The Signature Effect: How Signing One’s Name Influences Consumption-Related Behavior

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We propose that signing one’s name acts as a general self-identity prime, facilitating the activation of particular aspects of one’s self-identity that are afforded by the situation, resulting in behavior congruent with these aspects. In line with this theoretical account, we show that signing causes consumers to become more (less) engaged when shopping for a product they (do not) closely identify with (studies 1 and 2), to identify more (less) closely with in(out)-groups (study 3), and to conform more with (diverge more from) in(out)-groups when making consumption choices in preference domains that are relevant to signaling one’s identity (study 4).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Handwritten signatures play an important role in everyday life. However, the potential influence of signing one’s name on subsequent behavior has not been investigated to date. In this paper, we examine the possibility that the mere act of writing might influence consumption-related behavior (e.g., how much time one spends in a retail store or what one buys there). We introduce and test a theoretical account of how signing affects subsequent behavior.

People associate their signature with their identity. The act of signing one’s name is a highly expressive behavior (Warner and Sugarman 1986; Zweigenhaft and Marlowe 1973) – individuals tend to craft a signature that is clearly distinguishable from others’ signatures and thus difficult to forge (Bensefia et al. 2005; Kam et al. 2001). Consistent with the premise of a strong association between one’s signature and one’s self-identity, people believe that the unique manner in which they sign their name reflects their personality and character traits (King and Koechler 2000; Rafaeli and Klimoski 1983).

We propose that signing one’s name acts as a general self-identity prime. Building on the theory of affordances (Gibson 1977; Greeno 1994), we hypothesize that the general priming of one’s self-identity (as a result of producing one’s signature) makes it more likely that situational affordances activate the relevant aspect of one’s self-identity, and that this in turn promotes behavior that is congruent with the activated aspect. This implies concrete predictions about a variety of behavioral consequences, depending on the particular situation that an individual is in.

In this paper, we test such predictions about consumption-related behavior in several domains. We present evidence from four studies that examine the effect of signing one’s name in situations that afford different aspects of a consumer’s self-identity – strength of identification with different product domains (studies 1 and 2) and social identities (studies 3 and 4). In each of the studies, participants were randomly assigned to either sign or print their own name on a blank piece of paper (ostensibly for a separate study about handwriting) before entering the focal situation.

The first two studies examine how signing affects the relationship between how closely consumers associate their self-identity with a specific product category and their level of engagement in a shopping task in that category, both in a controlled laboratory setting (study 1) and in an actual retail environment (study 2). Based on our theoretical framework, we predicted that signing their name would cause consumers who strongly associate a product domain with their self-identity to become (even) more behaviorally engaged when shopping in that domain, and that it would have the opposite effect – i.e., causing them to be (even) less engaged – if they do not associate the domain with their self-identity. The results of studies 1 and 2 provide strong support for these predictions. In study 1, participants completed a computer-based shopping task in one of two product categories – one that was closely associated with their self-identity (cameras) and one that was not (dishwashers). The task required them to search for attribute information about multiple products. Consistent with our theoretical account, signing caused an increase in the amount of information search when shopping for products that are strongly associated with participants’ self-identity, but a decrease in search for products where that is not the case.

Study 2 was conducted in a retail store. Participants’ task was to shop for a pair of running shoes (with the goal of selecting their preferred pair). In support of our theoretical account, for consumers who closely associate their identity with running, signing (vs. printing) their name prior to entering the store caused an increase in the number of pairs of running shoes they tried on and in the amount of time they spent in the store, whereas it had the opposite effect (i.e., it reduced engagement) for consumers who do not associate their identity with running.

Studies 3 and 4 examine the effect of signing on behavior in connection with consumers’ social identities. Based on our theoretical framework, we predict that signing one’s name in a context that affords a particular social identity activates one’s identification with the afforded social group. In line with this, study 3 shows that signing causes people to identify even more closely with a social group to which they belong (an in-group), and to diverge more from an out-group and conform more with an in-group, and this effect was stronger in product domains that are more relevant to signaling one’s identity to others. Finally, an analysis of decision times provides further support for the proposed mental mechanism – i.e., that the signature effect is driven by the activation of the particular aspect of a consumer’s self-identity that is afforded by the situation.

The present research is the first to show that signing one’s name influences subsequent behavior in a predictable manner. It advances our understanding of priming effects by proposing and demonstrating that a general self-identity prime (such as the act of producing one’s signature) increases responsiveness to identity-relevant cues, and that this leads to contrasting effects on behavior depending on which aspect of one’s self-identity is afforded in a particular situation. Finally, because consumers sign their name (or can be asked to do so) in many consumption contexts, our findings also have important practical implications for both sellers (e.g., retailers) and consumers.

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