



Me, myself, and Ikea: Qualifying generic self-referencing effects in brand judgment



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ABSTRACT

The present research extends previous work on the latent tendency to be attracted to objects, events and entities that are associated with the self by demonstrating when and how generic self-referencing brand names influence brand judgment. In five studies we hypothesize and find that using pronouns in brand names that refer to the consumer's self (i.e., 'I' or 'my' as in 'iTunes' or 'MySpace') produces an attraction effect and promotes favorable brand responses. The strength of the effect hinges on the extent to which the consumer's self-view is positive. In addition, we test a logical extension of the effect and show that attraction turns into avoidance when consumers' acute self-view is negative, particularly for products for which the association with the consumer's self is more salient, i.e., self-expressive products.

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1. Introduction

We frequently like occupations, partners, cities, streets, birthdays, and a host of other objects, events and entities because, essentially, we like ourselves (Nuttin, 1985; Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005). This intriguing phenomenon is known as 'implicit egotism'—the latent attraction to things that are linked to the self (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). Although abundant research in numerous contexts has shown its pervasive existence (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Knewton & Sias, 2010; Nelson & Simmons, 2007; Nuttin, 1985; Pelham, Carvallo, DeHart, & Jones, 2003; Pelham et al., 2002), research in the consumer sphere is surprisingly scarce and has mainly focused on name letter branding (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005; but see Perkins & Forehand, 2012). This is all the more surprising given that recent trends indicate that the use of personal pronouns in branding such as 'I' and 'my' (e.g., iTunes and MySpace) shows a marked surge in recent years, even up

to the point that the number of registered self-referencing trademarks has tripled over the past decade (BOIP, 2014). The present research will address this void and extends previous findings on implicit egotism and name letter branding by examining whether and when more generic references to the self as integral components of brand names (i.e., brand names starting with I, or My) affect brand judgment, under which conditions this generic self-referencing effect is most pronounced, and when the self-referencing effect might turn from positive to negative.

In particular, we build on work on the name letter effect and implicit consumer cognition—which suggests that the attraction effect of objects directly associated with the self (i.e., by sharing initials with the owner) is the result of people's default self-view being positive (Baumeister, 1989; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Pelham et al., 2002)—and propose that more generic references to the self in brand names may similarly produce an attraction effect and thus promote favorable brand responses. More specifically, and aligning with previous research, we examine the notion that the extent to which consumers feel attracted to more generic self-referencing brand names is dependent on the valence of both their chronic and temporary self-view. Additionally, we extend this work and test a logical implication of this reasoning by examining whether the implicit attraction to generic self-referencing brand names may turn into avoidance when consumers' self-view is negative, rather than positive. Finally, we examine an extension particularly germane to the marketing and consumer field by arguing that the impact of consumers' self-view valence on generic self-referencing brand judgment is particularly pronounced for products that have a more salient link with the consumer's self and may express that property and thus

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are deemed to be particularly self-relevant, i.e., for self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive products.

2. Generic self-referencing

The rationale behind the present work is hardly new and essentially dates back to William James (1890) who already proposed that people project their self-liking on external objects and hence show a disproportionate liking for objects and events that are associated with the self, something he referred to as the product of 'self-love' (p. 306). During the past decades a growing body of research has tested and refined this idea (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Becker, 2007; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Notably, the effect also holds for objects that share letters with people's own name, as people prefer their name letters to other letters in the alphabet (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1985). More recent research has found that this so-called 'name letter effect' extends to the liking of people, places, and professions with similar name letters, and that it influences important life decisions including where people choose to live and what to do for a living (Jones et al., 2004; Pelham et al., 2002). Although some of the findings are not uncontested—particularly those from correlational field studies (Gallucci, 2003; Simonsohn, 2011)—they do suggest a robust effect of self-associations on choices and judgment (see Knewton & Sias, 2010).

Strikingly, research on this self-referencing effect in the marketing and consumer behavior spheres has lagged behind. In a seminal study examining consumer responses, though, Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated that consumers also evaluate brand names more positively when they resemble their own name. They exposed participants to Japanese snacks with brand names that either or not included the first three letters of their first name followed by the word stem '-oki', and found that participants preferred brand names that shared the first three letters with the first three letters in their own name to brands that did not.

It is interesting to note that most studies have been limited to examining effects of implicit egotism by assessing *name letters* as proxies for self-referencing (e.g., Knewton & Sias, 2010). Such letters—by definition—can only serve as self-referencing cues for consumers whose first or last names start with them, but they are irrelevant for others. This leaves open the straightforward question of whether these effects remain limited to such incidental similarities as between the target's name letters and the first few letters of a brand name or whether more *generic* self-referencing cues in brand names, such as brand names starting with 'I' or 'my', may serve a similar function. On the one hand, it can be argued that more generic references to the self are less self-relevant than specific individual name letters, in which case one might expect self-referencing effects to be less pronounced or even absent. On the other hand, there are reasons to assume that the name letter effect may well extend to more generic references to the self. Support for this assumption comes from work by Perkins and Forehand (2012), who showed that the pairing of previously neutrally valenced products with self-concept terms (i.e., I, self, me, my, and mine) in a categorization task (i.e., an adapted Implicit Association Test) leads to more positive evaluations of those products, mainly as a function of their mere association with these self-concept terms. While this work constitutes an important step going beyond the demonstration of mere name letter effects, it also has several features that affect its theoretical and practical relevance for the marketing and consumer behavior fields. More in particular, the studies used fictitious products or full product categories and only examined the role of implicit (rather than including also explicit) self-esteem. Of more importance, this research relied heavily on a sequential priming paradigm in which the association of the self with these fictitious products was forged via a process of repeatedly, but incidentally, pairing self-relevant words with the focal product. This may limit the relevance of the results for business practice since the typical self-product association (to the extent that it exists) will likely be singular and integral rather than

repeated and incidental and so, the Perkins and Forehand (2012) paradigm, while theoretically well-established, may constitute the exception rather than the rule when it comes to understanding *actual* self-referencing effects in brand judgment. Finally, and possibly most important, to examine the moderating role of self-esteem, the authors only focused on the distinction between neutral vs. positive self-esteem, but did not take into account the possibility of negative self-esteem modulating any self-referencing effect.

Hence, one of the key contributions of the present work is that it builds on, extends, and is distinct from this previous research in that we include a test of *both* fictitious *and* actually existing products and brands, and include the moderating role of *both* explicit *and* implicit self-esteem. In addition, we will examine the effects of more generic references to the self, as *intrinsic* components of certain brands, and, contributing to its relevance to the marketing and consumer behavior field, assess whether such intrinsic references to the self actually affect brand judgment even when exposure to such brand names is subtle and singular, rather than systematic and repeated. Finally, we contribute to the literature by also systematically examining the possibility of *negative* self-esteem to affect brand judgment, a void in the literature that is still in need of an answer. The next section further elaborates on our notions.

3. Qualifying the self-referencing effect

Work in implicit consumer cognition strongly suggests that the self-referencing effect may unfold as a function of *associative self-anchoring*, in which the association of an object (e.g., a brand or product) with the self produces a transfer of pre-existing self-associations to the object (see Gawronski et al., 2007; Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996; Otten, 2003). The process that drives this associative transfer can be understood as akin to evaluative conditioning, in which the pairing of an initially neutral or even valenced object (the product or brand, acting as conditioned stimulus, CS) with the self (acting as the unconditioned stimulus, UCS) may influence evaluations of the CS through a transfer of affect from the self (the UCS) to the CS (rather than vice versa). This requires arguing that the self can indeed function as a UCS. A wealth of research indicates that it can. More in particular, Greenwald and Banaji (1995) and others (e.g., Gawronski et al., 2007; Symons & Johnson, 1997; Walter & Traselli, 2003; Zhang & Chan, 2009; Perugini, Richetin & Zogmaister, 2012) have argued and shown that the self possesses both the necessary and sufficient attributes to take on this role—the (actual) self is a well-developed mental construct, it is highly accessible, has a clear valence, and has the capability to produce evaluative changes even in cases of an "accidental" association with a neutral object. Consequently, it follows that if the self is implicitly or explicitly activated by a self-relevant stimulus and if this activated sense of self is saliently associated with a neutral object, then the valence associated with the self should spill over and affect evaluations of the neutral object. By extension, if the self is activated by a self-referencing prefix in a brand or product name, the associated valence should spill over and affect evaluations of the brand or product associated with it, thus producing a generic self-referencing effect. These notions are tested in the present work.

Importantly, the typical findings in implicit egotism research rest on the assumption that the self's valence is by 'default' positive (Baumeister, 1989; Schmitt & Allik, 2005), and hence that these positive self-evaluations spill over to any target that can be associated with the self (Gawronski et al., 2007; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). But what if the consumer's self-view is not positive but negative? In principle, there are two possible scenarios. First, if the self-referencing effect hinges on the assumption of a positive self-view and that it is this property that makes consumers seek out and expose themselves to objects and events that reflect the self, then the impact of generic self-referencing on brand judgment should manifest itself only for consumers with a favorable self-view, but not for consumers with an unfavorable self-view. Hence, this scenario only allows for the existence of

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