When possessions become part of the self: Ownership and implicit self-object linking

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined effects of ownership on implicit self-object linking.
- Ownership effects were moderated by object valence and type of ownership.
- Mere-ownership enhanced self-object linking for positive but not negative objects.
- Ownership-by-choice enhanced self-object linking even for negative objects.
- Choice effect independent of prior preferences, expectancies, and physical ownership.

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that ownership influences self-perceptions and behaviors. According to dominant theories in this area, a key to understanding the effects of ownership is the mental association between the owner and the owned object. However, little is known about the formation of such associations. Drawing on principles of associative network theories, the present research investigated the effects of two types of ownership situations, mere-ownership and ownership-by-choice, on implicit self-object linking (i.e., the behavior of automatically connecting a person's self and a given object on an implicit measure). In Study 1, mere-ownership influenced implicit self-object linking for positive, but not for negative, objects. In Study 2, ownership of negative objects influenced implicit self-object linking in ownership-by-choice but not mere-ownership situations. Studies 3 to 5 replicated the effect of ownership-by-choice on implicit self-object linking for negative objects and further demonstrated its independence of pre-existing differences in relevant object properties, ownership expectations, and physical ownership. The findings are discussed with reference to existing theories and research on associative representation, decision-making and choice, and the self.

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1. Introduction

Do you remember your experience when you got to own your first toy, your first trophy, or your first house? What did the experience feel like? The psychological experience of ownership has profound implications for human behavior, especially for people's behavior toward their possessions. For example, people may prefer things they own to things they don't own (Beggan, 1992), attribute human characteristics to material objects (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007), develop trust

and loyalty to brands (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and get emotionally attached to their possessions (Frost & Hartl, 1996).

A long-standing view about ownership is that it constitutes a relation between the owner's self and his or her possessions. William James defined the self as the "sum of things that the person calls his or hers" (James, 1890, p. 291). Social-identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) propose that objects, such as possessions, contribute to the symbolic definition of a person's identity and the communication of this identity to other people. Research on conspicuous consumption (Pettit & Sivanathan, 2011) suggests that possessions contribute greatly to one's public self-image. Consistent with these views, Belk (1988) argued that a person's possessions should be viewed as extensions of a person's self, as they help the person maintain a sense of continuity and a sense of the past.

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Recent developments in implicit social cognition and the prominence of associative network theories in this area (for an overview, see Gawronski & Payne, 2010) provide researchers with a new approach to studying the relation between the owner's self and his or her possessions. According to this approach, the proposed relation can be understood as a mental association between the owner's self and the owned object in an associative network of social knowledge (Greenwald et al., 2002a). To the extent that self-object associations are sufficiently strong, they can have automatic effects on behavior, including responses that automatically connect the self and the object on implicit measures (cf. Gawronski & De Houwer, 2014). Following terminological conventions proposed by De Houwer, Gawronski, and Barnes-Holmes (2013), we use the term *implicit self-object linking* to describe the behavioral phenomenon of automatically connecting the self and a given object on an implicit measure, and the term *self-object association* to describe a particular mental construct that is proposed to explain this behavioral phenomenon. From this perspective, ownership may influence implicit self-object linking by forming (or strengthening) a mental association between the owner's self and the owned object.

The main goal of the present research is to (1) examine the effect of ownership on implicit self-object linking and (2) identify its boundary conditions on the basis of principles proposed by associative network theories. By doing so, we hope to achieve a better understanding of the psychological processes and representational structures underlying ownership effects. Toward this end, we will first outline the theoretical framework that guided our research. We will then present five experimental studies, in which we tested key predictions from the theoretical framework. Finally, the findings will be discussed with reference to previous work on associative network theories of social cognition, decision making and choice, and the self.

1.1. An associative approach to ownership

The idea that ownership leads to a mental association between the owner's self and the owned object was originally proposed by Beggan (1992) in his work on the mere-ownership effect. Across several studies, participants reported enhanced positive evaluations of an object after they received the object as a gift (compared to before they received the object). The term *mere-ownership* was justified by the setting that the objects individuals received were randomly selected from a larger set of similar objects. Similarly, the endowment effect (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990) shows that the ownership of objects increases the perceived value of the objects for the owners. Similar effects have also been observed on implicit evaluations (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Becker, 2007; Huang, Wang, & Shi, 2009).

According to Beggan (1992), the key to understanding the mere-ownership effect is the mental association between the owner's self and the owned object, as it allows the positive post-ownership evaluation of the owned object to transfer to the self, and thereby function as a means of self-enhancement. On a similar note, Greenwald and Banaji (1995) argued that a mental association between a concept and a person's self should allow for the automatic transfer of valence from the concept to the self or from the self to the concept. From this perspective, the mere-ownership effect is an instance of what Greenwald and Banaji called *implicit self-esteem effects*: the automatic transfer of positive valence from the self to a concept associated with the self. Consistent with this notion, Gawronski et al. (2007) found that participants' implicit evaluation of a chosen object, but not that of a rejected object, depended on participants' implicit evaluations of the self. Similar effects have been observed for 5 year-old children (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, 2016) and for the relation between implicit evaluations of the self and implicit evaluations of ingroups (e.g., Roth & Steffens, 2014).

Greenwald et al. (2002a) proposed that mental associations are part of a larger associative network consisting of interconnected conceptual nodes that are centered around a node representing the self (see Fig. 1). Associative links allow for automatic spread of activation between nodes, in that the activation of one node automatically leads to the activation of its associated nodes. The strength of associations can therefore be understood as the ease with which activation spreads from one node to another. According to this view, the association between the owner's self and the owned object is a specific case of a general type of association between the self and other concepts. To the extent that such mental associations play a key role in other social psychological phenomena, such as self-esteem, group attitudes, and stereotypes (Greenwald et al., 2002a), understanding the effects of ownership on the formation of self-object associations is important not only for understanding the psychology of ownership, but also for gaining deeper insights into other key phenomena in social psychology.

1.2. A theory of self-object association

Most existing models of association formation have focused on the effects of repeated co-occurrence between two stimuli as a source of mental associations (e.g., De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001). Ownership, however, goes beyond the co-occurrence of the owner's self and the owned object, in that it involves a meaningful event in which the owner forms a relation with the owned object. Balanced-identity theory (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, 2012; Greenwald et al., 2002a) suggests that such events should lead to adaptive changes in people's associative networks in the form of new associations that reflect the experience. Accordingly, newly established ownership should pressure a person's associative network to form a new association between the person's self and the newly owned object.

The theory further suggests that the formation of associations under the pressure of new experience is constrained by two principles of associative networks. The principle of *balance-congruity* states that, if each of two nodes is linked to the same third node, the two nodes have a "shared first-order link" (Greenwald et al., 2002a, p. 6), which should facilitate the formation of a new association between the two nodes. The principle of *imbalance-dissonance* states that the associative network should resist forming a new association between two nodes if such an association would result in each of the two nodes being linked to two bipolar-opposed nodes, defined as nodes with "fewer shared first-order links than expected by chance" (Greenwald et al., 2002a, p. 6). Examples of bipolar-opposed nodes can be seen in the associative structure depicted in Fig. 1, including the nodes representing positive and negative valence and the nodes representing male and female.

On the basis of these two principles, one can predict whether the formation of a new self-object association would be facilitated or inhibited in ownership situations by examining the associative network structure that includes the self, the object, and the nodes with which the self and the object are associated. In the example here, we use positive and negative valence as the focal bipolar-opposed nodes. Assuming that both the self and the object are associated with positive valence (i.e., a shared first-order link), the balance-congruity principle implies that the formation of a new self-object association should be facilitated. However, if the self is associated with positive valence and the object is associated with negative valence (i.e., links to two bipolar-opposed nodes), the conjunction of the two principles implies that the formation of a new self-object association should be inhibited. According to the balance-congruity principle, such a self-object association would lead to (1) an association between the self and negative valence via their shared first-order link to the object, and (2) an association between the object and positive valence via their shared first-order link to the self. As a result, the self and the object would be associated with both positive and negative valence, constituting a structure that should be rejected by the associative network according to the imbalance-dissonance principle.

In the present research, we use the term *self-object congruity* to describe the degree to which the self and the object share common third nodes. The content of these shared nodes may vary widely, including