From Egotism to Averseness: the Role of Implicit Self Judgments in Seller Choice

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Actual bidders in Internet auctions were more likely to participate in auctions when sellers’ screen names had the same first character as their own screen name. This is a case of implicit egotism, whereby people gravitate toward things that resemble the self, and the first such case to be driven by a non-birth given characteristic. However, bidders were less likely to win higher-priced auctions under the same conditions. We propose that this reversal of implicit egotism is due to the salience of risk that may have negative implications for the self.

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able to justify the indulgence to the friend who is unaware of their high effort. For this same reason, we expect participants in the low effort condition to conceal more in the public condition versus private condition. Overall, we predict that amount of effort and the ability to justify indulgence will significantly impact a consumer’s tendency to conceal luxury goods purchases.

References

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Abstract
Actual bidders in Internet auctions were more likely to participate in auctions when sellers’ screen names had the same first character as their own screen name. This is a case of implicit egotism, whereby people gravitate toward things that resemble the self, and the first such case to be driven by a non-birth given characteristic. However, bidders were less likely to win higher-priced auctions under the same conditions. We propose that this reversal of implicit egotism is due to the salience of risk that may have negative implications for the self.

John enjoys participating in Internet auctions. His screen name is pguy111. One day he comes across two auctions for a new DVD. One seller’s screen name is patrick6, while the other’s is matman. Judging from information like the sellers’ feedback ratings, John believes both are equally trustworthy and that neither one’s auction represents a potential cost savings over the other. In which auction will John participate? It may be expected that John will be indifferent. In this paper we propose that John will be more likely to participate in patrick6’s auction than matman’s auction. Further, we propose that if the auction was not for a DVD, but for a more expensive item such as a DVD player, then John might tacitly avoid patrick6’s auction.

One reason John may choose to participate in patrick6’s auction is because of John’s apparent self association with the letter P, as indicated by the choice of his own screen name. Research on implicit egotism indicates that for the most part people feel good about themselves and that these positive associations spill over into judgments of stimuli that share even the most superfluous characteristic with the self such as the initial of their first name (Jones, Pelham, and Mirenberg, 2002; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones, 2002). The implicit egotism effect has been shown to be truly implicit, outside of conscious awareness (Jones et al. 2004). Implicit egotism has been shown to influence major life decisions including choices of professions (Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones, 2002; e.g. Dennis is likely to be dentist.), living locations (Pelham et al. 2003; e.g. Florence is likely to live in Florida.), and romantic partners (Jones et al. 2004; e.g. Jennifer is likely to marry Jesse.). It has also been shown to influence brand choices (Brendl et al. 2005).

Based on this line of research, if John associates himself with the letter P, then he should have positive associations about sellers who also use the letter P to represent themselves. Thus, while his conscious comparison of matman’s and patrick6’s auctions may deem them equal, we argue that John should be more likely to participate in the latter’s auction because his implicit judgment of patrick6 should be more positive than that of matman. This is an important contribution because extant research shows that implicit egotism stems only from a person’s birth-given characteristics. This research shows that the effect of implicit egotism is more prevalent than previously thought because other types of self-associations (e.g., pseudonym) may lead to implicit egotism.

To date, research has shown only positive effects of implicit egotism. However, negative effects are theoretically possible. For example, if John encounters someone who resembles himself, like patrick6, and that person potentially has negative attributes, would John still gravitate toward this person? Prior research indicates that an individual will distance oneself from a group when the group exhibits undesirable attributes that might reflect negatively on oneself (Cialdini et al. 1976; Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford 1986; Schimel et al. 2000). When John bids on Internet auctions, he is aware that sellers might act fraudulently. When auction prices are high, the threat of fraud should loom particularly large. John should not want to associate his self-concept with the negative attributes that sellers may possess. Therefore, if auctions for an item have high prices, then John should avoid those auctions in which the seller’s screen name shares characteristics with his own. If matman and patrick6’s auctions are for a DVD player, then John should avoid patrick6’s auction because he does not want to associate potentially negative characteristics with his self-concept. As discussed next, our data support this argument. Thus, this research makes another important contribution by demonstrating the reversal of implicit egotism for the first time.

A field study demonstrates the influence of implicit egotism in Internet auction participant behavior. Data was collected from the popular Internet auction site Ebay from November 2005 through January 2006. The set included 123,639 unique auction-bidder-seller combinations and 59,208 unique auction-winner-seller combinations. To ensure that we were studying a truly implicit effect, we examined
the likelihood of bidding on an auction when only the first character of the seller’s screen name matched the first character of the bidder’s screen name. Indeed, bidders had a greater than chance likelihood of participating in an auction when the first character of the seller’s screen name matched the first character of their own. To examine the hypothesis that the implicit egotism effect would reverse for high priced auctions, we looked at winner-seller pairs because auction winners are financially committed to the transaction. Consistent with our theorizing, for auctions with high bids over $50, bidders had a less than chance likelihood of winning an auction when the first character of the seller’s screen name matched their own. Experimental data currently being collected will replicate and extend these findings.

This research has a number of implications. Implicit egotism not only causes people to gravitate toward things that resemble the self. It also drives people away from self-resembling entities when those entities have potentially negative implications for the self. This opens up a new line of questioning in implicit egotism research. For example, would people named Carl have a higher than chance likelihood of living in Compton, California, notorious for its housing projects and gang activity? Additionally, implicit egotism had been primarily demonstrated through birth-given characteristics (name, birthday). This study shows that implicit egotism can also work via characteristics one selects to represent oneself (e.g., job title).

References

An Exploratory Study on Attitude Toward Luxury Products, Counterfeits and Imitations
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This research investigates how individual and company-controlled variables affect attitudes toward original luxury goods, counterfeits and imitations. We distinguish original products, which are “goods for which the mere use or display of a particular branded product confers prestige on their owners” (Grossman & Shapiro 1988, p.82), from counterfeits, which are strict copies of genuine products (Kay 1990) and from imitations “designed as to look like and make consumers think of the original brand” (d’Astous & Gargouri 2001, p.153). Consumer’s attitude toward brand imitations and counterfeits has a great impact on brand management decisions and has been recognised as an important stream of research (Keller, 1998). Although several academicians (e.g. d’Astous & Gargouri, 2001; Warlop & Alba, 2004) studied this field, the literature remains scarce and largely incomplete.

The purpose of this research is to study a main effect (the impact of product type on consumers’ attitude), a potential moderator (conformity) and several items that may hinder the purchase of counterfeits or imitations.

Hypotheses
Our main proposition is that consumers will respond differently to original products than to counterfeits or imitations. The purchase of luxury goods is primarily intended to “satisfy buyers’ appetite for symbolic meanings” (Dubois & Duquesne 1993, p.37). Since originals and counterfeits look exactly the same, the attitude toward these two types of products should not differ. However, imitations may be distinguished quite easily from an original or a counterfeit and should therefore be less liked. We propose:

H1: Attitude toward original luxury products will be different from counterfeits and imitations. Specifically, attitude toward:
(a): originals is the same as toward counterfeits
(b): originals is more positive than toward imitations
(c): counterfeits is more positive than toward imitations

However, this first hypothesis is moderated by a personal variable. “Individual behavior is motivated in large part by social factors [desire for prestige, esteem, popularity, acceptance... which] tend to produce conformism” (Bernheim 1994, p.842), defined as an
individual’s behavior in the sense of the conventions of his peer-group. Consumers being highly conform to the rest of the society and wanting to appear as a part of the group (e.g. by dressing similarly to one’s friend, Lumpkin 1985), will evaluate original products more favorably than consumers not caring about conformity to the group. Following these arguments, we propose that:

H2: Attitude toward the product will vary according to the level of conformity. Specifically:
(a): originals are evaluated more positively (the same) than counterfeits by consumers with a high (low) level of conformity
(b): originals are evaluated more positively (the same) than imitations by consumers with a high (low) level of conformity
(c): counterfeits are evaluated more positively (the same) than imitations by consumers with a high (low) level of conformity.

Concerning company-controlled variables, we intended to assess factors which could hinder consumers to buy counterfeits or imitations. Eight items were chosen based on a literature review and on a pretest: perceived level of quality, legal issues, image perceived by others during purchase, external aspect, price, ethical aspects and made of the product.

Method

Materials: Two brands (handbags and polo shirts) from the luxury industry were chosen because they were familiar to almost everybody and, even if expensive, were not out of touch for the respondents. Additionally, a lot of counterfeits and imitations for these two brands are available on the market.

Procedure: 62 undergraduate students participated in the study, comprised of two ostensibly unrelated surveys. The first one inquired about personal characteristics like dress conformity (Lumpkin, 1985) and other variables not taken into account in this study. In the second part, a 3x2 between-participants experiment was conducted (type of brand: original vs. counterfeit vs. imitation; conformity: low vs. high). The three stimuli of the experiment were composed of a scenario and an illustration (visual/semantic) describing one of the three types of products.

After time for reflection, the respondents were asked to rate their attitude toward the product (Sujan & Bettman, 1989) and the eight items which could possibly hinder their consumption. Every respondent was randomly affected to one of the three scenarios and evaluated the two brands. This gives us a total sample of 124 observations.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks indicated that the three types of products were perceived as having different levels of similarity compared to an original product ($M_{original}=6.05$, $M_{counterfeit}=5.45$, $M_{imitation}=4.61$ $F(1, 103)=15.962, p<.01$).

A 3 X 2 ANOVA was conducted with attitude toward the product as dependent variable, type of product and conformity as between-participant factors. Low/high groups on the conformity scale were constituted using a conventional median split.

The attitude toward original products, counterfeits and imitations was different ($M_{original}=4.44$, $M_{counterfeit}=3.75$, $M_{imitation}=3.11$, $F(1, 102)=7.38, p=0.01$). Post hoc tests revealed that this difference is only significant between originals and imitations. These results confirm H1a, H1b and infer H1c.

The two-way interaction between type of products and conformity was significant by Hotelling’s criterion ($F(1, 99)=5.45, p<.01$). Planned contrasts revealed that the evaluation of the three types of products differed significantly for consumers with a high level of conformity ($F(2, 99)=11.27, p<.01$) but not for consumers with a low level of conformity ($F(2, 99)=.632, n.s.$). For high conformity individuals, participants evaluated more positively originals ($M_{HC Originals}=5.26$) than counterfeits ($M_{HC Counterfeit}=3.89, p<.05$) and imitations ($M_{HC Imitations}=2.98, p<.01$). For low conformity individuals, the evaluations of the three products are the same ($M_{LC Originals}=5.56$, $M_{LC Counterfeit}=3.65$, $M_{LC Imitations}=3.21, n.s.$). Therefore, we confirm H2a and b. On the contrary, counterfeits and imitations were evaluated the same way by high and low conformity individuals, which infers partially H2c.

Concerning the company-controlled variables, results indicate that the legal and ethical issues are not really taken into account when considering purchasing a counterfeit or imitation. The criteria identified as most important concern primarily the external aspect of the product and its quality.

On basis of this first research, high conformity consumers may be identified as an interesting target group since their product attitude is more favorable towards original products. In a second study, we plan to investigate not only attitudes but also purchase intentions and responses to the identified factors hindering the purchase of counterfeits and imitations. Therefore we project to develop several advertising stimuli in order to verify their effects on purchase intentions.

References