



Psychological ownership: The implicit association between self and already-owned versus newly-owned objects



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ABSTRACT

Evidence from explicit measures (e.g. favourability ratings, valuations) has led to the prevalent hypothesis that owned objects become cognitively associated with self-concept. Using a novel version of the Implicit Association Test (self-object IAT), wherein participants categorized objects by colour, we evaluated implicit cognitive associations involving self with already-owned and newly-owned objects. We observed faster responses when self-related words required the same response key as the colour that incidentally corresponded to self-owned objects, irrespective of length of ownership. These findings suggest that participants efficiently form cognitive associations between self and self-owned objects within mere minutes of ownership induction and inspire questions about the extent to which length of ownership drives the strength of this association.

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1. Introduction

Psychological ownership is the sensation that a target object belongs to a specific person (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001, 2003). Evidence supporting this phenomenological experience comes from effects such as the mere ownership and endowment effects, wherein participants *explicitly* assess self-owned objects to be qualitatively different (e.g. more attractive, more valuable) from unowned and other-owned objects. The widely accepted mechanism for such effects is the elaboration of a strong cognitive association between the object representation and self-concept (Beggan, 1992; Belk, 1988, 1991; Dittmar, 1989, 1991; Furby, 1978; Pierce et al., 2001, 2003). There are only a few studies that have used *implicit* measures to test this hypothesis (Constable, Kritikos, & Bayliss, 2011; Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Becker, 2007). The present study makes novel use of the Implicit Association Test (self-object IAT) to (1) measure the proposed cognitive associations between owned objects and self-concepts, and (2) assess how an object property (i.e. length of ownership) mediated this association.

1.1. Explicit evidence

Much of the explicit evidence for self-association with owned objects comes from studies of the mere ownership and endowment effects. The mere ownership effect reflects a bias whereby participants rate objects that they own as more *attractive* than objects that they do not own (Beggan, 1992). The magnitude of the mere ownership effect positively

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correlates with the activation elicited by the object in the medial pre-frontal cortex (MPFC), an area of the brain associated with self-reflection (Kim & Johnson, 2014).

The endowment effect is observed when participants are asked to provide valuations of the *prices* at which they would buy or sell various items, and tend to overvalue self-owned objects (Beggan, 1991; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990, 1991). The endowment effect was traditionally explained by loss aversion: a loss is viewed more negatively than the same sized gain is viewed positively (Beggan, 1991; Kahneman et al., 1991). However, the original endowment effect experiments confounded the role as a buyer or seller with ownership; only the sellers were owners, thus the observation that sellers value the items more than buyers might be due to ownership rather than loss aversion. When this confound was eliminated by including buyers who owned an identical object, the owner-buyers valued the items as much as owner-sellers (Morewedge, Shu, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2009). Moreover, the endowment effect is enhanced when ownership is more salient, for example, when owners write about the object's personal meaning (Maddux et al., 2010) or when the object shares a prior link to self (i.e. a mug displaying the individual's university logo; Dommer & Swaminathan, 2013). These insights support a role for ownership in the endowment effect, leading researchers to question whether the mere ownership and endowment effects could be measuring the same phenomenon in different ways (Gawronski et al., 2007). At the root of these effects, positive self-associations are believed to be transferred onto owned objects in a halo effect (associative self-anchoring; Gawronski et al., 2007).

Much of the research supporting the association between self and owned possessions does so by measuring explicit ratings of the objects rather than implicitly accessing the underlying cognitive organization. Explicit knowledge is subject to validation processes, conscious reflection, contextual factors, and the influence of other related implicit activations (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2007; Gawronski, LeBel, & Peters, 2007; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Our understanding of ownership is improved through the use of implicit measures which tap into a different level of knowledge and awareness. Implicit measures are a proxy for the network activations that are the basis for explicit knowledge, and therefore implicit measures offer a potentially less biased approach to examine the self-object association.

1.2. *Implicit evidence*

Self-tagging refers to the formation of associations between self and novel arbitrary stimuli or concepts. Evidence for self-tagging helps to support the idea that physical objects in ownership contexts might become quickly and easily associated to self. When words are paired with geometric shapes via associative learning, later match/mismatch testing of these shape-word pairs is faster and more accurate for self- than for other-associated shapes (Sui, He, & Humphreys, 2012). Additionally, consumer research experiments demonstrate enhanced implicit favourability towards brands implicitly associated with self via a categorization task (Perkins & Forehand, 2012; Prestwich, Perugini, Hurling, & Richetin, 2010), as well as an implicit self-association with brands incidentally related to self (i.e. appeared on their Facebook page; Perkins & Forehand, 2012, experiment 3). Though these experiments did not induce ownership, *per se*, the idea that self is easily associated with abstract stimuli implies that the same may be true for physical stimuli.

When interacting with physical objects, object ownership results in biased grasping actions (e.g. trajectory and acceleration measures) which suggest that the visual-motor system is sensitive to associations between self and the object (Constable et al., 2011). Further, ownership is accompanied by enhanced implicit object-positivity (compared to a rejected object) that correlates with implicit self-positivity (Gawronski et al., 2007). This correlation strongly suggests that ownership leads to the transfer of self-associations onto the owned object through a self-object association. In the present experiment, we used a new design to measure this self-object association within a *single* implicit task.

1.3. *The present experiment*

Using a self-object Implicit Association Test (self-object IAT) we examined the nature of the cognitive relationship between self-representation and ownership, and whether this measure differed between short-term and long-term owned objects. In the IAT, participants categorize stimuli into four categories, using two response keys (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). The categories are paired so that two categories require a left key press, while the other two require a right key press. Speed of response reflects associations. For instance, participants categorizing words into categories representing magnitude of sound (e.g. loud versus quiet) and size (e.g. large versus small) would likely perform faster when the categories are compatibly paired (i.e. loud/large and quiet/small) than when they are incompatibly paired (i.e. loud/small and quiet/large). The IAT effect is calculated as reaction time difference between compatible and incompatible blocks, and represents the strength of association between the categorized concepts.

The ownership IAT developed for this experiment measured the relative strength of association between self-representation and self-owned versus other-owned objects. If self-owned objects are cognitively associated with self-concept, then participants should show faster categorization for the compatible pairing in which self and self-owned objects are paired than the incompatible pairing in which self and other-owned objects are paired.

Length of ownership has positive effects on object valuations and attractiveness ratings for currently-owned possessions (Shu & Peck, 2011; Strahilevitz & Loewenstein, 1998). Further, the endowment effect persists for items owned in the past and is enhanced for longer lengths of past ownership, even when the individual no longer owns them (Strahilevitz & Loewenstein, 1998). This effect on an explicit measure related to ownership leads us to question how such variations are

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