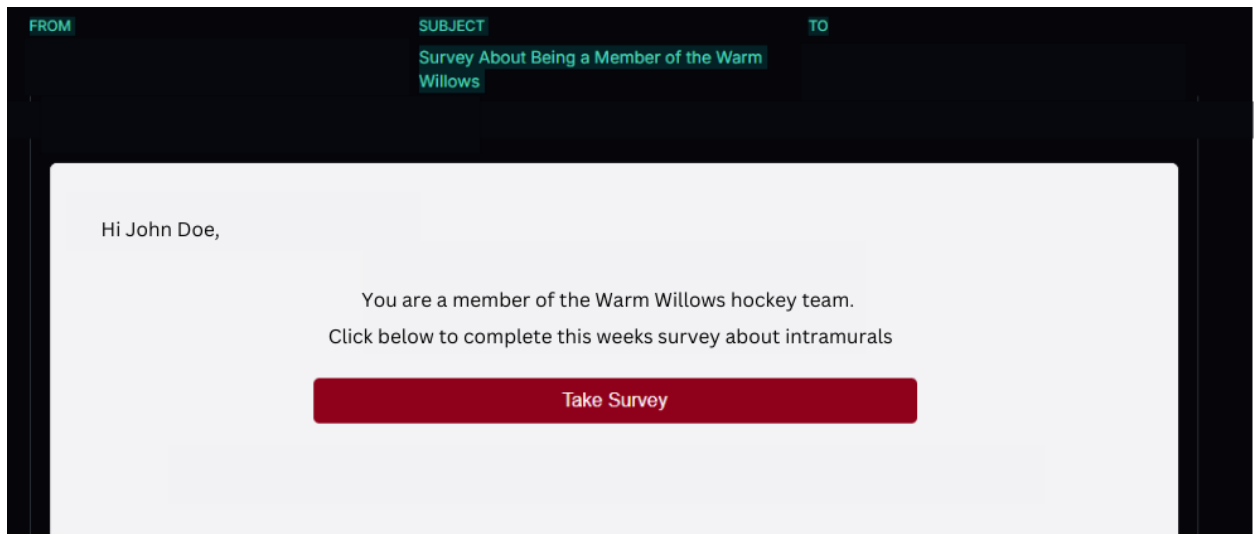
Table A1. Summary of Key Results Across Studies

<i>Study</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Copular Phrase Condition</i>	<i>Verbal Phrase Condition</i>	<i>Statistical Test</i>
1	Win Percentage	59.2%	40.8%	t(592) = 2.54, p = .011
1	Points Scored (Z-Score)	0.12	- 0.12	t(630) = 1.98, p = .051
1	Points Allowed (Z-Score)	-0.4	0.09	t(630) = 1.23, p = .224
1	Attendance	68.6%	68.2%	t(686) = .085, p = .396
1	Week 4 Integrated Autonomous Motivation (-3 to 3 scale)	0.22	0.42	t(592) = -0.97, p = .332
1	Week 4 Identity Self-Importance (-3 to 3 scale)	0.18	0.32	t(592) = -0.69, p = .494
1	Week 10 Integrated Autonomous Motivation (-3 to 3 scale)	0.44	0.55	t(592) = 0.16, p = 8.73
1	Week 10 Identity Self-Importance (-3 to 3 scale)	0.40	0.42	t(592) = 0.75, p = .456
2	Integrated Autonomous Motivation (1-7 scale)	6.08	4.69	t(251) = -2.309, p = .022
3	Integrated Autonomous Motivation (1-7 scale)	Republicans: 4.65 Democrats: 4.54	Republicans: 3.52 Democrats: 3.74	b = 0.48, SE = 0.08, t(361) = 6.25, p < .001 No political affiliation effect or interaction
3	Support for Carbon Tax (0-100 scale)	Democrats: 31.7 Republicans: 0.85	Democrats: 32.4 Republicans: 1.20	b = -0.25, p = .85 Party effect: b = 15.52, p < .001
3	Identity Congruent Behaviors (3-item composite, $\alpha = .82$; Likert 1-7 scale)	4.92	4.72	b = 0.28, p = .25 Party effect significant: b = 0.86, p < .001
3	Mediation Effect (Phrase → Motivation → Behavior)	Significant	—	$\beta = 0.255$ (CI: [0.12, 0.43]), p < .05

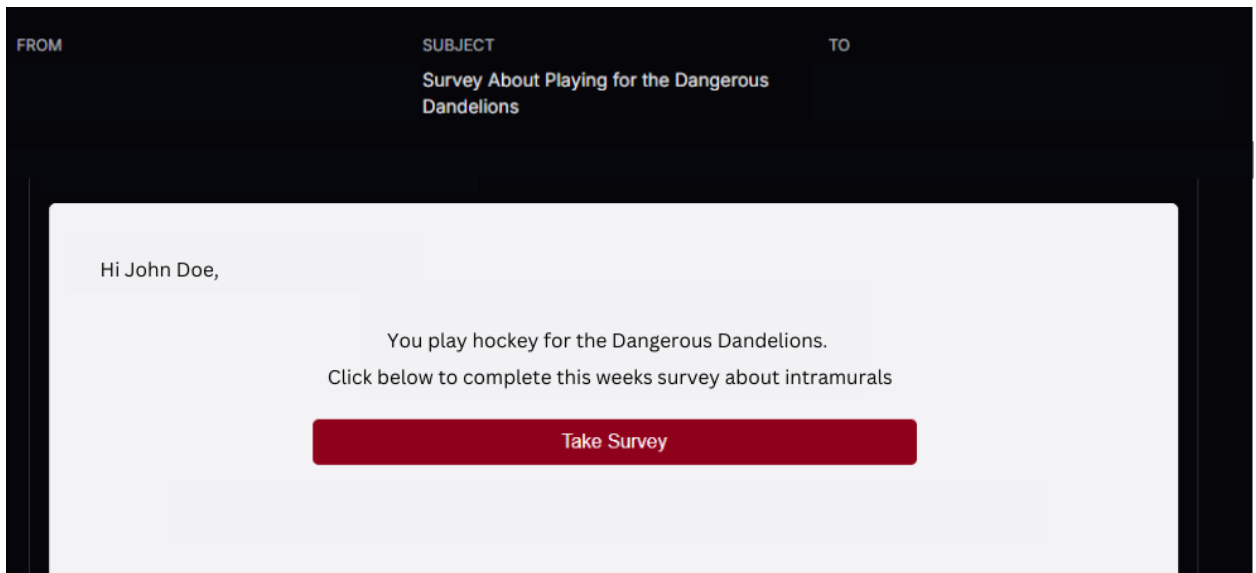
Note: Bold indicates a statistically significant difference (p < .05) between Copular and Verbal Phrase conditions.

Appendix B: Intramural Email Content

Copular Phrase Condition Weekly Email



Verbal Phrase Condition Weekly Email



Appendix C: Intramural Weekly Survey

Copular Phrase Condition Weekly Engagement Survey

Welcome to the Intramural Participation Survey!

As a member of the Warm Willows, please take a minute to answer the following questions.

As a member of the Warm Willows... My level of motivation this week is:

Very Low	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Very High
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

As a member of the Warm Willows... My interest in the game this week is:

Very Low	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Very High
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

As a member of the Warm Willows... My experience with the hockey league is:

Very Negative	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Very Positive
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

If you wish, share a few thoughts about being a member of the Warm Willows.

Verbal Phrase Condition Weekly Engagement Survey

Welcome to the Intramural Participation Survey!

As you play for the Dangerous Dandelions, please take a minute to answer the following questions.

Playing with the Dangerous Dandelions... My level of motivation this week is:

Very Low	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Very High
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Playing with the Dangerous Dandelions... My interest in the game this week is:

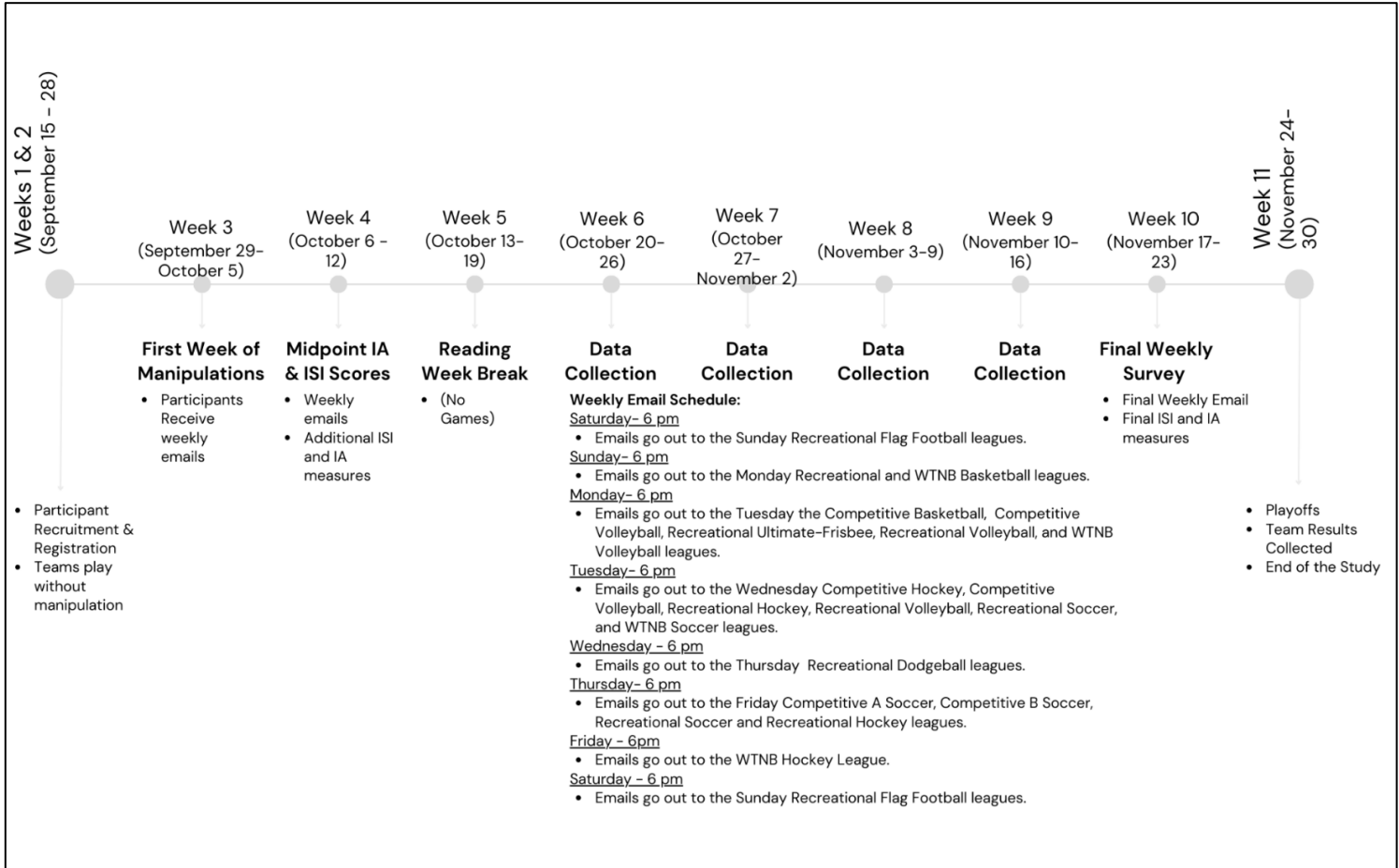
Very Low	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Very High
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Playing with the Dangerous Dandelions... My experience with the hockey league is:

Very Negative	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Very Positive
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

If you wish, share a few thoughts about playing for the Dangerous Dandelions.

Appendix D: Intramural Study Timeline



Appendix E: Intramural Integrated Autonomous Motivation Measure

Copular Condition

As a member of the [Team Name], please take a minute to indicate how well the following statements describe you:

1. During intramurals, my identity as a member of the [Team Name] reflects the essence of who I am.
2. As a member of the [Team Name], I am living in line with my deepest principles
3. Being a member of the [Team Name] is an integral part of my life.

Verbal Condition

As you play for the [Team Name], please take a minute to indicate how well the following statements describe you:

1. During intramurals, my identity playing for the [Team Name] reflects the essence of who I am.
2. As I play for the [Team Name], I am living in line with my deepest principles
3. Playing for the [Team Name] is an integral part of my life.

Appendix F: Intramural Identity Self-Importance Measure

Copular Condition

As a member of [Team Name], please take a minute to answer the following:

1. How important to your identity is your identity is your Intramural team
2. How central to your sense of self is your Intramural team
3. How closely do you identify with your Intramural team

Verbal Condition

As you play for the [Team Name], please take a minute to answer the following:

1. How important to your identity is your identity is your Intramural team
2. How central to your sense of self is your Intramural team
3. How closely do you identify with your Intramural team

Appendix G: Student Integrated Autonomy Measure

Please indicate the most accurate answer to the following question:

Why am I a student? (copular)

Why do I do schoolwork? (verbal)

Intrinsic

- 2. Because I enjoy learning
- 7. Because learning new skills and improving are very interesting
- 13. Because I find it enjoyable to discover new things I can apply to my life

Integrated

- 4. Because it reflects the essence of who I am
- 5. Because through this, I am living in line with my deepest principles
- 15. Because it is an integral part of my life

Identified

- 9. Because it is a way to develop myself.
- 11. Because it helps develop other aspects of my life
- 17. Because I found it is a good way to develop aspects of myself that I value.

Introjected

- 3. Because I would feel bad about myself if I did not (was not)
- 12. Because I feel better about myself when I do (am)
- 14. Because I would not feel worthwhile if I did not (was not)

External

- 1. Because people around me reward me when I do (am)
- 6. Because I think others would disapprove of me I did not (was not)
- 16. Because people I care about would be upset with me if I did not (was not)

Amotivated

- 8. So that others will praise me for it
- 10. It is not clear to me anymore; I don't really think my place is at school (as a student)
- 18. I used to have a good reason, but now I am asking myself if I should continue

Appendix H: Political Identity Integrated Autonomy Measure

I am a member of [Political Party Name] ... (copular)

I vote for the [Political Party Name] ... (verbal)

1. Because it reflects the essence of who I am
2. Because through my political affiliations, I am living in line with my deepest principles.
3. Because my political views are an integral part of my life

Appendix I: Carbon Tax Support Measure

Please use the sliding scale to rate your support for the implementation of the carbon tax in the USA.



Appendix J: Carbon Tax Identity Congruent Behaviors Measure

Please use the sliding scale to rate the likelihood in which you would support the implementation of the carbon tax in the USA, using the following methods.



Chapter 2: “I am” versus “we are”: When and for whom identity-referencing and self-construal affect behavior.

Exploratory manuscript prepared as part of the doctoral dissertation (July 2025). This article was co-authored with Keri L. Kettle. My specific contributions are detailed in the Preface.

Abstract

Does saying “I am a blood donor” feel as motivating as saying “We are blood donors”? Or does that depend on who you are and your relationship with others? This chapter investigates how subtle shifts in identity-referencing language—copular (“I am”) versus verbal (“I do”) phrasing—interact with identity type (singular vs. plural) and self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) to shape motivation and prosocial intentions. Grounded in self-determination theory and identity-based motivation theory, two experimental studies test whether integrated autonomous motivation mediates the relationship between phrasing and behavior, and whether this effect is amplified when linguistic framing aligns with an individual’s self-view. While we find limited support for direct effects of phrasing, consistent evidence emerges for moderated mediation: identity-referencing language influences motivation and behavior when phrasing type fits participants’ dominant self-construal. These findings underscore the importance of linguistic fit in promoting internalized motivation and point to practical implications for identity-based messaging in social campaigns.

Keywords

Linguistics, self-construal, integrated motivation, self-determination theory

Introduction

A simple phrase can shape how people see themselves. Telling someone “You are a voter” rather than “You vote” makes them more likely to turn out on election day (Bryan et al., 2011). Describing a child as “a helper” rather than asking them “to help” increases their willingness to assist others (Bryan et al., 2014). These kinds of identity-framing effects are striking not just for their impact, but for their subtlety. With just a shift in phrasing—from doing to being—language can nudge behavior by invoking the self (Kettle et al., 2025).

But identity doesn’t exist in a vacuum (Oyserman et al., 2012). Whether someone sees themselves as a voter or a helper is shaped by more than syntax—it depends on how they construe the self in the first place. For some, the self is personal and autonomous. For others, it is relational and defined by group membership (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). What happens when these foundational differences in self-construal combined with identity-referent language? Does saying “I am a donor” inspire the same motivation as “We are donors”? And for whom does each message resonate?

In this paper, we explore how linguistic framing interacts with self-construal to shape identity-driven motivation. We focus on copular phrases—those that people use as a symbolic representation of who they are (“I am a donor”, “We are donors”)—and examine how the shift from singular to plural identity alters motivation for people who see the self as independent versus interdependent. Through three studies, we test whether the motivational power of identity phrasing depends not just on what is said, but on how individuals see themselves in relation to others. By examining when and for whom identity-referencing language works, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of how language shapes behavior—and why the same phrase can inspire some people while leaving others unmoved.

This research integrates self-construal into the study of identity-referencing language, challenging assumptions of uniformity in identity-driven motivation. If individuals with different self-construals respond distinctively to individual versus collective identity framing, then one-size-fits-all approaches to shaping motivation may be misguided. This study aims to delineate when identity-referencing language enhances motivation and for whom it has the greatest impact, offering theoretical advancements and practical insights for designing more effective identity-based messaging across diverse domains.

Theoretical Background

Language as a Tool for Identity Construction

Language does more than express identity—it helps shape it (Boroditsky, 2001; Lupyan & Bergen, 2016). Subtle differences in phrasing can signal whether an identity is seen as central to the self or just descriptive of one's actions. For instance, the difference between saying “I am a runner” versus “I run” might seem trivial, but research suggests it can significantly affect how deeply people internalize that identity (Tinlin et al., 2025). A growing body of research shows that such linguistic nuances carry psychological consequences. Copular expressions (e.g., “I am a voter”) tend to cue trait-like understandings of the self, which in turn promote identity-consistent behavior over time (Bryan et al., 2011). In contrast, verbal expressions (e.g., “I vote”) focus on discrete actions and may not foster the same level of commitment or internal motivation (Husband et al., 2019).

These distinctions are not merely semantic. They function as psychological frames that shape how people understand themselves and what they do (Moore, 2012). Referred to here as identity-referencing language, these phrases influence motivation across diverse domains—from academic achievement (Cimpian et al., 2012) to self-regulation in health and consumer behavior

(Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2014). Yet, despite increasing evidence that the way we refer to an identity matters, research has only begun to explore the mechanisms behind these effects—and the conditions under which they are most potent.

Framing Identity: Singular versus Collective Selves

While most studies have focused on singular expressions of identity (“I am a student,” “I am a voter”), many real-world identities are experienced collectively. People often describe themselves as part of a group, using plural constructions such as “We are Penn State” or “We are Democrats.” These framings do more than add grammatical complexity; they reshape how the self is perceived and enacted.

Plural identity statements can activate a sense of shared purpose, social norms, and group cohesion (Ashmore, 2004; Ellemers et al., 2002). They offer a relational context through which identity becomes not only internalized but shared. In prosocial contexts, for instance, referring to oneself as part of a group (“We are blood donors”) may generate feelings of belonging and moral obligation, which in turn increase follow-through on intentions (Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012; Oyserman, 2009, Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

These effects may parallel those found in individual identity-referencing language, but they may also operate differently. Just as “I am” (copular phrasing) can differ in impact from “I do,” (verbal phrasing) so too might “We are” elicit different motivational consequences than “We do.” Surprisingly, few studies have investigated how grammatical number (singular vs. plural) interacts with grammatical form (copular vs. verbal) to shape motivation. This interaction—between how identity is phrased and how it is socially framed—may be critical to understanding when language influences behavior and for whom.

However, just like with individual identity cues, the psychological effects of plural phrasing may depend on how the self is construed—individually or relationally. Surprisingly, few studies have examined how singular vs. plural identity framing interacts with grammatical form (copular vs. verbal) to influence internal motivation. Does saying “We are volunteers” work differently than “We volunteer”? How might these differences matter more to some people than others? These are questions we intend to answer with this research.

The Self in Context: Why Self-Construal Matters

To understand when and for whom identity-referencing language matters, we turn to self-construal theory (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). According to this framework, people differ in how they understand the self: as independent or interdependent. An independent self-construal emphasizes individual traits, goals, and internal consistency. An interdependent self-construal, by contrast, emphasizes social roles, relationships, and harmony with others. These orientations influence not just how people think about themselves, but how they respond to identity cues (Cross et al., 2011, Vignoles et al. 2016). For example, individuals with an independent self-construal may find singular, copular expressions like “I am a volunteer” particularly motivating, as they align with the self as a personal and enduring entity. In contrast, those with an interdependent self-construal may respond more strongly to plural framings like “We are volunteers,” which reflect a relational understanding of the self embedded in social context.

Empirical evidence supports the idea that self-construal moderates’ responses to identity cues. It shapes how individuals interpret identity primes (Kühnen & Oyserman, 2002), persuasive messaging (Uskul, Sherman, & Fitzgibbon, 2009), and motivational cues (Shao et al., 2018). However, to date, no research has systematically tested how these self-views interact with identity-

referencing language to influence behavioral outcomes. This gap is especially important in settings where both individual and collective motivations are in play.

What Drives Identity-Congruent Motivation? The Role of Integrated Autonomy

To advance this framework, we consider how identity becomes motivational. Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that motivation is strongest when behaviors are internalized—when people engage in actions that align with their sense of who they are. The most robust form of internalization, known as integrated regulation (or integrated autonomy), occurs when identity and behavior are fully self-endorsed and experienced as congruent with one’s values and self-concept (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

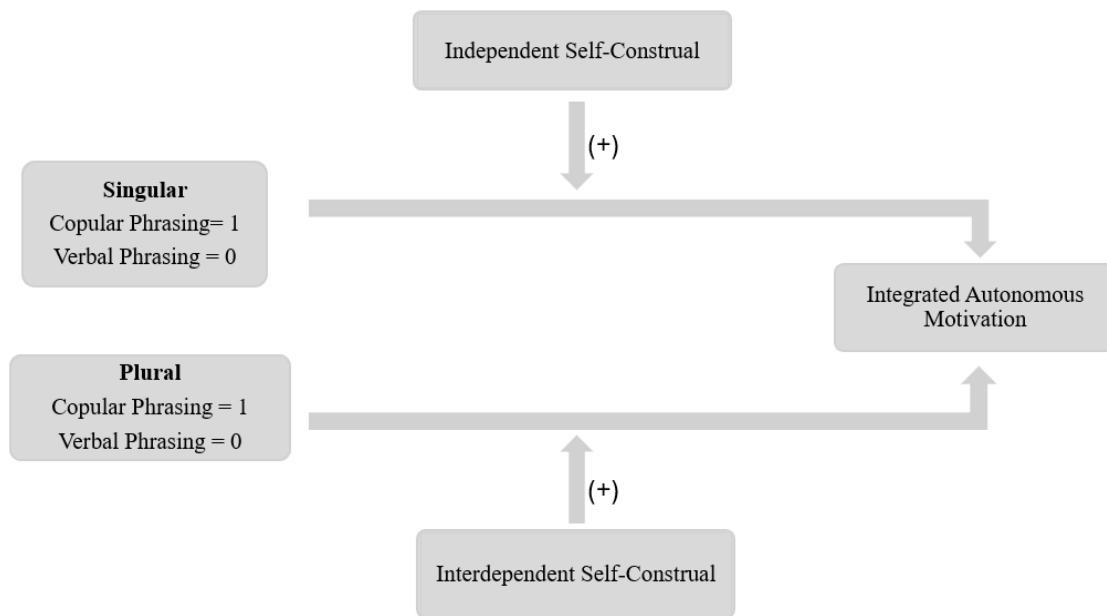
We propose that identity-referencing language plays a central role in this internalization process. Specifically, copular expressions such as “I am a donor” may enhance integrated autonomy by framing the behavior as core to the self, whereas verbal expressions like “I donate” may imply external or temporary motivation. The same logic extends to plural forms: for individuals with an interdependent self-construal, saying “We are donors” may provide a socially grounded path to internalization—one that aligns with their relational orientation and group values.

However, empirical work connecting language, self-construal, and motivational integration is limited. No prior studies, to our knowledge, have examined how these elements interact to predict real-world behaviors. This paper introduces a new framework that integrates identity-referencing language, self-construal, and integrated autonomy to explain motivational outcomes. Across three studies, we test how phrasing identity in copular (“I am” / “We are”) versus verbal (“I do” / “We do”) form influences internalized motivation and behavior—and whether these effects vary based on individual differences in self-construal and identity framing (singular vs. plural).

Hypotheses

Given these theoretical considerations, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a two-way interaction between identity type (singular vs. plural) and identity-referencing (copular vs. verbal) on integrated autonomy. This interaction is moderated by self-construal: among those with an independent self-construal, copular phrasing increases autonomy more when the identity is singular; among those with an interdependent self-construal, copular phrasing increases autonomy more when the identity is plural.



H2: The effect of copular identity-referencing on behavior (donation motivation and choice) is mediated by integrated autonomy. This mediated effect is moderated by self-construal, such that the indirect effect is stronger for independent individuals in the singular condition and for interdependent individuals in the plural condition.

framing has a stronger effect on motivation than plural framing, regardless of phrasing. Self-construal emerged as a consistent predictor of motivation across conditions, highlighting its importance in shaping identity-related engagement.

Study 2 extended the inquiry to a socially meaningful context—blood donation—where identity-referencing language may shape prosocial intentions. Participants were exposed to a fictional recruitment campaign and completed a reflection task using either singular or plural, and copular or verbal phrasing. Although the predicted interaction with self-construal was not significant, exploratory mediation analyses revealed that integrated autonomous motivation partially mediated the relationship between phrasing and behavioral intentions. These results suggest that phrasing may influence motivation indirectly, even in the absence of strong main effects.

Taken together, these studies offer preliminary evidence that identity-referencing language can influence internalized motivation and downstream behaviors but also underscore the complexity of these effects. Rather than acting uniformly, the influence of phrasing appears to depend on the interplay between identity framing, individual differences in self-construal, and the broader context in which the identity is activated. This work contributes to a growing literature on how language shape's identity and motivation, and points to key boundary conditions for the effectiveness of identity-based messaging. A summary table of results across studies can be found in Appendix A.

Study 1

Study 1 tests the central premise that the motivational impact of identity-referencing language depends on how the identity is framed (individual vs. collective) and how the self is

construed (independent vs. interdependent). Specifically, it examines whether using copular phrasing (e.g., “I am a voter” / “We are voters”) versus verbal phrasing (e.g., “I vote” / “We vote”) affects integrated autonomous motivation. The study also tests whether these effects vary depending on whether the identity is singular (“I”) or plural (“We”). We predict that identity phrasing enhances motivation most when it aligns with participants’ chronic self-construal—that independent individuals respond more strongly to singular-copular phrasing, and interdependent individuals to plural-copular phrasing.

Participants

We recruited 500 U.S. citizens through CloudResearch who self-identified as either Democrat or Republican. Participants who selected “Other” or “Either/Or” were redirected to a different study.

Design

A 2 (Linguistic Form: Copular vs. Verbal) \times 2 (Identity Type: Singular vs. Plural) between-subjects design randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions: (1) Singular-Copular (“I am [party]”), (2) Singular-Verbal (“I vote [party]”), (3) Plural-Copular (“We are [party]”), or (4) Plural-Verbal (“We vote [party]”).

Procedure

Participants first completed the Self-Construal Scale–Short Version (SCS-SV; D’Amico & Scrima, 2016) to measure independent and interdependent self-construal (see Appendix B). They then completed a writing task corresponding to their assigned condition, completing a prompt such as “I am a Democrat because...” or “We vote Republican because...”, depending on condition (See Appendix C for the complete manipulation list)

Following this task, participants completed an adapted Relative Autonomy Index (RAI; Ryan & Deci, 2000) contextualized to political identity, with six subscales measuring motivation types. The integrated subscale served as the primary outcome.

Measures

Self-Construal Scale (SCS-SV).

Participants completed the 10-item Short Version of the Self-Construal Scale (D'Amico & Scrima, 2016), which includes five items assessing independent self-construal (e.g., “I act the same way no matter who I am with”) and five assessing interdependent self-construal (e.g., “I often consult with others before making important decisions”). Items were presented in randomized order, and responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Relative Autonomy Index (RAI).

Motivation to identify with one’s political party was measured using an adapted version of the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI; Ryan & Deci, 2000), contextualized to the political domain. The measure included six subscales of motivation (intrinsic, integrated, identified, introjected, external, and amotivation), each consisting of three items. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Rather than computing a weighted RAI score, each subscale was averaged separately and analyzed as an individual dependent variable, allowing for a more focused assessment of motivational internalization. Integrated autonomous motivation was the primary outcome variable.

Hypothesized Results

We predicted a significant three-way interaction among identity referencing (copular vs. verbal), identity type (singular vs. plural), and self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) on

integrated autonomous motivation. Specifically, for individuals with an independent self-construal, we expected that copular phrasing (e.g., “I am Democrat/Republican”) would lead to higher integrated autonomy compared to verbal phrasing (e.g., “I vote Democrat/Republican”), particularly when the identity was framed singularly (individual identity). Conversely, for individuals with an interdependent self-construal, we hypothesized that copular phrasing would produce stronger motivational effects when the identity was framed collectively (e.g., “We are Democrat/Republican”) rather than individually.

This hypothesized three-way interaction aligns with Hypothesis 1, proposing that the motivational impact of identity-referencing language depends on both the linguistic form (copular vs. verbal) and the identity type (individual vs. plural), contingent upon alignment with the participant’s self-construal.

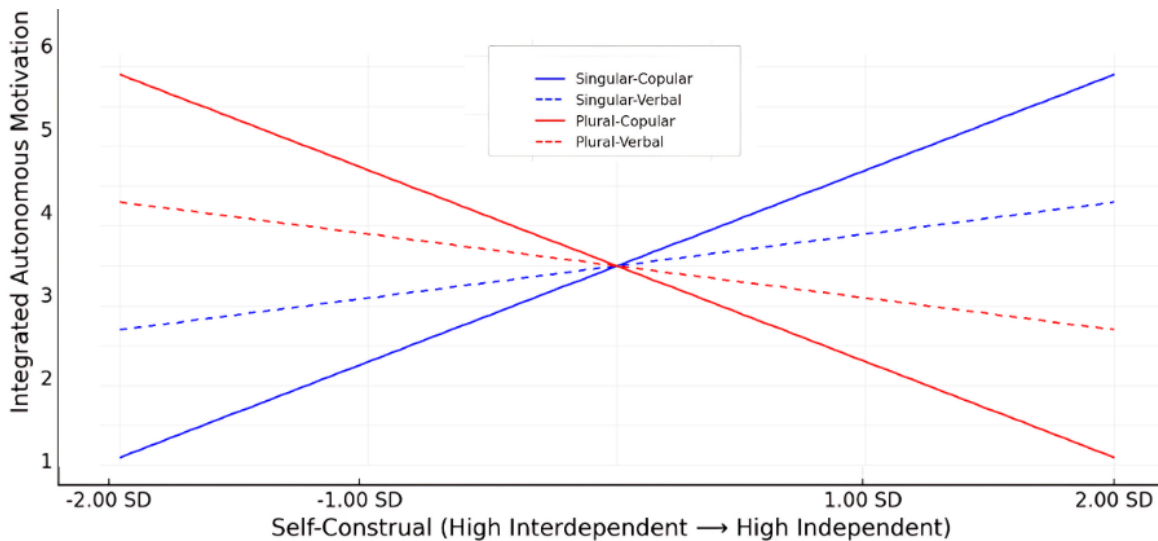


Fig.1. Illustrates the predicted interaction of identity-referent phrasing (copular/verbal) and identity-form (singular/plural) on integrated autonomous motivation.

Results

We tested whether identity-referencing language (copular vs. verbal), identity type (singular vs. plural), and self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) interacted to predict integrated autonomous motivation. Contrary to expectations, the three-way interaction was not significant for independent self-construal, $b = 0.044$, $t(498) = 0.62$, $p = .54$, nor for interdependent self-construal, $b = -0.079$, $t(498) = -1.02$, $p = .31$. The two-way interaction between phrasing and identity type was also not significant, $b = 0.058$, $t(498) = 0.91$, $p = .36$.

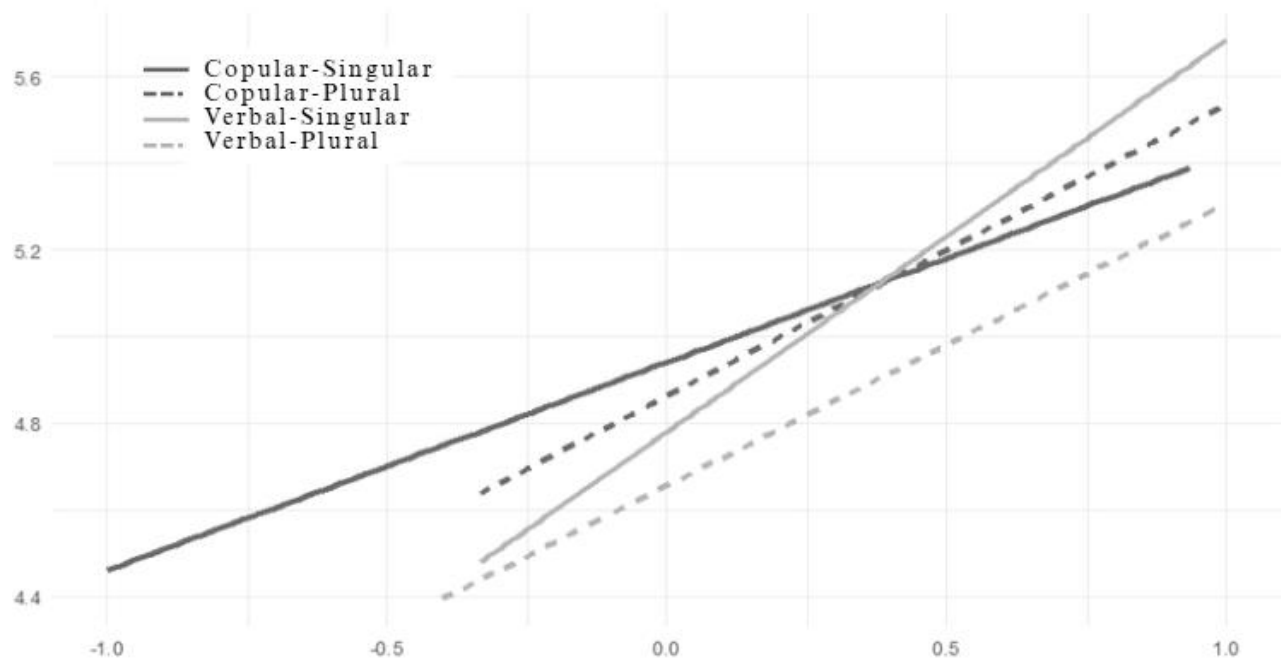


Fig.2. Interaction of identity form (copular-verbal) and identity type (singular-plural) for independent self-construal on integrated autonomous motivation.

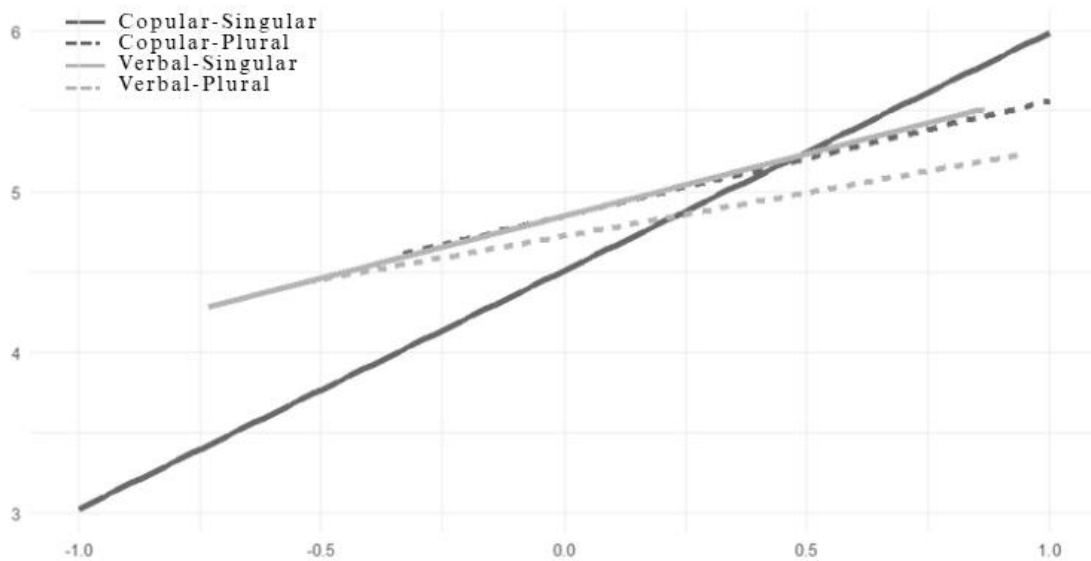


Fig.3. Interaction of identity form (copular-verbal) and identity type (singular-plural) for interdependent self-construal on integrated autonomous motivation.

However, significant main effects emerged for self-construal. Higher independent self-construal predicted greater integrated autonomous motivation, $b = 0.18$, $t(498) = 2.49$, $p = .013$. Similarly, higher interdependent self-construal was associated with greater motivation, $b = 0.28$, $t(498) = 3.62$, $p < .001$.

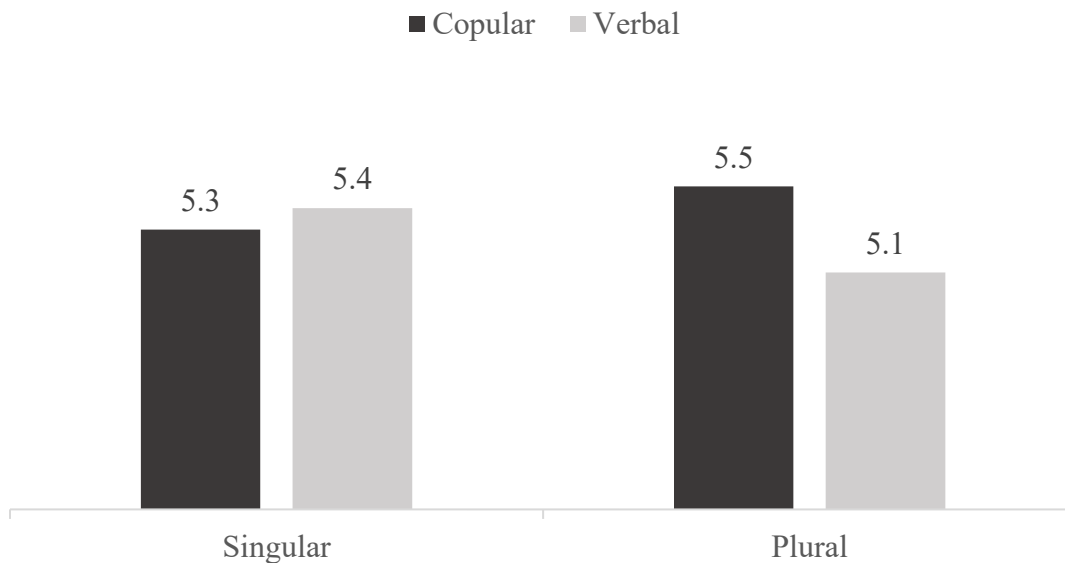


Fig.4. Integrated Autonomous Motivation by Condition and Identity Type

Follow-up analyses revealed a significant interaction between identity framing and phrasing condition. In the verbal condition, participants reported significantly higher integrated motivation when the identity was framed singularly ($M_{vs} = 5.4$) compared to plurally ($M_{vp} = 5.1$), $p = .014$. In contrast, in the copular condition, participants reported marginally lower motivation when framed singularly ($M_{cs} = 5.3$) than plurally ($M_{cp} = 5.5$), $p = .094$. Differences between copular and verbal phrasing within each identity type (singular or plural) were not significant ($ps > .26$).

Although the full Relative Autonomy Index was administered, we focused exclusively on the integrated subscale to assess identity-congruent motivation. This decision reflects our theoretical emphasis on internalization as a key mechanism underlying identity-referent language effects. For a comprehensive overview of means and inferential statistics across motivation subscales, see Appendix E, table E1 .

Overall, these results suggest that identity type influences integrated autonomous motivation more consistently than phrasing type. Furthermore, while individuals with stronger independent or interdependent self-construal tend to report higher motivation, the interaction effects involving linguistic phrasing and identity type do not appear to depend on self-construal in this sample.

Discussion

This study advances our understanding of how subtle variations in identity-referencing language shape motivation, particularly when considered alongside individual differences in self-construal. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), we tested whether the fit between phrasing type (copular vs. verbal), identity type (singular vs. plural), and self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) influences integrated autonomous motivation.

Contrary to predictions, verbal phrasing (e.g., “I vote Democrat”) elicited higher integrated motivation than copular phrasing (e.g., “I am a Democrat”) among participants with an independent self-construal when the identity was singular. This pattern suggests that action-oriented language may better resonate with independently oriented individuals, who emphasize agency, autonomy, and doing. In contrast, the expected motivational boost from copular phrasing (e.g., “We are Republicans”) among interdependent individuals in the plural identity condition did emerge, supporting the idea that categorical, group-based phrasing aligns with the values of interdependence and belonging.

Although the study focused on motivational internalization, it did not assess perceived identity relevance, identity strength, or behavioral intentions—factors that could further illuminate the pathways between language and motivation. Still, this narrow focus strengthens the case that

linguistic framing alone can affect integrated motivation, independent of broader identity attitudes or downstream behaviors.

Contextual factors may also have shaped responses. The data were collected during a period of intense political polarization in the United States (May 2025), when categorical political labels like “I am a Democrat” may evoke defensiveness or fatigue, even among in-group members (Lelkes, 2016; Mason, 2018). Given the moralization and affective polarization of political identities (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009), identity labels may no longer motivate in the way they once did. In this climate, verbal phrasing that highlights action over category membership (e.g., “I vote Democrat”) may seem less ideological and more agentic, particularly appealing to those with independent self-construal’s. This aligns with prior work showing that action-based language can more effectively foster motivation in high-stakes or morally charged domains (Bryan et al., 2011; Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007).

Although our study was not designed to test political dynamics directly, these findings raise important questions about when and how identity-referencing language supports motivational internalization. Future research should examine how contextual factors such as perceived identity threat, political tension, or issue salience, moderate the motivational effects of linguistic framing. While some effects aligned with theoretical expectations, others were marginal or non-significant. These patterns may reflect small but meaningful trends or statistical noise and should be interpreted with caution.

To clarify the mechanisms underlying these effects, future studies could incorporate behavioral measures such as political engagement, donation behavior, or identity-congruent choices. Experimental designs that include contextual manipulations—like salience of group identity, exposure to identity threat, or varying levels of social support—would also help identify

the boundary conditions under which linguistic framing strengthens motivational internalization. Examining a wider range of identities and contexts will further help establish the generalizability and limits of these effects. In summary, the study highlights the importance of matching identity-referencing language to an individual's self-construal and identity type to promote integrated autonomous motivation, underscoring the complex interplay between language, identity, and motivation central to SDT.

Study 2

Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 by testing a moderated mediation model in the context of a blood donation campaign. Specifically, this study examined how identity-referencing language (copular vs. verbal phrasing) interacted with self-construal to influence prosocial behavioral intentions through integrated autonomous motivation (IA). By situating this effect in a socially relevant and behaviorally meaningful context, we aimed to generate practical insight into how linguistic framing can enhance donor engagement.

Methods & Procedure

Participants

Participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) under the pretense of a study on “blood donation.” To ensure baseline relevance, only participants who had previously donated blood at least once were eligible. Eligibility was confirmed via a screening question at the start of the study. A total of 824 participants were recruited, with final analyses conducted on participants who passed the eligibility criteria and manipulation check ($N_{\text{donors}} = 596$).

Design

The study employed a 2 (Identity Referencing: Copular vs. Verbal) × 2 (Identity Type: Singular vs. Plural) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) Singular-Copular phrasing (“I am a blood donor”), (2) Singular-Verbal phrasing (“I donate blood”), (3) Plural-Copular phrasing (“We are blood donors”), or (4) Plural-Verbal phrasing (“We donate blood”).

Procedure

Participants first completed a screening question indicating the recency of their last blood donation. The available response options included: “Within the last month,” “Within the last 6 months,” “Within the last year,” “Within the last 4 years,” “5+ years ago,” and “I’ve never donated blood.” Participants who select “I’ve never donated blood” will be excluded from the analysis.

Next, participants completed the same 10-item Self-Construal Scale–Short Version (SCS-SV; D’Amico & Scrima, 2016) seen in Study 1, which includes independent and interdependent subscales. These scores were used as moderators in subsequent analyses.



Fig.5. Blood Donation Campaign Recruitment Poster

Participants were then introduced to a fictional blood donation campaign. They were shown a recruitment poster (see figure 5) and told to imagine participating in a national social media initiative encouraging others to donate blood. As part of this campaign, they were asked to share a personal message about their relationship to blood donation.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four phrasing conditions and asked to complete a writing task using the assigned phrase. For example, participants in the Singular-Copular condition saw the prompt “I am a blood donor because...” and were instructed to complete the sentence in at least 20 words (see Appendix F). This ensured engagement with the identity-referencing language.

Measures

Integrated Autonomous Motivation (IA).

After the writing task, participants completed a 3-item measure of integrated autonomy adapted from the Relative Autonomy Index (Ryan & Deci, 2000), rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all true, 7 = Very true). Higher scores indicated greater internalization of blood donor identity. See Appendix G for items used.

Behavioral Intentions

After completing the writing task, participants responded to a series of behavioral intention measures, which serve as the dependent variables. These measures assessed participants’ likelihood of publicly sharing their message and their commitment to future blood donation.

Likelihood to Post. First, participants indicated their likelihood to post by responding to the question: “How likely would you be to post the recruitment poster and your response on your social media?” (1= Not at all likely, 7= Very likely).

Donation Intention. Next, participants reported if they intended to donate blood at another unspecified time. The response was a binary Yes/No question: "*Do you intend to donate blood again in the future?*"

Donation Likelihood. Finally, we asked participants to indicate their likelihood of donating blood in the next 6 months on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all likely, 7= Very likely).

Manipulation Check

Moreover, participants completed a manipulation check "*In the writing task, which phrase where you asked to use?*" (with options matching the four conditions), to verify the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Hypothesized Results

We predicted a moderated mediation model in which the effect of identity-referencing language (copular vs. verbal) on prosocial behavioral intentions would be mediated by integrated autonomous motivation (IA), with this indirect effect moderated by self-construal. Specifically, we expected that copular phrasing (e.g., "I am a blood donor" or "We are blood donors") would increase IA relative to verbal phrasing (e.g., "I donate blood" or "We donate blood"), and that higher IA would, in turn, lead to greater donation intentions.

Crucially, we hypothesized that the strength of this mediated effect would depend on both the identity type and the participant's self-construal. For individuals with an independent self-construal, we expected the effect to be strongest in the singular copular condition ("I am a blood donor"), whereas for individuals with an interdependent self-construal, the effect was expected to be strongest in the plural copular condition ("We are blood donors"). This predicted pattern reflects an alignment between identity-referencing language and self-construal, such that the motivational

power of the phrasing increases when the linguistic form matches the individual’s dominant self-view.

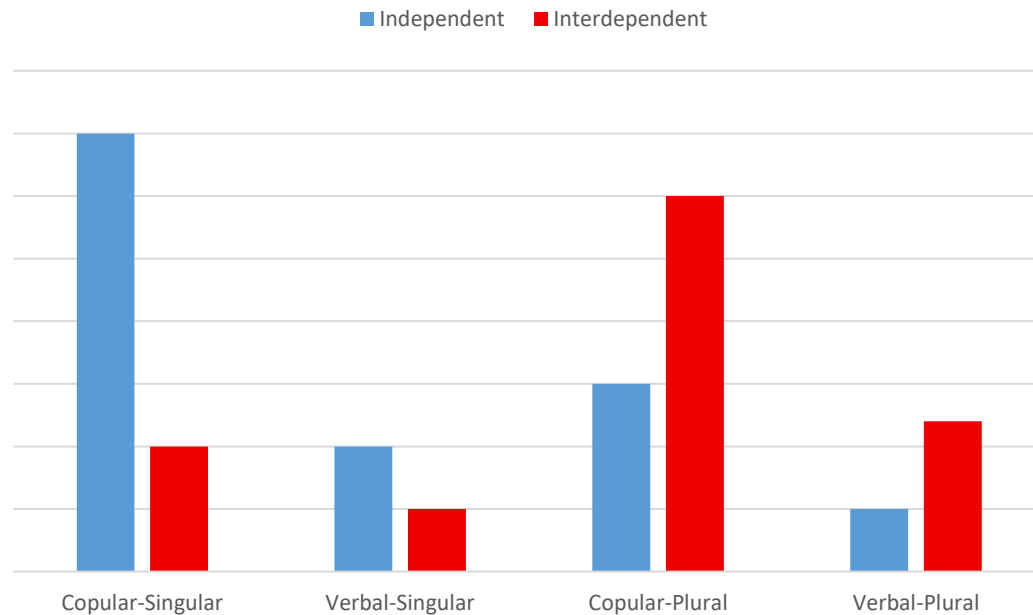


Fig.6. Hypothesized moderated mediation (indirect effect via integrated autonomy on donation behavior)

These hypotheses align with our broader claim that identity-referencing language shapes prosocial engagement by fostering internalized motivation—and that this effect is contingent on the fit between linguistic form, identity type, and the self-construal of the message recipient.

Results

Direct Effects of Phrasing and Identity Type on Motivation

We first examined whether identity-referencing phrasing (copular vs. verbal) and identity type (singular vs. plural) influenced integrated autonomous motivation (IA). Consistent with Study 1, there were no significant main effects or interactions. The effect of phrasing on IA was nonsignificant, $b = 0.02$, $t(594) = 0.18$, $p = .86$. The main effect of identity type was also

nonsignificant, $b = -0.09$, $t(594) = -0.71$, $p = .48$, as was the phrasing \times identity type interaction, $b = 0.06$, $t(592) = 0.92$, $p = .36$. These results suggest that identity-referencing language did not directly influence participants' internalized motivation for blood donation.

Moderated Mediation via Self-Construal

We next tested whether the indirect effect of phrasing on behavioral intentions via integrated autonomous motivation was moderated by self-construal. Analyses were conducted using Hayes PROCESS Model 7 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. This model allowed us to estimate the conditional indirect effect of phrasing (copular vs. verbal) on posting likelihood and donation likelihood through integrated autonomous motivation at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of self-construal. (Figures 7–10).

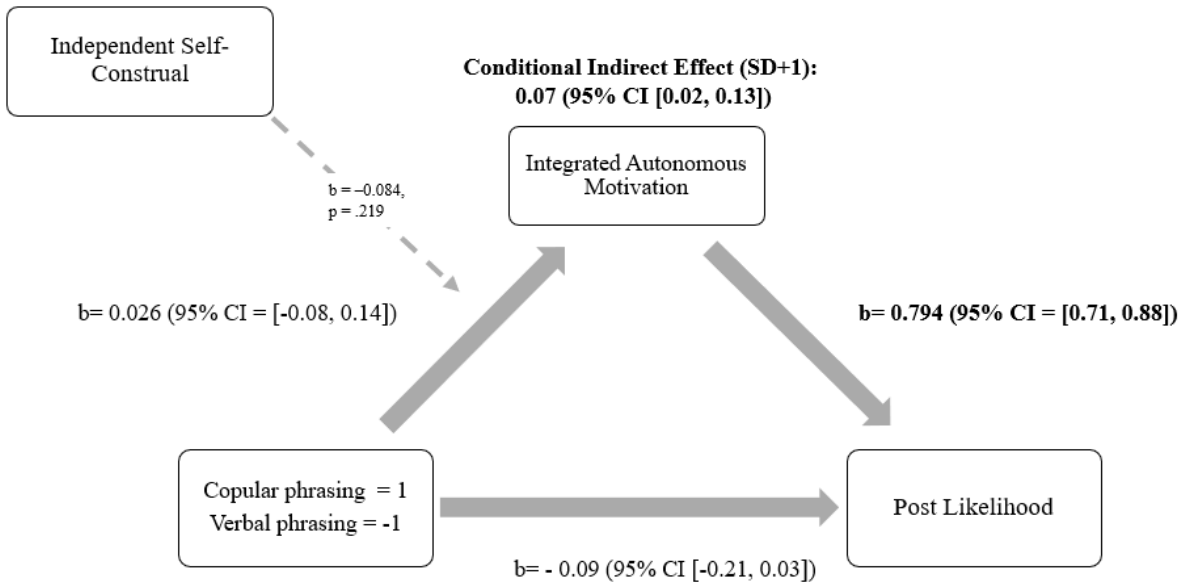


Fig.7. Moderated mediation of independent self-construal on post likelihood

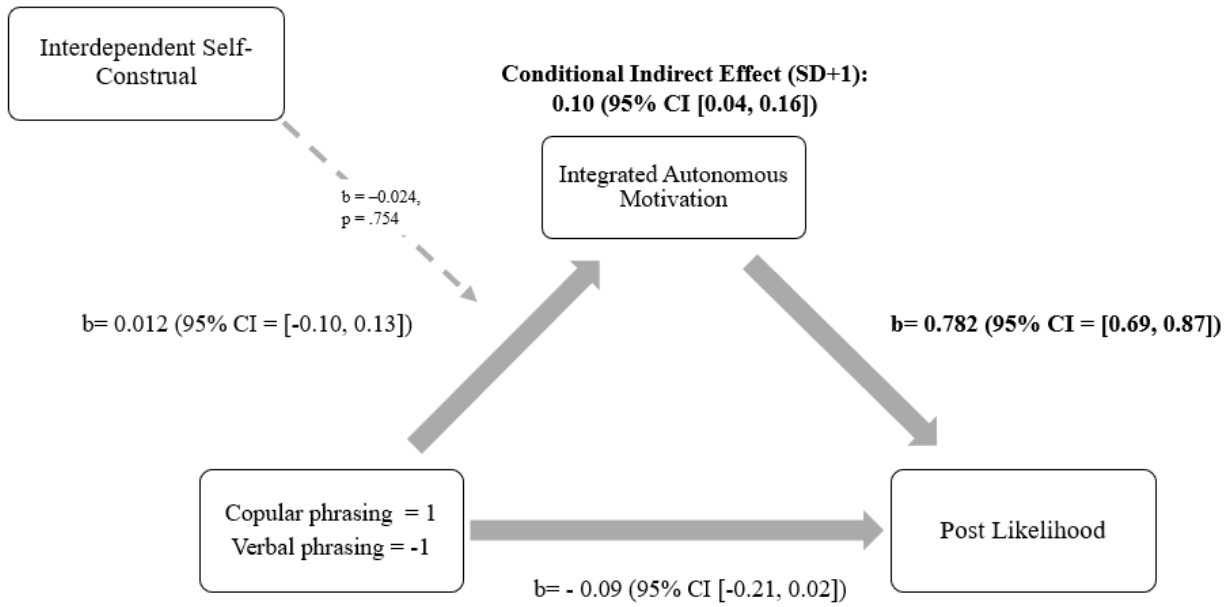


Fig.8. Moderated mediation of interdependent self-construal on post likelihood

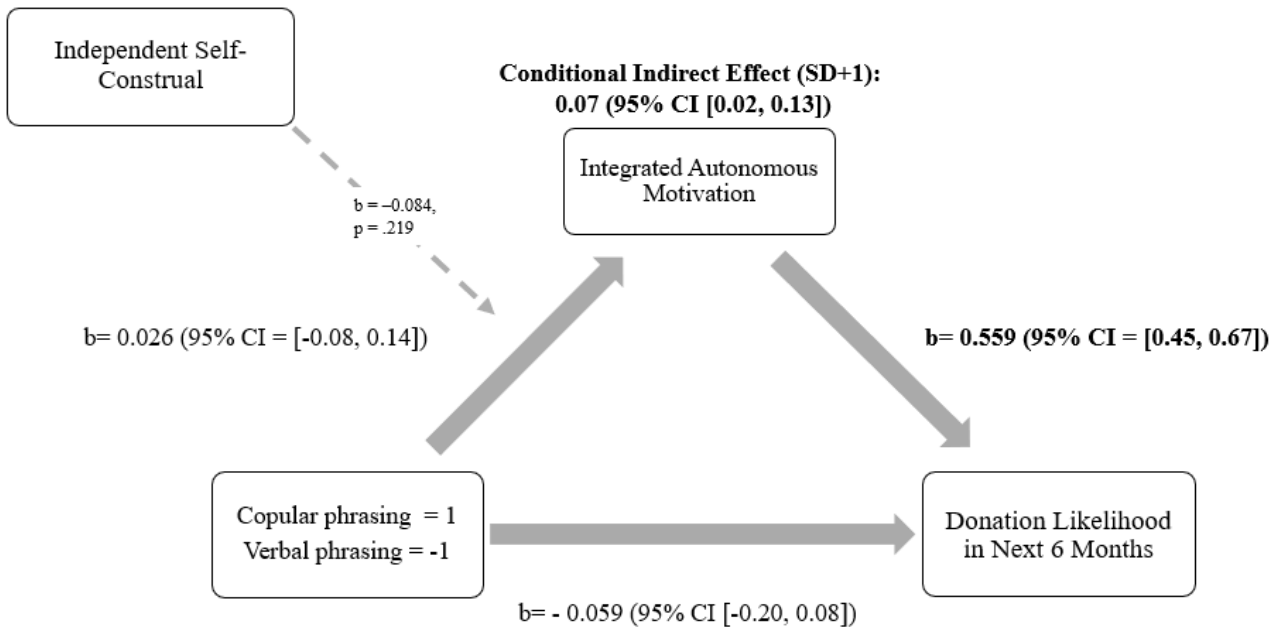


Fig.9. Moderated mediation of independent self-construal on donation likelihood in the next 6 months

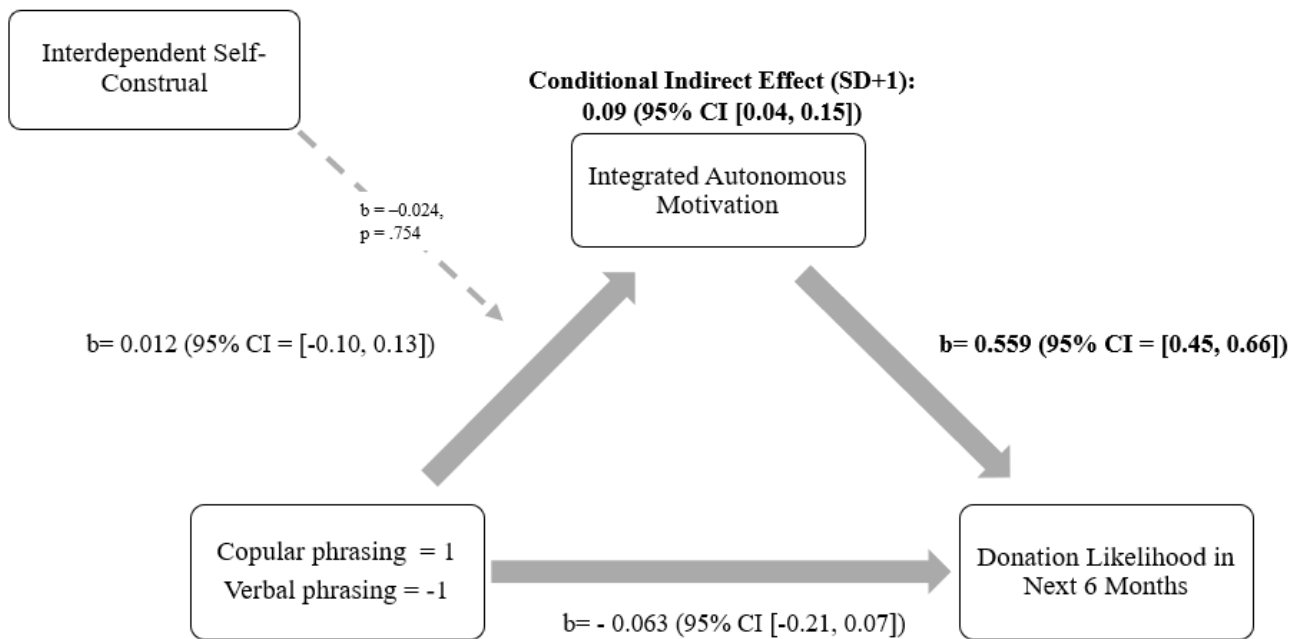


Fig.9. Moderated mediation of interdependent self-construal on donation likelihood in the next 6 months

Independent Self-Construal

Among participants higher in independent self-construal (+1 SD), the indirect effect of phrasing on the likelihood of posting the recruitment message through integrated autonomous motivation was significant ($effect = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.13]). A similar effect was observed for donation likelihood ($effect = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.13]). At low levels of independence (-1 SD), these indirect effects were nonsignificant. The **index of moderated mediation** was significant for posting likelihood ($index = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.08]) and for donation likelihood ($index = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.08]), confirming that the indirect effects differed reliably as a function of independence.

Interdependent Self-Construal

A comparable pattern emerged for interdependent self-construal. Among participants higher in interdependence (+1 SD), the indirect effect of phrasing on posting likelihood was significant ($effect = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.16]), and the indirect effect on donation likelihood was also significant ($effect = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.15]). These effects were nonsignificant at low levels of interdependence (-1 SD) (see Appendix H).

The index of moderated mediation was significant for posting likelihood ($index = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.09]) and donation likelihood ($index = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.09]). The significant index of moderated mediation indicates that the size of the indirect effect of phrasing on behavioral intentions via integrated autonomous motivation differed reliably by self-construal; in other words, the mediation pathway was stronger for participants high in self-construal than for those low in self-construal. These results support the core hypothesis: when identity-referencing language aligns with participants' dominant self-construal, internalized motivation increases and, in turn, predicts stronger behavioral intentions.

Effects of Self-Construal on Motivation and Behavior

Independent and interdependent self-construal were both robust predictors of integrated autonomous motivation and behavioral intentions. Participants higher in independent self-construal reported greater IA, $b = 0.49$, $t(588) = 7.63$, $p < .001$, greater likelihood to post, $b = 0.51$, $t(588) = 3.17$, $p = .002$, and greater likelihood of donating in the next six months, $b = 0.48$, $t(588) = 2.90$, $p = .004$. Interdependent self-construal showed similar effects: it predicted greater IA, $b = 0.47$, $t(588) = 6.87$, $p < .001$, as well as stronger posting and donation intentions, $bs = 0.59$ and 0.42 , respectively, $ps < .03$.

Logistic regression analyses predicting binary donation intention replicated this pattern. Although neither phrasing nor identity type predicted donation intention, both independent and

interdependent self-construal significantly increased the likelihood of intending to donate again. For independent self-construal, $b = 0.54$, $z = 2.11$, $p = .035$; for interdependent self-construal, $b = 0.62$, $z = 2.09$, $p = .037$.

Exploratory Analysis: Joint Self-Construal Effects

Following reviewer suggestion, we conducted an exploratory test of whether the effect of phrasing on integrated autonomous motivation depends jointly on both independent and interdependent self-construals. To evaluate this, we fit models including the three-way interaction between condition, independent self-construal, and interdependent self-construal.

Exploratory analyses including the Condition \times Independent \times Interdependent interaction yielded nonsignificant effects on integrated autonomous motivation ($b = -0.16$, $p = .26$) and behavioral intentions ($b = 0.12$, $p = .31$), suggesting that the two self-construal dimensions operate largely in parallel rather than in combination.

Discussion

Study 2 extended our investigation of identity-referencing language to the context of blood donation, testing whether phrasing (copular vs. verbal) and identity type (singular vs. plural) interact with self-construal to influence integrated autonomous motivation (IA) and downstream behavioral intentions. While the full pattern of hypothesized effects did not emerge, the results offer partial support for our theoretical framework and reinforce the value of examining individual differences in self-construal when evaluating the motivational impact of identity-based language.

Contrary to expectations, identity-referencing phrasing and identity type did not exert direct effects on motivation or behavior. That is, neither saying “I am a blood donor” versus “I donate blood,” nor framing the identity singularly versus plurally, significantly altered integrated

motivation or behavioral intentions on their own. This replicates the null main effects observed in Study 1 and suggests that the effects of identity phrasing may not be uniformly powerful across contexts or populations.

However, the hypothesized moderated mediation model was supported: the indirect effect of phrasing on behavioral intentions (i.e., likelihood to post, likelihood to donate) via IA was contingent on self-construal. Specifically, individuals high in independent self-construal were more motivated and more likely to act prosocially when the phrasing aligned with their identity orientation (e.g., “I am a blood donor”), and the same pattern held for interdependent individuals exposed to “We are blood donors.” These findings highlight that while phrasing alone may not drive motivation, its effectiveness depends on the psychological lens through which individuals interpret it.

Taken together, the results suggest that identity-referencing language can promote motivational internalization—but only under the right psychological conditions. The absence of broad main effects across both studies challenges the assumption that simple identity labels are inherently motivating. Instead, the findings point to the importance of linguistic-personal fit: phrasing that matches the self-construal of the recipient appears to unlock the motivational potential of identity-based messaging.

At the same time, the inconsistencies across conditions remind us that these effects are subtle and context sensitive. Even in a socially valued domain like blood donation, identity phrasing alone did not shift motivation across the board. The moderated mediation findings suggest that internalized motivation may serve as a psychological bridge between language and behavior, but this bridge is not always activated by phrasing alone. Future research should

investigate whether additional factors such as identity strength, perceived expectations, or value alignment further moderate these effects.

In sum, Study 2 provides qualified support for our theoretical framework. Identity-referencing language does not consistently produce motivational gains, but when it fits with an individual's self-construal, it can meaningfully influence both internalized motivation and prosocial intentions. These findings underscore the complexity of designing identity-based interventions and suggest that language must be strategically aligned with recipients' self-concept in order to be effective.

General Discussion

This research examined how subtle differences in identity-referencing language shape internalized motivation and behavior, with a focus on the alignment between linguistic framing, identity type, and self-construal. Across two studies, one in a political context and one in a prosocial donation setting, we tested whether phrasing identity in copular (“I am runner”) versus verbal (“I run”) form would influence integrated autonomous motivation, especially when matched with identity type (singular vs. plural) and self-construal (independent vs. interdependent). Our predictions were grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and prior research on identity framing and internalization.

Limited Direct Effects, Conditional Indirect Effects

Across both studies, we did not observe consistent main effects of linguistic phrasing or identity type on integrated autonomous motivation (IA) or behavior. These null effects suggest that simply using identity-laden language (e.g., “I am a blood donor”) is not enough to increase motivation or behavioral intention. However, more nuanced, conditional effects emerged. In both

studies, we observed moderated mediation: when phrasing aligned with participants' dominant self-construal, it increased IA, which in turn predicted behavior.

For example, in Study 1, independently oriented participants showed higher IA when exposed to singular-verbal phrasing ("I vote Republican") than copular phrasing ("I am a Republican")—suggesting that action-oriented language may better align with values of autonomy and agency. Meanwhile, in Study 2, both independent and interdependent self-construal moderated the indirect effect of phrasing on behavior via IA. Specifically, "I am a blood donor" increased motivation and posting likelihood among independents, whereas "We are blood donors" had the same effect for interdependents. These effects were only present when there was a match between self-construal, identity type, and identity-referent phrasing.

Implications for Language, Identity, and Motivation

These findings suggest that identity language does not operate in a vacuum. Rather than uniformly increasing motivation, identity-referencing phrasing only exerts its influence when it resonates with the listener's self-construal and identity context. This insight aligns with prior work showing that self-categorization and motivation are shaped not just by content, but by form, how identities are expressed in language (Turner et al., 1994; Oyserman, 2009).

The findings also contribute to SDT by identifying linguistic framing as a mechanism that may either promote or inhibit motivational internalization, depending on the social-cognitive fit. While integrated motivation is typically shaped by values and long-term identification, this work suggests it may also be influenced by seemingly superficial cues, but only when those cues affirm the individual's core view of self.

The Role of Political Context

The political setting of Study 1 may help explain the lack of consistent main effects. Phrases like “I am a Democrat” or “We are Republicans” are now embedded in a polarized and morally charged landscape (Mason, 2018; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Identity statements in such contexts may trigger resistance, fatigue, or reactance, even among in-group members. This may have diluted the potential motivational power of copular phrasing. In contrast, action-based language (“I vote Republican”) may be perceived as more flexible, less essentializing, and more behavior-focused—qualities that align well with individualist self-construal and may feel safer to endorse in a charged climate.

These findings highlight an important boundary condition: the effectiveness of identity framing is likely shaped by social and political context. Future research should explore how factors like identity threat, issue salience, and polarization moderate the effects of identity language, especially in public-facing or controversial domains.

Limitations and Opportunities for Improvement

Despite supporting our core moderated mediation hypothesis, both studies fell short of producing robust, replicable main effects. This raises the possibility that the manipulations were not strong or sustained enough to influence motivation directly. Participants only engaged with the phrasing once—through a short writing prompt or vignette—without deeper reflection or reinforcement. This may not be sufficient to shift internalized motivation, particularly for established identities like political affiliation or blood donor status.

Another limitation is the lack of direct measures of identity salience or strength. While we inferred internalization from integrated motivation, future work should include additional measures such as perceived identity relevance, centrality, or self-importance to better understand

what the phrasing is doing psychologically. Moreover, identity types in our study were restricted to political and prosocial domain; broader application to other identities, e.g., environmental, occupational or religious would test the generalizability of these findings.

Future Directions

To build on this work, we propose several future research directions:

Deepen engagement with identity framing. Rather than a single exposure, future studies could use repeated priming, social identity affirmations, or narrative elaboration tasks to more effectively activate the phrasing and allow for deeper motivational internalization.

Directly measure identity salience and perceived fit. Adding scales assessing how relevant, accurate, or resonant participants found the phrasing would help test the proposed psychological mechanism—fit between language and self.

Manipulate social and political context. To test boundary conditions, future studies could vary context (e.g., high vs. low polarization) or perceived identity threat and examine whether these moderate the effectiveness of identity-referencing language.

Expand to behavioral outcomes. While we focused on intention, future work should track real-world behavior (e.g., actual donations, voter registration) to assess whether linguistic phrasing produces lasting behavioral shifts.

Apply to organizational and health contexts. Extending this framework to contexts like workplace identity (“I am a team member” vs. “I work in a team”) or health behavior (“I am a runner” vs. “I run”) would allow us to examine whether similar motivational mechanisms emerge in less politicized domains.

Conclusion

Together, these studies underscore the importance of linguistic fit in shaping motivation and behavior. Identity language exerts its greatest influence not when it declares who we are, but when it reflects how we see ourselves. Rather than assuming that “I am” phrasing universally strengthens commitment, these results point to a more conditional truth: the motivational impact of identity language depends on the right match—between words, identity, and self.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1: Results Summary Table Across Studies

<i>Study</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Key Result</i>	<i>Statistical Test</i>
1	IA (Verbal: Singular vs. Plural)	$M_{vs} = 5.4 > M_{vp} = 5.1$	$p = .014$
1	IA (Copular: Singular vs. Plural)	$M_{cs} = 5.3 < M_{cp} = 5.5$	$p = .094$
1	3-Way Interaction (Phrasing × Identity Type × Self-Construal)	Not significant	$ps > .31$
1	Main Effect: Independent Self-Construal → IA	Positive effect	$b = 0.18, p = .013$
1	Main Effect: Interdependent Self-Construal → IA	Positive effect	$b = 0.28, p < .001$
2	Direct Effects of Phrasing / Identity Type on IA	No significant effects	$ps > .36$
2	Moderated Mediation (High Independent SC: Copular → IA → Post / Donate)	Significant	Effects = 0.07, 95% CIs [0.02, 0.13]
2	Moderated Mediation (High Interdependent SC: Copular → IA → Post / Donate)	Significant	Effects = 0.09–0.10, 95% CIs [0.04, 0.16]
2	Main Effect: Independent SC → IA / Posting / Donation Intentions	Positive effects	$bs = 0.48–0.51, ps < .01$
2	Main Effect: Interdependent SC → IA / Posting / Donation Intentions	Positive effects	$bs = 0.42–0.59, ps < .03$
2	Logistic Regression: SC → Binary Donation Intention	Positive effects	$bs = 0.54–0.62, ps < .04$

Note: Bold indicates a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$)

Appendix B: SCS Measure

Independent Measures

1. I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects.
2. I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I've just met.
3. I act the same way no matter who I am with.
4. I value being able to act on my own, regardless of what others might think.
5. I'd rather say "No" directly, than risk being misunderstood.

Interdependent Measures

1. I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.
2. I often consult with others before making important decisions.
3. I feel good when I cooperate with others.
4. It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group.
5. I respect people who are modest about themselves.

Appendix C: Political Manipulation

Please complete the following thought...

Copular-Singular

I am [Political Party] because...

Verbal-Singular

I vote [Political Party] because...

Copular-Plural

We are [Political Party] because...

Verbal-Singular

We vote [Political Party] because...

Appendix D: Political Identity Relative Autonomy Index Measures

Copular Conditions

1. Because I enjoy being a Democrat/Republican.
2. Because it feels good to be a Democrat/Republican.
3. Because being a Democrat/Republican makes me feel like myself.
4. Because being a Democrat/Republican reflects who I am.
5. Because it's part of my identity.
6. Because it expresses my values.
7. Because I believe being a Democrat/Republican matters.
8. Because it aligns with what I believe in.
9. Because it helps me make sense of my worldview.
10. Because I would feel guilty if I stopped identifying this way.
11. Because I feel like I should be a Democrat/Republican.
12. Because I would feel bad about myself if I changed parties.
13. Because others expect me to be a Democrat/Republican.
14. Because people in my life pressure me to identify this way.
15. Because I want to meet others' expectations.
16. I'm not really sure why I'm a Democrat/Republican.
17. I don't think it matters which party I belong to.
18. I'm a Democrat/Republican, but it doesn't mean much to me.

Verbal Conditions

1. Because I enjoy voting for Democrats/Republicans.
2. Because it feels good to support them at the polls.
3. Because voting for them feels personally meaningful.
4. Because voting for them reflects who I am.
5. Because it expresses my political identity.
6. Because it reflects my values.
7. Because I believe voting for Democrats/Republicans makes a difference.
8. Because their platform aligns with what I believe in.
9. Because voting helps me act on my political goals.
10. Because I would feel guilty if I didn't vote for them.
11. Because I feel like I should vote for them.
12. Because I would feel bad if I didn't support them.
13. Because others expect me to vote that way.
14. Because people around me pressure me to vote that way.
15. Because I want to meet expectations.
16. I'm not really sure why I vote for Democrats/Republicans.
17. I don't think my vote really matters.
18. I vote for them, but it doesn't mean much to me.

Notes* Intrinsic (1-3); Integrated (4-6); Identified (7-9); Introjected (10-12); External (13-15); Amotivated (16-18). Items were presented in randomized order to participants.

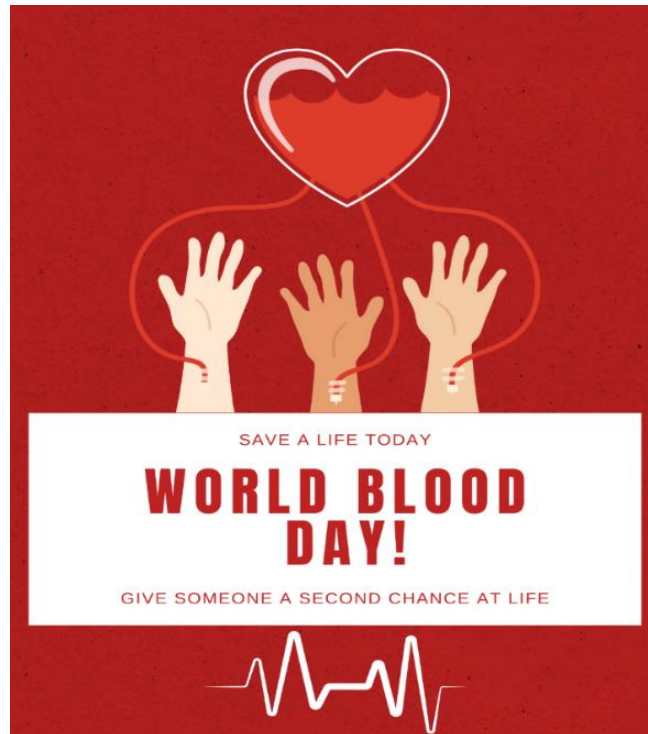
Appendix E: Political Identity All Subscale Results

Table E1: Subscale Result Summary

Subscale	Condition (Copular vs Verbal) Mean Diff (p)	Identity Frame (Plural vs Singular) Mean Diff (p)	Mean (Copular)	Mean (Verbal)
<i>Intrinsic</i>	+0.15 (p = .460)	-0.12 (p = .542)	4.11	3.87
<i>Integrated</i>	+0.14 (p = .182)	-0.05 (p = .765)	5.14	5.03
<i>Identified</i>	-0.40 (p = .043)	-0.06 (p = .767)	4.52	5.04
<i>Introjected</i>	+0.11 (p = .769)	+0.12 (p = .620)	3.61	3.53
<i>External</i>	+0.09 (p = .963)	+0.19 (p = .307)	2.09	2.03
<i>Amotivated</i>	+0.35 (p = .036)	+0.19 (p = .267)	2.27	1.85

Appendix F: Blood Donation Manipulation

Imagine you are participating in the national blood donation campaign and sharing a post on social media to encourage others to donate blood. Below, you will see the start of your post. Please complete the post in your own words (at least 20 words), **making sure to use the provided phrasing.**



Copular-Singular

I am a blood donor...

Verbal-Singular

I donate blood...

Copular-Plural

We are blood donors...

Verbal-Plural

We donate blood...

Appendix G: Blood Donation Integrated Autonomous Motivation Measure

Please indicate how much each of the following statements reflects your reasons for sharing a message as part of this World Blood Day campaign.

1. Because blood donation reflects the essence of who I am
2. Because through blood donation, I am living in line with my deepest principles.
3. Because blood donation is an integral part of my life

Appendix H: Summary Table of Conditional Indirect Effects

Moderator (Self- Construal)	Outcome Variable	Conditional Indirect Effect	95% CI
Independent (+1 SD)	Posting Likelihood	0.07	[0.02, 0.13]
Independent (-1 SD)	Posting Likelihood	ns	[-0.02, 0.04]
Independent (+1 SD)	Donation Likelihood	0.07	[0.02, 0.13]
Independent (-1 SD)	Donation Likelihood	ns	[-0.03, 0.05]
Interdependent (+1 SD)	Posting Likelihood	0.10	[0.04, 0.16]
Interdependent (-1 SD)	Posting Likelihood	ns	[-0.01, 0.03]
Interdependent (+1 SD)	Donation Likelihood	0.09	[0.04, 0.15]
Interdependent (-1 SD)	Donation Likelihood	ns	[-0.02, 0.04]

General Discussion

The primary aim of this dissertation was to investigate how subtle variations in identity-referencing language influence motivation and behavior by embedding actions within self-concept. Through five empirical studies conducted across diverse domains including intramural sports, political engagement, and prosocial donation behavior; this research examined the psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions underlying the motivational impact of copular (“I am”) versus verbal (“I do”) phrasing. The findings contribute both theoretical and practical insights into the powerful role language plays in shaping identity-congruent motivation and behavior.

Integration and Synthesis of Findings

Across multiple studies, copular phrasing consistently emerged as a potent linguistic cue that facilitates integrated autonomous motivation by directly linking behaviors to core aspects of the self. The first paper’s field evidence demonstrated that teams exposed to copular identity language outperformed those in verbal phrasing conditions, with a notable difference in win rates. These findings underscore how linguistic framing can influence motivation and group dynamics, even in naturalistic settings.

Controlled laboratory experiments further supported these results, showing that copular phrasing increases integrated motivation, reinforcing the theoretical claim that embedding identity within language fosters deeper internalization of behaviors. These effects extended to political behavior, where copular constructions heightened policy support and behavioral intentions via increased self-relevance.

However, the second paper qualified these effects by demonstrating that the motivational benefits of identity language are contingent upon alignment with individuals’ self-construal and

social context. The absence of uniform main effects in political and donation studies suggests that phrasing alone does not uniformly enhance motivation. Instead, its effectiveness depends on the congruence between linguistic form and individuals' dominant self-view. For example, singular copular statements resonated more with independent self-construals, whereas plural "we are" phrasing motivated those with interdependent self-construals. These results suggest that psychological fit between language and identity framework is critical in shaping motivational outcomes.

Together, these findings reconcile mixed results in prior identity-framing research by emphasizing the importance of psychological fit and contextual sensitivity. They reveal identity-referencing language as both a direct and moderated motivational tool, one that dynamically interacts with individual and social factors to shape identity internalization and behavior.

Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation advances theory in several meaningful ways. First, it enriches identity salience theory (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) by introducing grammatical form, specifically copular versus verbal phrasing, as a novel mechanism influencing identity accessibility and integration. Whereas prior work has focused on social roles and situational cues as drivers of identity salience, this research shows that linguistic structure alone can elevate the motivational importance of an identity.

Second, the findings deepen Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) by elucidating how language facilitates integrated regulation. While SDT traditionally emphasizes the role of social contexts and support in promoting internalization, this work identifies a subtle yet powerful internal cue embedded in language itself, which promotes alignment between behavior

and self-concept. This highlights a previously underexplored route to sustain motivation that does not rely on external reinforcement.

Third, by examining moderate mediation, the research contributes to social identity and self-categorization theories (Turner et al., 1994; Oyserman, 2009), revealing how linguistic cues interact with self-construal and identity type to shape motivation. The conditional nature of these effects calls for more nuanced models of identity internalization that incorporate language as both context-dependent and individually contingent.

Lastly, this work contributes to the broader literature on language and cognition by reinforcing the idea that “words matter” not only in their content but also in their form and delivery, underscoring language’s active role in constructing identity and guiding behavior.

Practical Implications

The practical applications of this research span several important domains. In educational settings, educators may foster stronger student engagement and a sense of belonging by adopting identity-affirming language. For instance, referring to students as “learners” or “scientists” rather than merely describing their activities could deepen identity congruence with academic domains. This strategy may be particularly effective for marginalized groups who often struggle with identification in educational contexts, thereby supporting efforts to improve inclusion and persistence.

Within political and civic engagement, campaigns and nonprofit organizations can harness the power of identity language by tailoring messaging to resonate with individuals’ self-construal. Using singular copular phrases like “I am a voter” may enhance motivation among those with independent self-views, whereas plural collective phrasing such as “We are volunteers” could

better engage those with interdependent orientations. This approach promises to improve participation and sustained engagement beyond simple behavioral nudges.

In health communication and behavior change initiatives, encouraging individuals to adopt identity labels such as “active person” or “healthy eater” rather than focusing solely on behavioral prescriptions (“exercise regularly”) may support more durable habit formation and internalization. Such identity-based messaging aligns health behaviors with the self-concept, potentially increasing long-term adherence and success.

Organizational settings can also benefit by incorporating identity language during onboarding, role transitions, or team-building exercises. Framing employees as “team members” or “innovators” rather than just task performers can enhance intrinsic motivation and organizational commitment, which are critical for retention and performance. This linguistic approach may be especially valuable during periods of change, when reinforcing new or evolving professional identities is essential.

Finally, nonprofit organizations that rely on volunteerism may find that identity-based appeals foster deeper and more sustained engagement compared to behaviorally focused messages. This can enhance volunteer retention and build stronger organizational affiliation over time. However, practitioners must exercise caution and tailor language carefully, as identity framing may trigger resistance or backfire if it conflicts with individuals’ self-views or cultural context. Understanding the audience’s psychological and social profile is crucial to optimizing the motivational impact of identity language.

Limitations

A notable insight that emerged during this research was the realization that the motivational effects of identity-referencing language are not uniformly reliable but are instead contingent on deeper psychological and contextual factors. Although the initial hypothesis anticipated robust effects of copular phrasing across domains, the inconsistent main effects—particularly in Studies 2 and 3—revealed that even minimal linguistic shifts interact with entrenched self-views and situational meaning. This complexity proved conceptually valuable, prompting a broader theoretical framing in which language operates not as a standalone cue but as one element within a larger motivational ecosystem. These findings underscore the importance of psychological fit and contextual sensitivity, and they highlight the challenges of isolating linguistic mechanisms in behavioral research.

Despite the strengths and contributions of this dissertation, several limitations warrant consideration. The field study, although ecologically valid, did not include direct real-time assessments of motivation, relying instead on behavioral outcomes such as team performance. The experimental studies typically employed brief, single-exposure manipulations, which may have underestimated the effects of sustained identity framing.

Furthermore, samples were mostly drawn from university populations or adults using online research platforms, limiting generalizability across age, culture, and identity domains. The research also focused predominantly on integrated autonomous motivation and did not measure other relevant psychological constructs, such as identity salience, essentialist beliefs, or potential social desirability biases.

Future Research Directions

Future research should aim to address these limitations by employing longitudinal and repeated measures designs to capture how identity language influences motivation and behavior

over time and with repeated exposure. Incorporating mixed methods, including qualitative interviews and physiological indicators, may provide richer insight into the emotional and cognitive processes involved in identity internalization.

Expanding the range of identity domains studied (occupational, environmental, or religious identities) and recruiting culturally diverse samples will enhance understanding of the generalizability and boundary conditions of linguistic identity effects. Investigating the role of message source, power relations, and identity threat, especially in polarized or contentious contexts, will deepen knowledge about when and how identity language motivates or backfires.

Finally, future studies should include direct measures of behavioral outcomes in naturalistic settings, such as actual voting records or donation behavior, to establish ecological validity and better assess the durability of identity language effects.

Conclusion

This dissertation highlights the transformative power of language in shaping identity and motivation. By demonstrating that copular identity-referencing enhances integrated motivation and behavior, contingent upon psychological fit, this work offers theoretical innovations and practical strategies for leveraging language to promote sustained engagement across diverse domains. These findings underscore language not merely as a tool for communication but as an active agent in constructing identity and driving human behavior. Continued exploration of this promising avenue stands to deepen our understanding of how language actively constructs identity and drives motivated behavior.

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