The Real Me or the Ideal Me: a Match Between Self-Concept and Ad Message Framing

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The Real Me or the Ideal Me: 
A Match between Self-Concept and Ad Message Framing

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the role of self-concept in consumer response to advertising messages. Specifically, this study postulates that matching advertising message framing (concrete vs. abstract) with consumers’ self-concept (actual vs. ideal-self) should yield positive ad evaluation. Results from an experimental study suggest that consumers primed with the actual-self evaluated the concrete ad message more favorably than did the abstract ad message. In contrast, those primed with the ideal-self responded more favorably to the abstract ad than to the concrete ad. Implications from the study and suggestions for future research are provided.

KEYWORDS
Construal Level Theory; Self Concepts (Actual vs. Ideal); advertising message framing; Advertising effectiveness

INTRODUCTION
The self-concept has been advanced as a useful construct to understand how consumers connect with brands. Since consumers tend to use brands as self-expression tools, they are likely to prefer brands that are consistent with how they view themselves (Belch 1978; Sirgy 1980). Therefore advertising messages that appeal to the consumer’s self-concept may increase the message effectiveness (DeSarbo and Harshman 1985; Sewall and Sarel 1986). Past research has provided evidence to support this congruity effect of the self-concept and product image. The more a brand’s image matches the consumer’s self-concept, the higher the purchase intention from that consumer (Belch 1978; Gardner and Sidney 1955; Landon 1974).

As a multidimensional construct, the self-concept consists of a wide variety of self-conceptions such as the possible self, the ideal self, and the ought self (Markus and Kunda 1986). At any given moment, a subset of this universe of self-conceptions may be activated and has an impact on an individual’s behavior. Among them, the actual-self and the ideal-self have attracted much interest from consumer behavior researchers. The actual-self is the perceived reality of oneself. Meanwhile, the ideal-self is based on the imagination of goals and ideals that a person is eager to achieve (Lazzari, Fioravanti, and Gough 1978; Wylie 1979). For instance, Sirgy (1982) suggests that product preference tends to be more influenced by the ideal-self than the actual-self, while purchase intention is more affected by the actual-self rather than the ideal self. While many studies have investigated the impact of self-concept on the relationship between brands and consumers (Aaker 1999; Chaplin and John 2005; Grohmann 2009; Park et al. 2010; Sirgy 1982) and the effectiveness of marketing communications (Aaker and Lee 2001; Lee and Aaker 2004; Sung and Choi 2011), there have been limited empirical attempts to examine the relationship between the self-concept and ad message types.

According to Construal Level Theory (CLT), the greater a person’s psychological distance from an object or event, the greater the possibility that the individual conceptualizes the object and event in an abstract rather than a concrete manner (Liberman, Trope, and Stephan 2007). In general, individuals tend to perceive their ideal-self as something psychologically distant while their actual-self as something psychologically proximal (Malär et al. 2011). Therefore, it can be postulated that an individual with a focus on the ideal-self may be more concerned with abstract thinking rather than concrete thinking. The reverse will be true for individuals thinking about their actual-self. Thus, a person’s focus on the actual- or ideal-self should play a role in how that person responds to messages framed in a concrete or abstract manner. The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of self-concept (actual vs. ideal) and messages types (abstract vs. concrete) on consumer response. Specifically, it is postulated that when there is a good fit between an individual’s self-concept and the message framing, that individual is likely to respond more positive toward the ad and the brand featured in the ad than when there is not a fit.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
How We Think of Ourselves and Information Processing
The self-concept is the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg 1979, p. 7). It refers to individuals’ subjective thoughts toward themselves (Zinkhan and Hong 1991). Specifically, the self-concept has been regarded as a set of self-schemas which are cognitive structures about the self that systematically influence the processing of self-related information (Markus, Smith, and Moreland 1985). External stimuli which are congruent with the self-schema tend to be more easily and more quickly comprehended, encoded and retained compared to those stimuli that are incompatible with the self-schema (Markus 1977). This self-congruent effect has been demonstrated to have an impact on consumer brand preference, brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Hong and Zinkhan 1995; Graeff 1996), product involvement (Celsi and Olson 1988; Park and Young 1986), and product evaluation (Heath and Scott 1998; Sirgy and Samli 1985). Specifically, Sirgy (1985) employed the constructs of self-congruity—a match between a product’s image and a consumer’s actual self-image, and ideal congruity—a match between a product’s image and a consumer’s ideal self-image to investigate consumer purchase intention and he found that both constructs significantly had an impact on purchase intention. Hong and Zinkhan (1995) also suggested that consumers often attempt to realize their aspirations by choosing the brand that has an appeal congruent with their ideal-self.

Previous studies have shown that the self can be primed by experimental manipulations, which, in turn, would have an impact on information processing (Aaker and Lee, 2001; Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999; Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto 1991; Sung and Choi 2011). Given that schema-relevant information tends to be processed faster, more confidently and deeply than schema-irrelevant information (Markus, Smith, and Moreland 1985; Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker 1977), advertising expressions compatible with the consumer’s self-concept will be easily accepted and result in positive attitude toward the advertised brand. The question thus becomes what types of message content are congruent with what types of self-concept. In order to answer this question, we need to look for additional theories for insights.
Construal Level Theory

Construal-level theory (CLT) suggests that temporal distance, the perceived proximity of an event in time, can influence an individual’s reaction to future events by changing their mental representations of those events (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2003). Trope and Liberman (2003) propose that the greater the temporal distance, the more likely the events are to be denoted by abstract features concerned with the essence of the events (high-level construals) rather than in terms of concrete features related to incidental details of the events (low-level construals). Based on this suggestion, the CLT has been developed as a special case of a general theory of psychological distance (Bar-Anan, Liberman, and Trope 2006; Liberman, Trope, and Stephan 2007; Trope, Liberman, and Wakslen 2007). Psychological distance is therefore defined as “a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self” (Trope and Liberman 2010, p. 440). In other words, psychological distance is an egocentric concept with a reference point that is the self, here and now. Therefore as the psychological distance from an object or event increases, individuals are more likely to conceptualize the object or event in higher level and more abstract terms that emphasize the fundamental attributes of the object or event. In contrast, as the psychological distance decreases, individuals are more likely to conceptualize the object or event in low-level and concrete terms focusing on the peripheral properties of the object and event (Malär et al. 2011; Wright et al. 2012).

Since a superordinate goal has to do with the relatively abstract, the “why” aspect of the activity, high-level construal is tied to the superordinate goal. In contrast, the subordinate goal associated with the specific “how” aspect of the activity is linked to the low-level construal. For example, an individual with a high-level construal described their wedding with abstract terms such as “expressing love,” while an individual with low-level construal represented their wedding in specific terms such as “having pictures made” (Vallacher and Wegner 1985). Therefore in high-level construals, peripheral, incidental, subordinate and contextual features are replaced by more central and abstract features representing the essence of the event or object (Liberman and Trope 1998).

Generally, when individuals focus on their actual-selves, the psychological distance will be proximal, whereas when they focus on their ideal-selves, the psychological distance will be distant. (Malär et al. 2011). According to Trope, Liberman, and Wakslen (2007), “An event is in some manner psychologically distant whenever it is not part of one’s direct experience” (p. 84). Even if individuals can imagine and construct their ideal-selves, they cannot experience it directly in reality. Additionally, the ideal-self is formed by the imagination of ideals and goals that an individual desires to achieve (Wylie 1979), and is less likely to be formed compared to an individual’s actual-self (Malär et al., 2011). Consequently, this less probable ideal-self seems to have a greater psychological distance than a more probable actual-self.

The psychological distance associated with an individual’s ideal- or actual-self can be applied to how they process external stimuli such as advertising messages. Previous research suggests that construal levels have an impact on judgment and decision-making by increasing an individual’s preference for information that fits his or her mindset (Fujita et al. 2006; Kim and John 2008; Trope and Liberman 2000). Specifically, individuals with an abstract mindset tend to make their judgments and predictions based on higher-level construals of available information, while individuals with a concrete mindset tend to make their judgment and predictions based on lower-level construals of available information (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2003). Put another way it is likely that an individual focused on his or her actual-self tends to prefer information composed of concrete features. In contrast, an individual who is highly concerned with the ideal-self is more likely to prefer information containing high-level construals that are abstract ideals. Therefore, the following hypotheses are put forth.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals primed with the actual self will show more positive attitudes toward appeals emphasizing concrete features of the brand, whereas individuals primed with the ideal self will react more favorably to appeals focusing on abstract features of the brand.

METHOD

An experimental study was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. A 2 (ideal- vs. actual-self) × 2 (concrete message vs. abstract message) between-subjects design was employed. A set of print advertisements of a fictitious brand with the same visuals but two distinctive copies was employed as stimuli in the study.

Stimulus Development

In order to minimize the confounding effects of existing brands that might be perceived differently by participants, a fictitious brand was created. Two head copies and two body copies were developed to represent two types of messages – abstractness vs. concreteness. Based on prior research, the current research defines abstractness as general information describing superordinate and essential features whereas concreteness as specific information describing the subordinate and incidental features. For example, in Lee, Keller, and Sternthal’s research (2010), they manipulated the construal level of the flash drive ad message through the headline and the body copy. “Having your data in your data in your pocket is music to your ears” was used as the high-level message whereas “2-in-1 feature: a data storage device + an MP3 player” was used as the low-level message. Through a pretest, the most distinct set of two copies (among 12 copies) was selected for the main study. For the abstract condition, the head copy was “When it comes to rebooting, amazing speed makes all the difference.” and the body copy read “The Latest Model of Processor, Larger Screen Size, Huge Hard Drive Size, and Clear and Vivid Graphics.” In contrast, for the concrete condition, the head copy read “When it comes to rebooting, 8.5 seconds makes all the difference,” followed by the body copy, which read, “Genuine Windows 7 Home Premium (64b), 14.0” Screen size, 750GB Hard Drive Capacity and AMD Radeon HD 6490M.” Pretest results show that the two copies differed in terms of their concreteness (Mabstract =3.78 vs. Mconcrete =5.48, t = 3.01, p < .05). Appendix 1 provides the advertisements that were used in the main experiment.

Sample and Procedure

A total of 125 undergraduate students from a major southwestern university (67% female) participated in the main study. Extra course credits were provided as an incentive for completing the study. Once subjects consented to participate in the study, they were primed with either an ideal-self condition or an actual-self condition by writing simple essays describing themselves. According to Förster, Liberman, and Friedman (2009), at the priming phase, carryover effects from previous actions can have an impact on the performance of subsequent actions. Writing essay can be a good example for inducing this carryover effect. For example, Liberman and Förster (2009) primed participants with high-level construals or low-level construals by making them write simple essays about their near future lives (tomorrow) or distant future lives (1 year later). Similarly, in the
current study, participants who were in the ideal-self condition were asked to write about who they would like to be whereas participants who were in the actual-self condition were asked to write about who they are. Through this task, half of the participants were primed with the actual-self and the other half of the participants were primed with the ideal-self. Subsequently, participants in each primed subject group (actual-self vs. ideal-self) were randomly assigned to evaluate one of the two advertisements (abstractness vs. concreteness). After viewing the ad, subjects answered a series of questions about their evaluation of the brand, the ad, and their purchase intention. The approximate time to complete the study was 20 minutes.

**Dependent Measures**

Two dependent variables were used to assess the effectiveness of persuasion. These two dependent variables were based on Lee and Aaker’s research (2004). Participants’ attitude toward the advertising was assessed with a four-item seven-point scale (1 = bad, unfavorable, not helpful, and not persuasive; 7 = good, favorable, helpful, and persuasive; Cronbach’s α = .90) and attitude toward the brand was assessed with three-item seven-point scale (1 = bad, negative, and unfavorable, 7 = good, positive, and favorable; Cronbach’s α = .91).

**RESULTS**

**Priming Tasks**

In order to confirm that the priming task was successful, two coders were employed to analyze the essays that participants wrote at the beginning of the experiment. It was presumed that if participants described their selves appropriately according to their experimental conditions (ideal vs. actual), they were primed successfully. The two coders did not have any information of the current research such as its purpose and hypotheses. The coding scheme included a total of 11 items to check how closely essay descriptions related to the ideal or the actual self. The 11 items were description of daily life, future life, actual-self personality, ideal-self personality, ultimate goal, current occupation (school life), current friend and family relationship, future family plan, current preference, current residence, and future (planned) residence. Intercoefficient reliability reached 86.25% on average overall, ranging from 75.0% to 100%. Among a total of 129 essays, 20 essays were used to calculate intercoefficient reliability and the rest of the 109 essays were analyzed. The results indicated that all 11 items were significantly different from the two conditions (actual vs. ideal). Therefore as expected, the self-priming manipulation was successful. See table 1.

**Manipulation Check**

To assess the efficacy of the ad messages (concreteness vs. abstractness), subjects were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived the ad messages as abstract or concrete on a 7-point scale (1=Abstract; 7=Concrete). The result of an independent t-test was consistent with the pretest, showing that there was a significant difference in means between perceived abstractness (vs. concreteness) of the two manipulated ads ($M_{abstract} = 4.03$ vs. $M_{concrete} = 4.61$), $t$ [123] = 2.14, $p = .04$. That is, subjects exposed to the abstractly framed message perceived the ad to be more “abstract” while those who were exposed to the concretely framed message perceived the ad to be more “concrete.” The manipulation of ad messages was successful.

**Hypothesis Testing**

To test the hypotheses, (actual vs. ideal) x (2 concrete vs. abstract-focused message) ANOVA tests were conducted on each of the dependent measures – attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand.

**Attitude toward the ad.** As shown in Figure 1, the ANOVA test results showed a significant interaction ($F[1,121] = 7.88, p = .01, \omega^2 = .06$). Two main effects (self-concepts and message framing) were shown not to be significant ($F_{sc} = 3.36, p = .07, \omega^2 = .03; F_{mf} = 5.1, p = .048, \omega^2 = .00$). To investigate the interaction effect further directly, planned one-tailed contrasts were operated. Participants primed with ideal-self showed more positive attitudes toward the ad with abstract message versus the concrete message content ($M_{abstract} = 3.96$ vs. $M_{concrete} = 3.26, F = 6.15, p < .05, \omega^2 = .05$). However, participants primed with the actual-self did not show significantly different preference for the advertising messages ($M_{concrete} = 4.18$ vs. $M_{abstract} = 3.77, F = 2.21, p = .14, \omega^2 = .02$). Therefore, the two-way interaction was more influenced by the relationship between the self-concept and message types.

**Attitude toward the brand.** ANOVA results also showed a significant interaction ($F[1,121] = 7.93, p = .01, \omega^2 = .06$). Both the main effect of self-concepts ($F_{sc} = .30, p = .59, \omega^2 = .00$) and message framing ($F_{mf} = .00, p = .96, \omega^2 = .00$) were found to be not significant. Planned contrast showed that subjects primed with ideal-self showed more positive attitudes toward the brand with abstract message versus the concrete message content ($M_{abstract} = 4.40$ vs. $M_{concrete} = 3.90, F = 3.94, p < .05, \omega^2 = .03$). In contrast, for subjects primed with actual-self, the concrete message induced a more favorable attitude toward the brand than the abstract message ($M_{abstract} = 4.31$ vs. $M_{concrete} = 3.80, F = 4.30, p < .05, \omega^2 = .03$). A visual representation is provided in Figure 2.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The topic of ad effectiveness has always been one of the most important issues for advertising practitioners and researchers. Advertisers are constantly challenged to find ways to build creative strategies and engage consumers in order to increase effectiveness. This research is a step toward meeting this challenge. The purpose
of the experimental study was to investigate the congruence effect of self-concept and message content on consumer response. Based on the premise that an ideal-self has a thread of connection with abstractness whereas the actual-self is associated with concreteness, the current research empirically tested the notion that advertising message types (abstract vs. concrete) that are congruent with consumers’ self-concept (ideal vs. actual) increase consumers’ positive evaluation of the advertisement and the brand.

As expected, results of this research showed that when individuals were primed with the ideal-self, an abstract advertising message was more persuasive than a concrete message. In contrast, when individuals were primed with the actual-self, a concrete advertising message was more effective than an abstract message. Given that ideal- and actual-self are closely related to consumers’ product choice and purchase intention (Malhotra 1988; Sirgy 1985), the current research investigating the effects of these two self-concepts on advertising message framing can offer an opportunity for researchers and marketers to understand what roles the self-concepts can play in marketing communication contexts.

Furthermore, by demonstrating the potential relevance of self-concept and construal levels, this research can also increase the general applicability of the construal-level theory. This research also offers important implications for advertisers and marketers. Prior research suggests that the advertising context can prime or activate certain traits of an audience and influence their interpretations of products in the advertisement (Yi 1990). Findings from the current study particularly suggest the possibility that the audience can be primed either with the actual-self or with the ideal-self. If advertising practitioners are able to prime self-concept, it will help increase ad message effectiveness by providing congruent message with the primed self-concept. For example, Sung and Choi (2011) primed people into either independent or interdependent self-construal by showing them individual sports events (e.g., marathon, tennis, and golf) or team sports events (e.g., football, soccer, and baseball). In the same vein, a certain media content that is closely related to an individual’s ideal-self such as SF or super hero movie primes an audi-
ence into the ideal-self. By placing abstractly framed advertisement right after the content, the matching effect of the ideal-self and the abstract ad can occur and the effectiveness of the ad can increase. The findings from this study can shed light on developing a new media planning and copywriting guideline with using self-concepts and abstract and concrete message framing.

In addition, the characteristics of product category can play a role to prime individuals on their actual- or ideal-selves. For example, cosmetic products concerned with consumers' aspiration of beauty can activate their ideal-self whereas necessities closely associated with daily lives can activate the consumers' actual-self. Therefore future research needs to examine the association between product categories and message framing (abstract vs. concrete).

REFERENCES

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### Appendix 1

**High construal (abstract) Advertisement**

*When it comes to rebooting, amazing speed makes all the difference*

The Latest Model of Processor
Larger Screen Size
High Hard Drive Size
Clear and Vivid Graphic

**Low construal (concrete) Advertisement**

*When it comes to rebooting, 8.5 Sec rapidity makes all the difference*

Genuine Windows 8/7 Home Premium (64b)
14.0’ Screen Size
750GB Hard Drive Capacity
AMD Radeon HD 8490M