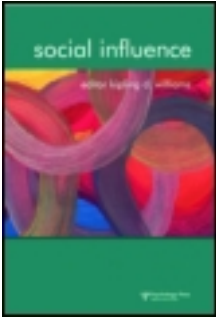


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Social Influence

Publication details, including instructions for authors
and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/psif20>

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Version of record first published: 18 May 2007

To cite this article: Rick B. van Baaren & Martin Ruivenkamp (2007): Self-construal and values expressed in advertising, *Social Influence*, 2:2, 136-144

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15534510701279722>

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Self-construal and values expressed in advertising

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People differ in the extent to which they feel psychologically connected and close to others. Whereas some people are individualistic and value uniqueness, other people are intrinsically more social and value belongingness to a greater extent. The present study investigated whether these different types of self-construal and values expressed in advertisements relate to brand choice. The data indicate that values expressed in advertisements *congruent* with chronic self-construal correlate with brand preference more than advertisements emphasizing values *incongruent* with chronic self-construal. People prefer advertisements that express values congruent with their self-construal.

Advertisements are attempts to influence consumers' cognition, affect, and behavior, so that consumers ultimately will buy the promoted product. The effectiveness of any influence attempt depends on the interaction between characteristics of that attempt and the characteristics of the recipient (DeBono, 2006; Eagly 1981; Haugtvedt, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1992). The more the variables in an advertisement match the personality variables of the recipient, the greater the influence will be. In the present study, we wanted to investigate the role of self-construal in the effectiveness of advertisements. Self-construal represents the extent to which a person feels psychologically connected and close to others. Whereas some people are individualistic and value uniqueness, other people are intrinsically more social and value belongingness to a greater extent. The question in the present study is: Are we more persuaded by advertisements that express our level of connectedness to other people?

In an article on the effectiveness of advertisements, Mehta (1999) argues that the way in which people feel and think about themselves influences how they react to a commercial. In Mehta's study of self-image/brand-image

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convergence levels, it was shown that brands were purchased more by individuals with high self-image/brand-image convergence levels than by those with low convergence levels.

Furthermore, Belk (1988) pointed out that individuals prefer products presented in such a way that they match the individual's self-concept. According to Belk (1988), the purchases provide a means of self-expression. In addition, Appiah (2001) argues that ethnic identity influences advertisements' effectiveness. In a study of ethnic identification on adolescents' evaluations of advertisements, Appiah (2001) demonstrated that when African-American characters are used in the advertisements, adolescents with a strong African-American ethnic identity perceive themselves as more similar and identify more strongly with the character used than do adolescents with weaker ethnic identities. Finally, work by Snyder and DeBono (1985) describes how the personality variable "self-monitoring" moderates the impact advertisements have. Their work shows how high self-monitors are more responsive to image-based advertisements, whereas low self-monitors endorse quality-based advertisements (but see DeBono, 2006, for additional moderation of this effect).

An important personality variable, which has a profound influence on perception and action, is self-construal. There are two different kinds of self-construals: independent and interdependent. Individuals with an interdependent self-construal tend to focus on how the self is related to other people, whereas individuals with an independent self-construal tend to construe themselves in terms of their own unique personal traits and attributes (for a review, see Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Recent research has shown a whole array of correlations between self-construal and cognitions and behaviors. For example, people with an interdependent self-construal describe themselves in less individualistic and more social terms (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991), sit closer to others (Holland, Roeder, Van Baaren, Brandt, & Hannover, 2004), and non-consciously imitate others more (Van Baaren, Maddux, Chartrand, De Bouter, & Van Knippenberg, 2003). People with an independent self-construal espouse other values than individuals with an interdependent self-view. Individuals with an independent self-construal value independence, uniqueness, and individuality. On the other hand people with an interdependent self-construal value interconnectedness and relationships with others (e.g., Gudykunst et al., 1996; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Lu et al., 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For this reason it is hypothesized in the present research that individuals with an independent self-construal have a preference for brands that advertise with values of individualism/uniqueness over brands advertising with values of collectivism/togetherness. The reverse will be true as well; individuals with an interdependent self-construal will

prefer brands advertised with values of collectivism over brands promoted with values of individualism.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Advertisements express different values to persuade consumers. However, consumers have different self-construals, and therefore are influenced by different values. Individuals with an independent self-construal value independence, uniqueness, and individuality, while people with an interdependent self-construal value interconnectedness and relationships with others. In the present research, it is hypothesized that consumers' brand preference is influenced by a combination of the individual's self-construal and the values expressed in the advertisement.

The self-construal of participants will be measured in order to test whether brands that advertise using values congruent with chronic self-construal are preferred over brands presented in advertisements using values incongruent with chronic self-construal.

Method

Overview. Participants' self-construals were measured, after which they were shown advertisements expressing individualistic values and advertisements emphasizing social values. To measure consumers' brand preference, participants were told that they would receive coupons they could use to obtain a catalogue of one of the promoted brands.

Participants and design. A total of 61 undergraduate students, 31 females and 30 males, participated. One male respondent was excluded from analyses because he failed to correctly complete the questionnaire. The study had a 2 (chronic self-construal: independent vs interdependent) \times 2 (sequence advertisements: first "social" then "individualistic" advertisement vs first "individualistic" then "social" advertisement) \times 2 (brand presented with social values: Palmer Snowboards vs K2 Snowboards) factorial design.

Procedure. Upon entering the laboratory, participants were led into a room and seated at a personal computer. Before the participants started the experiment, the experimenter explained that when they had finished working on a "language test," which ostensibly was the goal of the experiment, the respondents had to wait and look at pictures that would be shown on the computer. Then the experiment started.

First the participants read the cover story for the experiment. It was explained to them that it concerned a language experiment that investigates how much people implicitly understand of languages they don't know.

Actually, the task was designed to measure chronic self-construal. Participants were given Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg's (2000) "language task." In this task, participants read a story written in a fictional language ("Weswe"), and are asked to fill in the empty spaces with singular or plural pronouns. The quantity of singular and plural pronouns used indicates the individuals' chronic self-construal. When singular pronouns are used more often than plural pronouns, the participant's self-construal is independent. In contrast, when plural pronouns are used more often than singular pronouns, this indicates that the participant has an interdependent self-construal (see also Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999).

After the participants' chronic self-construal had been measured, they were placed at random in one of the conditions and watched the advertisements. These presented the brands in different ways (see Appendix). One advertisement promoted the product by expressing social values, while the other advertisement emphasized individualistic values. The values were expressed by showing either a family or a competent individual. In addition two different brand names were used. Both were sometimes promoted in the advertisement emphasizing collectivistic values and sometimes in the advertisement emphasizing individualistic values. Which advertisements were shown to the participants was counterbalanced, so that a possible influence of brand name was avoided. In addition, to avoid the possibility that the sequence in which the advertisements were shown might influence the participants' behavior, the order in which the different advertisements were shown was counterbalanced. Some participants were shown the "social" advertisements first and then the "individualistic" advertisements, while others saw the advertisements in the opposite order.

After watching the advertisements, participants were told that they would receive nine coupons for catalogues of the promoted brands. They then chose how many of the nine coupons to use for each brand.

Finally, participants had to indicate if they already knew the name of one of the presented brands, and it was checked whether the participants had an idea of the experiment's real objective. None of the participants suspected what the objective was. They were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results and discussion

Foreknowledge of brands. Of the 60 participants, 4 knew the brand K2. The data of these four respondents are eliminated and not used in the data analysis.

Measurement self-construals. Based on the quantity of plural and singular pronouns used by the participants a median split was carried out to divide the participants into two groups; one group of individuals with an interdependent self-construal and one group with an independent self-construal.

Coupon choice. Participants' coupon choices for the two different brands were dependent on each other. This dependence was created by the fact that a total of nine coupons could be divided between the two presented brands. In this way it did not matter whether the number of coupons chosen for the brand promoted with social values, or the number of coupons chosen for the brand promoted with individualistic values, was used as the dependent variable. To test the hypotheses, we decided to use the number of coupons chosen for the brand promoted with social values as the dependent variable.

To test the hypothesis, a 2 (chronic self-construal: independent vs interdependent) \times 2 (social presentation of the brand: Palmer Snowboards vs K2 Snowboards) \times 2 (sequence advertisements: first "social" vs first "individualistic") ANOVA was carried out. The results show that participants with a chronic interdependent self-construal chose marginally significantly more coupons for the brand presented with social values ($M=4.78$) than did participants with a chronic independent self-construal ($M=3.78$), $F(1, 55)=3.83$, $p=.06$ (see Figure 1). No other main effects or interaction effects were found.

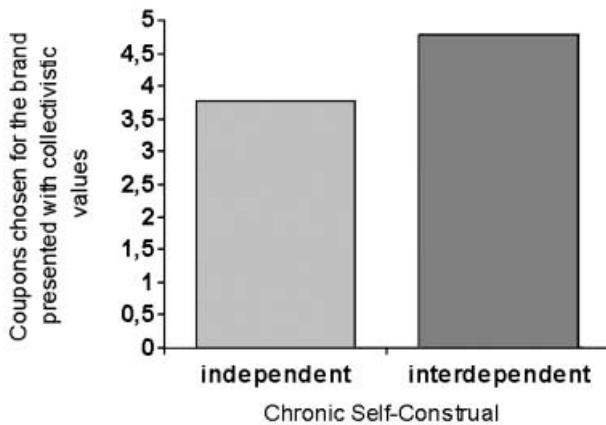


Figure 1. The quantity of coupons for the brand presented with collectivistic values chosen by participants with a chronic independent (incongruent) or interdependent (congruent) self-construal.

In addition, the results showed a significant correlation between chronic self-construal and coupon choice, $r=0.32$; $p < .05$, indicating that the more interdependent the self-construal, the more coupons of the “social” brand were chosen.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the present research was to investigate the effect of the individuals’ self-construal and values expressed in advertisements on brand preferences. Based on the argument that individuals with different self-construals appraise different kind of values, it was hypothesized that brands promoted in a way congruent with the self-construal are preferred over the brands promoted in a way incongruent with the self-construal. The results of this study indicate that the hypothesis is confirmed, because they show that brands promoted by advertisements emphasizing values *congruent* with the individual’s self-construal are preferred over brands advertised with values *incongruent* with the consumer’s self-construal.

However, it is important to note that the observed correlation does not lead to conclusive evidence regarding causality. A next step would be, instead of measuring self-construals, to temporarily activate them and assess the effects on the same dependent variable: brand choice. Although individuals differ in the chronic dominance of either interdependent or independent self-construal, Markus and Kitayama (1991) pointed out that the two different self-construals could theoretically coexist. Evidence for the coexistence of the self-construals has indeed been found (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner et al., 1999; Lu et al., 2001; Singelis & Brown, 1995; Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Trafimow et al., 1991), and self-construals are available to be activated at different times or in different contexts (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Several experiments have shown similar effects of chronically dominant and temporarily activated self-construals. For example, similar effects of chronic and temporarily primed self-construal have been found on interpersonal closeness (Holland et al., 2004) and non-conscious mimicry of behaviors and gestures (Van Baaren et al., 2003), but see Katzko (2006) for a critique on these priming procedures. Future research should carefully investigate the possible causal and mediating role of self-construal in the effects of advertising.

Earlier research made it clear that the convergence of self-image and brand-image influences the persuasive character of a commercial (Mehta, 1999), that ethnic identity influences advertisements’ effectiveness (Appiah, 2001), and that consumers prefer products presented in such a way that it matches their self-concept (Belk, 1988). The present findings add to this

literature by showing an important relationship between certain values expressed in advertisements and self-construals.

Manuscript received 10 January 2006

Manuscript accepted 4 January 2007

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APPENDIX: ADVERTISEMENTS



