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Research Notes

Self-reference bias in students' and managers' selection of target market segments



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ABSTRACT

Self-reference is a fundamental aspect of the learning process; all students use themselves as a model to understand others and the things around them. In this paper, we consider how self-reference as a learning technique leads students to unconsciously use themselves as a model for target segments in marketing plans. As many business teachers have probably experienced, students tend to choose to market most products to young adults in their assessments. The act of studying marketing within a business degree should effectively reduce this bias; students should use business and marketing models and empirical approaches as per their teaching when defining a target segment for their marketing plans. What this paper shows, however, is that this self-referential bias remains present in students and even persists among qualified managers working in marketing departments, despite marketing tools and even stereotypes. We identify an immediate practical strategy for business and marketing educators to use to respond to this issue.

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1. Introduction

Self-salience – the idea that 'I' am at the centre of my own personal universe (Catrambone, Beike, & Niedenthal, 1996; Klein & Loftus, 1988) – is a well-developed and frequently-used construct relevant to business education and practice. The self is a central marker in the understanding and interpretation of events and how they affect the individual (Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977); indeed, individuals tend to define themselves in terms of their personal relationships with other people and social groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), a classic example being students using their classmates as frameworks for social comparisons to evaluate their own academic standing (Gest, Rulison, Davidson, & Welsh, 2008). This self-reference bias – defined consistently across literature as an encoding strategy used during the learning process to enable the organisation and elaboration of new information (Gest et al., 2008; Klein & Loftus, 1988; Symons & Johnson, 1997) – occurs naturally in learning, when individuals are presented with large amounts of information to interpret, organise and store. The self in this context functions as a superordinate schema, and plays a significant role in processing, understanding and recollecting information (Rogers et al., 1977), assisting students in mastering new knowledge and skills.

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Processing information self-referentially is a normal, and indeed highly efficient, learning mode (Catrambone et al., 1996), and because of this, all students use themselves as a model to understand the things around them to some extent (Cho & Knowles, 2013; Preckel & Brüll, 2010). The danger of this learning mode, is that business graduates with marketing specialisations who regularly use it in preference to other modes may fall into the habit of over-emphasising their own personal characteristics (including age and gender) when choosing a target segment in a marketing plan, without realising that they are doing so; this may lead to the creation of flawed and ineffective marketing plans. This paper aims to raise awareness of the problems associated with self-referencing as a learning strategy for students, and to offer empirical evidence that these issues can persist amongst not only business-marketing students, but also qualified practitioners.

1.1. *Self-reference and learning*

Learning strategies, styles and preferences influence the academic performance of students (Debicki, Kellermanns, Barnett, Pearson, & Pearson, 2016). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the benefits and drawbacks of self-referent encoding. The application of the self is deeply involved in the processing, interpretation and memorisation of all kinds of information (Rogers et al., 1977); the retrieval processes of episodic memory are localised in the right cortex of the brain, and self-referent encoding activates the same area, suggesting that there is a connection between self-referent encoding and the retrieval of memories (Zhu & Zhang, 2002). Speed of attention, facility of memory and neurobiological correlates of processing are all affected by how relevant the information being processed is to the self (Wisco, 2009). The memory of an object has been shown to be stronger when the object is encoded with reference to the self than when it is encoded with reference to another person, or for general meaning (Brown, Keenan, & Potts, 1986). This suggests that self-reference can facilitate the effective encoding and easy retrieval of information (Klein & Loftus, 1988).

Using self-referent encoding strategies leads to faster and more accurate recall than other referent encoding strategies, and results in mnemonic superiority in both organisation and elaboration tasks (Symons & Johnson, 1997). When individuals subconsciously use themselves to create a mental shortcut to the new information they are encoding, the superior organisation makes elaboration of that information much easier (Klein & Kihlstrom, 1986). Self-reference is therefore a much more efficient encoding strategy than other strategies such as semantic coding, particularly when a high memory load is present, as is the case in schools and with students in a college classroom (Symons & Johnson, 1997). This is especially true for young adults, who tend to have superior recognition of self-referenced items compared to older adults (Gutchess, Kensinger, Yoon, & Schacter, 2007).

However, self-referent encoding strategies can also cause problems for students with regard to applying what they have learned effectively. Elaborating encoded information is easier for individuals who do it regularly and as a habit, and the strategy chosen and habit drawn on to do so are more influential than the depth of information processing (Anderson & Reder, 1979). Over-reliance on self-referent encoding can lead to shallow processing of information. Self-reference bias means that individuals are more likely to recall a stream of words if their own name is included in it, because their name functions as a self-relevant stimulus (this is known as the 'cocktail party effect': Wood & Cowan, 2004). Individuals also show a higher level of recall when the stream of words in question contains descriptive words that are relevant to them (Wisco, 2009), and better recall of positive trait adjectives than of negative trait adjectives when these adjectives are encoded with reference to the self (Carver & Scheier, 1981). Finally, when individuals look at a word on a computer screen, they are more likely to be distracted when an image of their own face appears in the screen next to it than when an irrelevant image does. This distraction occurs because more intentional resources are required to attend to self-relevant words and images: in other words, individuals can be distracted from other tasks by their own self-relevance (Bredart, Delchambre, & Laureys, 2006). The implications of this are plain. Due to the highly efficient, habit-forming and distracting nature of self-referent encoding, and the shallow processing of information it promotes, we should be particularly concerned about the presence of self-reference bias in the work of business-marketing students, as it has the potential to distort their selection of target segments. Business educators must therefore work to counter it in the construction of business-marketing education programs and assignments.

1.2. *The impact of self-reference on marketing strategy choices*

As self-referencing occurs naturally in all individuals' cognitions (Catrambone et al., 1996), some degree of self-reference bias is only to be expected in the work of the majority of students, even though their education should lead them to ignore the self when identifying target segments. The danger of self-reference bias being allowed to flourish is that students who use self-referent encoding as their primary learning style may continue to inadvertently overemphasise the importance of their personal characteristics of gender and age when choosing a target market segment in a marketing plan, despite having tools to avoid doing so. If they fall into the habit of emphasising target segments that are like themselves, then even after they are qualified, they may fail to register that segments of the market that are not like them might be more profitable to pursue, or might offer advantages that self-reference bias has led them to overlook. They will therefore end up spending money on sub-optimal targeting and communication plans.

There are multiple tools designed to help students make accurate targeting decisions, and these are explicitly taught during training; however, self-reference bias may still be strong enough to override these tools even after extensive exposure. We therefore aim to identify whether students, and indeed qualified managers, are subject to self-reference bias in their decision-making despite their training and exposure to these tools, and what factors, if any, can affect it.

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