

BEYOND DEMOGRAPHICS: A SELF-CONSTRUAL LENS ON TAILORING PRODUCT APPEAL

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Abstract:

The impact of extrinsic product popularity information on consumer behavior has been widely acknowledged in marketing literature. This study delves into the intricate interplay between consumer self-construal and the effectiveness of product popularity information in marketing communication. With an array of buying options available in today's market, consumers often rely on product popularity cues to make informed decisions. However, this research aims to uncover how individual differences in self-construal, specifically independent and interdependent self-construal, may influence the way consumers respond to such popularity information. By exploring the role of self-construal, this study sheds light on the underlying mechanisms that enhance or diminish the impact of product popularity information on consumer attitudes and preferences.

Keywords: self-construal, product popularity, marketing communication, consumer behavior, independent, interdependent.

1. Introduction

Providing extrinsic product popularity information such as sales volume or bestseller lists in sales promotion has been considered as a salient tactic in marketing communication (Kim & Chung 1997; Kim & Min, 2014; Sorensen, 2007). In market environments, where consumers are faced with numerous buying options and a wide array of choices, product recommendations based on product popularity is also becoming ubiquitous (Ahn, 2006; Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2002; Hanson & Putler, 1996; Huang & Chen, 2006). Consumers often prefer products that are presented with an extrinsic product popularity information, and business firms, therefore, invest heavily in communicating such information of product popularity to construct consumers' preferences (Dean, 1999; Max & Sylvester, 2000). Although there is evidence that product popularity has a positive impact on consumers' product attitudes (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Kim & Chung 1997; Kim & Min, 2014; Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991; Sorensen, 2007; West & Broniarczyk, 1998), little research has explored factors that may enhance or reduce the effectiveness of extrinsic product popularity information in marketing communication contexts.

Is this kind of extrinsic product popularity information always effective in shaping consumer preferences? Will such popularity of a product lead consumers who want to be unique and different from others (i.e., consumers with independent self-construals) to prefer a popular product less? Or is it possible that consumers who want to maintain connections with others or fit in with social groups (i.e., consumers with interdependent self-construals) feel more comfortable consuming majority-endorsed products, and therefore, prefer to buy a popular product? The current research tries to provide answers to these broad questions by investigating systematic consumer preference shifts toward popular products observed among consumers depending on their different self-construal types (i.e., interdependent vs. independent). Across two studies, the author shows that consumers with interdependent self-construals markedly depart from their independent counterparts on their responses to a product promoted with its extrinsic product popularity information— when a product is advertised with its popularity information and

interdependent self-construals are primed, consumers are more likely to favorably evaluate the popular product. However, when independent self-construals are primed, consumer preferences for the popular product are significantly diminished. Below, the author develops theoretical hypotheses based on a review of the relevant literature and present two studies to test the developed predictions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Product Popularity

Product popularity refers to the state of a product purchased by a large number of people, and so being widely accepted (Kim & Chung, 1997; Kim & Min, 2014). Consumers shape their preferences for a product promoted with its popularity information (Dawar & Parker, 1994; Dean, 1999), because they can construct confidence about their judgments and purchase decisions based on the relative popularity of a product (Dean, 1999; Howard, 1989; Howard & Sheth, 1969). Consumers feel comfortable and become assured about their product choices, when they follow other consumers' judgments and purchase decisions (Dean, 1999). Consumers also use the relative popularity of a product as a signal for superior quality, thereby making their purchase decisions (Ahn, 2007; Dawar & Parker, 1994; Dean, 1999; Hanson & Putler, 1996; Huang & Chen, 2006; Sorensen, 2006; Szymanski, Bharadwaj, & Varadarajan, 1993). When consumers evaluate and choose a product to buy, they use its popularity as a signal for widespread acceptance and appropriateness, and as an indicator of high quality and superiority to other products (Dean 1999; Szymanski, Bharadwaj, & Varadarajan, 1993). The current research examines such effects of product popularity differed by consumers' self-construals.

2.2. Interdependent and Independent Self-Construals

Self-construal has been explored as a significant individual-difference and personality variable profoundly influencing one's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Baaren & Ruivenkamp, 2007; Hardin, Leong, & Bhagwat, 2004; Kim, Grimm, & Markman, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007; Yeung, Fug & Lang, 2008). Self-construal refers to an individual's sense of self in relation to others and structure of self-schema (Ahluwalia, 2008; Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002; Hardin, Leong, & Bhagwat, 2004; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama (1991, p. 226) have defined self-construal as "the relationship between the self and others and, especially, the degree to which people see themselves as separate from others or as connected with others."

There are two primary types of self-construal, interdependent versus independent. Given the extent to which an individual views oneself as an individuated self, distinct from others or in one's relationship to others, a particular self-construal is emphasized, and thereby, an individual's perceptions, cognitions, emotions, motivations, and behavior are shaped (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Individuals with independent self-construals tend to be more autonomous and invariant across situations and social contexts. Independent individuals tend to more focus on their own feelings and thoughts. Therefore, those with independent self-construals show greater relationship-irrelevant tendencies to accentuate self-related features and minimize the influence of others, resulting in emphasizing uniqueness, separateness, and distinctness of individuals (Ahluwalia, 2008; Baaren et al., 2003; Jain, Desai, & Mao, 2007). Since expressions of one's unique and personal attributes are the main characteristics of individuals who are more accessible to independent self-construals, these individuals are more likely to hold bounded, stable and invariant self-construals to pursue individualized internal features and attributes that are clearly distinguished from others. In contrast, individuals with interdependent self-construals tend to be more sensitive to situations and social contexts and contingent upon the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of others (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001).

Interdependent individuals show greater relationship-relevant self-construal tendencies to concern more enacting appropriate behaviors based on others' behaviors, and fostering harmony and fitting in with others. Since interconnectedness with and belongingness to others are the central characteristics of individuals who are more accessible to interdependent self-construals (Kitayama et al., 1997), these individuals are more likely to hold flexible and variant self-construals to conform to situational and contextual norms (Kim & Markus, 1999) and act in

accordance with behaviors and decisions of others over their internal, personal attributes or features (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). This research proposes that such differences in consumers' self-construal (i.e., interdependent or independent) filter down the way consumers evaluate popular products and elaborates on this idea next.

2.3. Self-Construal Differences and Product Popularity Effects

When a self-construal temporarily becomes more accessible in cognition at a given time, the corresponding situational contents compatible with the temporarily activated self-construals become more salient (Aaker, 1999; Mandel, 2003). Consistent with this theory, recent research offers evidence that consumers experience enhanced favorability toward messages which are compatible with the characteristics of their activated self-construals. For example, Barren and Ruivenkamp (2007) demonstrate that participants with interdependent self-construals choose more coupons for a product presented with social values than do participants with independent self-construals. Han and Shavitt (1994) show that consumers whose independent self-construals are more accessible prefer messages emphasizing individual benefits and appeals, whereas consumers whose interdependent self-construals are more accessible prefer messages emphasizing group benefits. Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli (2007) report that selfconcept connection is more important for independent individuals, whereas brand country-of-origin connection is more important for interdependent individuals. And Nam et al. (2016) find that consumers experience positive feelings relevant to their activated self-concepts, and these positive feelings lead to enhanced preferences for nostalgic products. These findings suggest that the impact of product popularity vary based on interdependent versus independent self-construals. Specifically, individuals with interdependent self-construals should be more favorable toward a product presented with its popularity information, because they may interpret popularity information as values by which they can harmoniously fit in and maintain interconnections with others. They should, therefore, rely more on product popularity information representing majority-endorsed preferences. In contrast, consumers with independent self-construals are characterized with being unique, distinct, separate, and different from others. Independent consumers' such tendencies of behavioral autonomy and independency may reduce their attention and sensitivity to product popularity information, and therefore, may result in their decreased attitudes toward popular products. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: When interdependent self-construals are primed, exposure to extrinsic product popularity information should lead to more favorable product evaluations than when independent self-construals are primed.

H2: When interdependent self-construals are primed, exposure to extrinsic product popularity information should lead to higher purchase likelihood and product recommendation intention than when independent self-construals are primed.

Based on this conceptualization of the relationship between self-construals and product popularity, this research examines whether the predicted preference shifts among consumers occur depending on their activated different types of self-construals. Study 1 investigates self-construal effects in the impact of product popularity on product evaluations (hypothesis 1). Study 2 tests the predicted theorization with a different product category on different dependent variables, purchase likelihood and product recommendation intention (hypothesis 2).

3. Study 1

The purpose of study 1 is to test the predicted hypothesis that interdependent consumers show higher product evaluations than do independent consumers when a product is promoted with its extrinsic product popularity information. The study used a one-factor between-subjects design with different types of self-construals (interdependent vs. independent) as an independent variable. Self-construals were manipulated by asking participants to write down 10 short statements about how they are similar to or different from others (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991).

Participants then read some information about a desk chair which was presented with its extrinsic product popularity information (i.e., best seller sign) and evaluated it. Participants' evaluation of the desk chair served as the dependent variable.

3.1. Method

Ninety-one undergraduate students (54 males; average age = 21.44) participated in this study for extra course credit. They were informed that they were participating in a college student survey. They were then randomly assigned to one of the two self-construal conditions. In line with the work of Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991), participants in the interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal condition were asked to write 10 short statements about how they are similar to (vs. different from) their friends and family, beginning with “We are” (vs. “I am”) (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Participants then completed the self-construal manipulation check task adopted from Lee, Aaker, & Gardner (2000). They answered four questions asking to indicate how much they thought of and focused on others and themselves when they wrote the 10 statements on a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

In an ostensibly different task, participants were then told to imagine that they were surfing the Amazon Web site and trying to buy a desk chair. For this task, a picture of a desk chair with its five snapshots was shown. Next to the picture was a description of the chair, including the main features, dimensions, seat height and depth, and weight limit. Above the picture were the fictitious product name, Nesh Desk Chair for College Students, and the best seller sign next to it. After viewing the information at their own pace, participants evaluated the chair on a four-item 7-point scale (1 = dislike, unfavorable, uninterested, unappealing; 7 = like, favorable, interested, appealing). Finally, participants finished with a brief demographic section.

3.2. Manipulation Check

To check the activated self-construals, indexes for the extent of thoughts on others ($r = .82$) and self ($r = .83$) were created. A repeated measures ANOVA with thought type as a within-subjects factor and self-construal as a between-subjects factor revealed that participants more thought of and focused on others when they wrote 10 statements beginning with “We are” about how they are similar to their friends and family than when they wrote the statements beginning with “I am” about how they are different from their friends and family ($F(1, 89) = 150.74, p < .001, M_{inter} = 5.37, M_{ind} = 3.28$). On the other hand, the results showed that participants indicated higher thoughts of themselves when they wrote 10 statements beginning with “I am” about how they are different from their friends and family than when they wrote the statements beginning with “We are” about how they are similar to their friends and family ($M_{inter} = 3.62, M_{ind} = 5.28$), providing evidence that the self-construal manipulation was successful. The main effects of self-construal and thought type were not significant ($F < 1$).

3.3. Product Evaluations

To test the effect of self-construals in the impact of product popularity on product evaluations, participants' responses to the four evaluation items were loaded on a single factor first and were averaged to form a product evaluation index ($\alpha = .87$). The results of an ANOVA indicated that the effect of self-construals on popular product evaluations was significant ($F(1, 89) = 11.83, p = .001$). As predicted, participants primed with interdependent selfconstruals ($M_{inter} = 6.12$) evaluated the desk chair advertised with its best seller sign more positively than those primed with independent self-construals ($M_{ind} = 5.27$), supporting hypothesis 1.

3.4. Discussion

The results of Study 1 suggest that product popularity impact varies by consumers' different types of selfconstruals, such that interdependent consumers are more likely to prefer popular products than are independent consumers. Participants in the interdependent self-construal condition evaluated the desk chair presented with its best seller sign more positively than did those in the independent self-construal condition. Study 2 sought further evidence for this self-construal effect on popular product evaluations.

4. Study 2

The objectives of Study 2 were to replicate the self-construal effect on popular product evaluations observed in Study 1.

To enhance the robustness of the impact of consumers' different types of self-construals on product popularity, Study 2 used the design and procedure like those of Study 1, but with three changes in a product category, dependent variables, and product popularity information.

4.1. Method

One hundred and forty-four undergraduate students (82 males; average age = 22.04) were randomly assigned to one of the two self-construal conditions. Participants went through the same self-construal priming and manipulation check procedures used in Study 1. Then, in a seemingly unrelated study, participants were told that a manufacturer in the process of developing an advertising campaign for a wall picture frame was interested in their opinions. They were asked to review a fictitiously created product, Moderstays "Create A Gallery" Wall Frame Set, which was presented with its five snapshots and product descriptions. Next to the product name, "Most Popular" sign was presented. After viewing the information of the wall frame set, participants responded to the questions "How much are you willing to buy the Moderstays Wall Frame Set?" and "How much are you willing to recommend the Moderstays Wall Frame Set to others?" using seven-point scales (1 = not at all; 7 = Very much).

4.2. Manipulation Check

To check the different types of self-construal manipulation, indexes for the extent of thoughts on others ($r = .81$) and self ($r = .82$) were created. An overall 2 (self-construal: interdependent vs. independent) \times 2 (thought type: others vs. self) ANOVA, with thought type as a within-subjects factor and self-construals as a between-subjects factor was conducted. Consistent with prior findings, the results showed that when they wrote 10 statements beginning with "We are" about how they are similar to their friends and family, they more thought of and focused on others than when they wrote the statements beginning with "I am" about how they are different from their friends and family ($F(1, 142) = 156.17, p < .01, M_{inter} = 5.28, M_{ind} = 3.85$). In contrast, participants expressed higher thoughts of and focus on themselves when they wrote 10 statements beginning with "I am" about how they are different from their friends and family than when they wrote the statements beginning with "We are" about how they are similar to their friends and family ($M_{inter} = 3.55, M_{ind} = 5.38$). The main effects of self-construal and thought type were not significant ($F < 1$). These results suggest that the self-construal manipulation was successful.

4.3. Purchase Likelihood and Recommendation Intention

A one-way MANOVA with self-construal (interdependent vs. independent) as a between-subjects factor revealed the significant effects of self-construals on popular product purchase likelihood ($F(1, 142) = 10.42, p < .005$) and recommendation intention ($F(1, 142) = 7.41, p < .01$). Replicating the effect observed in Study 1, participants primed with interdependent self-construals indicated higher purchase likelihood ($M_{inter} = 5.12$) for the wall frame set presented with its most popular sign than those primed with independent self-construals ($M_{ind} = 4.37$). Interdependent participants were also more likely to recommend the popular wall frame set to others ($M_{inter} = 5.24$) than were independent participants ($M_{ind} = 4.53$). These results of Study 2 provide support for hypothesis 2 that interdependent consumers are more persuaded by product popularity information than independent consumers.

5. General Discussion

The present research offers support for the hypothesis which predicts the role of consumers' different types of self-construal on consumers' attitudes toward popular products. Whereas interdependent consumers tend to be more persuaded by product popularity, those with independent consumers are less inclined to be influenced by product popularity. Consistent with these predictions are the findings that participants primed with interdependent self-construals more positively evaluated a desk chair promoted with its best seller sign (Study 1) and indicated higher purchase likelihood and recommendation intention for a wall frame set advertised with its most popular sign (Study 2) than did those primed with independent self-construals. Taken together, these findings suggest a new perspective regarding the importance of consumers' different types of self-construal in promoting products with their popularity information. In line with past research showing that interdependent and independent consumers are more likely to

construct their preferences based on the appeals consistent with the characteristics of their self-construals (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005).

Han & Shavitt, 1994; Baaren & Ruivenkamp, 2007; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007), this research suggests that product popularity information better appeals to consumers with interdependent self-construals, whereas its persuasiveness tends to be attenuated by consumers with independent self-construals. This research also sheds light on the effectiveness of product popularity information used in advertising and promotion. Despite the prior work that has focused on the persuasive impact of brand popularity on consumer attitudes (Ahn, 2006; Dean, 1999; Hanson & Putler, 1996; Kim & Chung, 1997; Kim & Min, 2014), little work examines when the persuasiveness of product popularity information is diluted and accentuated. The current research provides a deeper understanding of product popularity, which results in an appeal to better fit with interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal. In summary, by developing a theory-based framework of how self-construal influences consumer attitudes toward popular products, this research extends the current understanding of consumer attitudes toward popular products and self-construal impact on the effectiveness of product popularity information. From a managerial perspective, the evidence the present research has marshaled in support of the predicted self-construal effect on product popularity offers prescriptions for strategic usage of extrinsic product popularity information in advertising and promotion. It highlights the importance of understanding consumers' different types of self-construals. With this knowledge, marketing managers should be able to more effectively advertise and promote their products using popularity information to enhance consumers' product evaluations, willingness to buy, and recommendation intention. The current research is limited to the extent that it is based on primed self-construals. Past research examining the effect of self-construal has shown that both chronic and latent self-construal are persuasive and the effectiveness of advertising appeals are determined by consumer-brand relationships (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005). The robustness and contribution of the current research would be greatly improved by replicating the findings in different cultures that are representative of the two chronic selves and by addressing other components that may provide additional and novel insights on the self-construal effects on consumer attitudes toward product popularity.

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