Self-Monitoring and Status Motivation: an Implicit Cognition Perspective

Sandor Czellar, HEC Paris, France

Prior research has highlighted the role of self-monitoring as a key individual trait impacting consumer behavior. In an extensive review, Gangestad and Snyder (2000) identified a need for research investigating the role of status motivation in self-monitoring. This research constitutes an answer to their call from an implicit cognition perspective. To do this, we rely on the motivation and opportunity as determinants of attitude-behavior processes model (MODE, Fazio and Towles-Schwen 1999). Results indicate that both low- and high self-monitors share positive automatic attitudes about status. However, low self-monitors seem to rely on these automatic associations to make explicit status judgments whereas high self-monitors do less so. These results integrate prior findings in consumer research and open up avenues for future inquiry.

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Sándor Czellar, HEC Paris, France

Extended Abstract

People differ in the way they regulate themselves in social situations (Snyder 1974). Some care little about the appropriateness of their behavior in the eyes of others. These are the low self-monitors, who project towards others a stable self in diverse settings of social interaction. High self-monitors exert more expressive control over their social behavior and tend to adapt their appearance and acts to specific people and situations.

In an extensive review, Gangestad and Snyder (2000) concluded that we know little about the motivational factors in self-monitoring. They called on researchers to study the possible role of status as a motivation associated with self-monitoring. They claim that high self-monitors wish to progress upward in social hierarchy by trying to win others’ favor. Therefore, they adapt their behavior to the specificities of the context. Indeed, “high self-monitors may well attempt to cultivate public images that create appearances that connote social status and may strive to construct social worlds that function as effective instruments of status enhancement” (Gangestad and Snyder 2000, p. 547). Status motivation could therefore be the driving force behind the high self-monitor’s social behavior, whereas low self-monitors should be motivated less by status. If self-monitoring indeed proves to be motivated by status seeking, this should explain why it is an important moderator of consumer behavior. In particular, why low self-monitors are more receptive than high self-monitors to functional quality cues; whereas high self-monitors are more receptive than low self-monitors to symbolic cues serving a social-adjustive function (DeBono 1987, 2000; DeBono and Harnish 1988; DeBono and Rubin 1995; Shavitt, Lowrey, and Han 1992; Snyder and DeBono 1985).

Our approach is based on advances in implicit cognition and builds heavily on Fazio and Olson (2003). Fazio et al. (1986) conceptualized attitudes as object-evaluation associations in memory. According to the MODE model of attitude-behavior processes, there are two ways in which attitudes may exert an influence on consumer behavior (Fazio and Towles-Schwen 1999). Depending on motivation and opportunity, attitudes play a role in behavior either through spontaneous processes or deliberative processes. In spontaneous processing, “attitudes may have an impact on eventual behavior, even without the individual’s reflecting upon the attitudes” (Fazio and Towles-Schwen 1999, p. 98). That is, some attitudes can be activated spontaneously, on the mere presentation of the attitude object. In such cases, a behavior is acted upon on the basis of the automatic attitudes that become spontaneously accessible in memory (Fazio, Powell, and Williams 1989).

Spontaneous processing contrasts with deliberative processing, whereby the consumer engages in extensive retrieval of any data available about the attitude object. In deliberative processing, automatic attitudes may also be activated; however, they will be used less to form explicit judgments and to choose a response vis-à-vis the attitude object.

The motivation component of the MODE model is our central interest. If the attitude object does not induce sufficient motivation, subsequent explicit judgment and behavior toward it will be guided by spontaneous processing, through automatically activated attitudes. In this case, we can expect a high correspondence between automatic attitudes about an object and explicit judgments about it (Fazio and Olson 2003). On the other hand, if motivation is high, the consumer engages in a processing of the attributes of the object, situational factors etc. In these circumstances, the consumer would rely less on automatic attitudes to form explicit judgments. Therefore, a weak match is expected between automatic attitudes about the object and explicit judgments about the same object (Fazio and Olson 2003).

We expect high self-monitors to be highly motivated by status. When probed explicitly about their attitude toward status with no time constraints, we expect elaborated answers from them in agreement with deliberative processing, leading to a low correspondence between automatic attitudes and explicit attitude measures about the concept of status. If motivation is low, as Gangestad and Snyder (2000) theorize it should be for low self-monitors, then the explicit evaluation of an attitude object should correspond to automatically activated attitudes (Fazio and Olson 2003; Karpinski and Hilton 2001), leading to a high correspondence between automatic attitudes and explicit attitude measures with respect to status. The following hypothesis is therefore to be tested:

*For low self-monitors, there will be a high correspondence between automatic attitudes about status and explicit attitude measures about status; for high self-monitors, there will be a low correspondence between automatic attitudes about status and explicit attitude measures about status.*
Eighty-one undergraduate students participated in the study in individual sessions. The traditional Implicit Association Test (IAT) was used to measure automatic attitudes about status (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). Word stimuli to represent the attitude objects of interest (high status vs. low status) were selected on the basis of a pretest. For “high status”, “upper class”, “low status”, “class”, “high society”, “noble”, and “royalty” were used. For “low status”, “lower class”, “employee”, “worker”, “low status”, “blue collar”, and “working class” were used. For the “pleasant” and “unpleasant” attributes, stimuli were randomly selected from Greenwald et al. (1998). Explicit attitude measures were elicited through six-item, seven-point semantic differentials: “unpleasant-pleasant”, “bad-good”, “dislike-like”, “ugly-beautiful”, “unfavorable-favorable” and “awful-nice” (Swanson, Rudman, and Greenwald 2001). The order of IAT and explicit attitude measures was counterbalanced. Finally, participants completed Snyder and Gangestad’s 18-item self-monitoring scale (Snyder and Gangestad 1986).

To calculate IAT effects, we used Greenwald, Nosek and Banaji’s (2003) scoring algorithm. For explicit attitude measures, difference scores (e.g. summed item score for “prestige brands” minus summed item score for “common brands”) were calculated. Groups of high- vs. low self-monitors were constituted using conventional median split.

Implicit attitude measures were positive for low and high self-monitors. Traditional IAT measures correspond to automatic association strength between status-related concepts and valence attributes. They may be interpreted as the sum of environmental stereotypes and personal experience with attitude objects in a specific cultural environment (Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001; Karpinski and Hilton 2001; Olson and Fazio 2004). The dominance of positive automatic associations suggests the presence of shared stereotypical associations about status.

Explicit attitude measures were also positive for low and high self-monitors. Following Aiken and West (1991), explicit attitude measure was regressed on IAT measure (r=0.26, p<0.01), self-monitoring (r=-0.32, p<0.01) and the IAT X self-monitoring interaction (r=-0.27, p<0.05). As expected, the correlation between IAT and explicit measures was significant for low self-monitors (r=0.45, p<0.01) but not for high self-monitors (r=0.01, ns). These results suggest that consumers have positive automatic associations about status, but only low self-monitors seem to rely on those associations to form explicit status judgments, confirming our hypothesis. However, this preliminary result calls for more empirical evidence about the processes at play.

Replications with other consumer segments are warranted. Within the same cultural environment, people with different income levels may share the same stereotypes about status and status symbols. However, personal experience with status symbols could vary, with affluent people having easier access to these brands than people with lower incomes. The effects we observed could actually be stronger with high-income consumers, since they might have more and more diverse experience with status and status symbols than undergraduates. Relatively, it would be interesting to introduce variation in the level of cultural capital (Holt 1998). We may expect consumers with a high cultural capital either to be less sensitive to stereotypes or to have different stereotypes than people with lower levels of cultural capital. Additionally, high self-monitors may reveal different types of status evaluations depending on situational cues. For example, if they are in a party with people who all look down on prestige brands, the high self-monitor may adapt to the circumstances and reveal a very negative evaluation of these brands, just to please others. Therefore, future research may benefit from the manipulation of situational cues, too.

References
A Construal Level Theory Approach to Understanding Self-Control Strategies
Kelly Haws, University of South Carolina

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Failures to exercise self-control over one’s behavior contribute to a variety of maladies that affect modern society. Virtually constant media attention, on such issues as increased health care problems due to obesity, rising bankruptcies caused by overextension of credit, lack of savings by Americans, and a variety of addictions to both legal and illegal substances, suggests a common link to under-regulated behavior. As such, understanding strategies that can be used to increase consumer self-control is crucial. Many strategies have been discussed in the marketing and psychology literature, but a thorough integration of the different strategies is lacking. In extant research, Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) distinguish between desire reducing and willpower enhancing strategies. Similarly, Dholakia et al. (2006) categorize self-control strategies either as “approaching the desire-resistance goal” or “avoiding the temptation”.

The present research seeks to enlighten various strategies that consumers use to exercise control over their own behavior by organizing these strategies using construal level theory (CLT) principles of psychological distance (Trope and Liberman 2003). Recent research by Fujita et al. (2005) discussed the integration of CLT and self-control in order to better understand consumer decisions. The basic proposition is that consumers’ high-level construals are more highly correlated with their actual values and attitudes than are their low-level construals.

Although the primary focus of their CLT research is temporal construal, Trope and Liberman (2003) suggest that the same principles apply to other dimensions involving psychological distance, and therefore propose level of construal as a basis for a unified theory. The specific construal level mechanisms are known as the four W’s of CLT: 1) When (temporal distance), 2) Where (spatial distance), 3) Who (social distance), and 4) Whether (hypotheticality or probabilistic distance). Across the various construal level mechanisms, a concerted focus on higher-level construals enhances the likelihood that an individual will successfully exercise self-control. The present research uses the four construal level mechanisms to organize and understand specific a total of 30 distinct consumer self-control strategies.

Construal Level Self-Control Strategies

Many temporally-based self-control strategies are likely to be fairly common for consumers. Because two of the three primary components of self-control (i.e., both standards and the monitoring of progress) (Baumeister 2002) are represented in the temporal distance category, this set of strategies is foundational to overcoming potential consumer self-control failures. Spatial strategies primarily involve contextual changes to one’s environment, such as avoidance or removal. Social distancing strategies use distance between oneself and others, as well as one’s actual and ideal selves. Probabilistic strategies cover a broad spectrum of approaches to regulating self-control through careful assessment of one’s potential actions and the impact of these actions on the likelihood of accomplishing higher-level goals.

The present research specifies strategies as representing one or more CLT mechanism. Many interesting issues arise from this organization of self-control strategies. It is simply not possible for all of the various strategies to be equally effective or for the same strategies to be equally effective for all individuals. Identifying the circumstances and individual difference variables that most impact self-control represents an important next step in understanding the effective use of self-control strategies.

Factors Affecting Self-Control Strategy Use

The first individual difference factor for examining the differential effectiveness of self-control strategies is one’s inherent level of self-control. Generally, consumers with high levels of trait self-control will be more likely to successfully use self-control strategies than those with low levels of self-control. Identifying which strategies or category of strategies work most effectively for those with low levels of self-control would be an important contribution. Individuals with low self-control are likely to try fewer strategies in their efforts to self-regulate. Self-efficacy suggests that past failures in exercising self-control will be taken into account in dealing with current temptations (Bandura 1977). Similarly, those with high levels of self-control simply need fewer strategies to obtain the desired results because they are confident in the success of a few core strategies based on past experiences. However, consumers with moderate levels of self-control are more likely to draw from a larger assortment of strategies when attempting self-regulation because of the greater ambiguity associated with their own ability to exercise self-control.

Method. Two studies involving various individual difference measures and open-ended response data regarding use of self-control strategies were conducted to enlighten the use of such strategies by consumers. Study 1 used a student sample (n=80), while study 2 consisted of adult consumers (n=157). Select study 1 results are reported below. The data collected in the two studies provide a rich data source that can be analyzed in a variety of ways useful to understanding consumers’ use of self-control strategies.

Results. A total of 238 self-control strategies (i.e., an average of 3.0 per participant) emerged from the open-ended responses obtained in study 1. Two coders independently coded responses into predetermined categories, based on extant literature and the CLT framework.