The Mirror Has Two Faces: Positive and Negative Media Image Effects

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The Mirror Has Two Faces: Positive and Negative Media Image Effects on the Self
Dirk Smeesters (Tilburg University) Naomi Mandel (Arizona State University) This research examines several factors that determine whether exposure to thin (or heavy) media images positively or negatively impacts consumers’ appearance self-esteem. In two studies, we demonstrate that the effects of exposure to models in advertisements depend on two moderating factors: (1) the extremity of the model’s thinness or heaviness; and (2) the method by which self-esteem is measured (free responses versus rating scales). We also establish the underlying role of self-knowledge activation by examining response latencies in a lexical decision task.

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Enhancing Self-consciousness: Implications for the Effectiveness of Ad Appeals
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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the influence of self-consciousness on responses to ad appeals. Study one established the positive relationship between self-monitoring and self-consciousness. Study two tested whether level of self-consciousness could influence ad responses. Findings showed that magazine articles written in the second-person, as opposed to the third-person, directed attention to the self and enhanced self-consciousness. Enhancing self-consciousness caused participants high in self-monitoring to more strongly influence the effectiveness of image and utilitarian appeal ads. The present study builds upon cognitive psychology and the self-consciousness of ambiguous product attributes. Similar to Yi's work, the present study builds upon cognitive psychology and its relationship with the self and the environment. Enhancing self-consciousness significantly improved the effectiveness of image appeal ads, but had no effect on utilitarian appeal ads.

INTRODUCTION

Attention can be directed either internally to the self or externally to the environment (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Directing attention to the self enhances self-consciousness, which in turn influences individuals' evaluations of the self (e.g., Duval & Wicklund, 1972), attributional styles (e.g., Fejfar & Hoyle, 1990; Wicklund, 1975), responses to emotion (e.g., Scheier & Carver, 1977) and product preferences (e.g., Bushman, 1993). Extending this line of research, I argue that enhancing self-consciousness also can affect responses to advertising messages.

Contextual priming in advertising literature refers to the effect the context in which an ad is presented can have on individuals' responses to the ad. For example, in a competitive ad viewing context, Yi (1990a) demonstrated that evaluation of the target product was influenced by the attributes a previous competing ad promoted. In addition, editorial contexts have also been shown to prime accessibility of different concepts and invite multiple product interpretations. In a similar vein, I propose that reading magazine articles that raise self-consciousness could influence readers' responses to the ad messages embedded in those articles.

The list of the top 25 magazines includes news magazines as well as general and special interest magazines (Adweek, 2004). The latter two magazine types feature articles on a variety of personal topics, including self-improvement, parenting, dating, cooking, fashion, and fishing. Whereas news magazine articles are written mostly in the third-person, articles in interest magazines sometimes try to enhance a sense of intimacy by using the second-person perspective. Articles written in the second-person may be more likely to enhance self-consciousness.

Researchers usually distinguish between two positively correlated sub-dimensions of self-consciousness: private and public (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Self-monitoring, a construct widely explored in consumer research, refers to the degree to which individuals monitor or regulate their own behaviors. Its relationship with public and private self-consciousness is examined in this paper. In addition, I hypothesize that those high in self-monitoring will favor magazine articles that direct attention to the self, and therefore will respond more positively to ads embedded in those articles. I also predict that the articles participants read will moderate the effectiveness of image and utilitarian appeal ads. The effectiveness of image appeal ads should improve when participants read a story directing attention to the self, but the effectiveness of utilitarian appeal ads should not vary as a function of story type. Two studies tested these proposed hypotheses.
suggests that editorial contexts can alter consumer responses to ad messages. However, the focus of this paper shifts from editorial articles that feature consumer information to general interest articles that can enhance self-consciousness.

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Attention can be directed to the self or the external environment (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Directing attention to the self enhances self-consciousness. According to Argyle (1969), self-consciousness is “the extent to which the self-system is readily activated, so that an interactor becomes concerned with the reactions of others to himself” (p. 378). Duval and Wicklund argued that consciousness can be focused on any aspect of the self and is not limited to a concern with others’ responses to oneself. Self-consciousness may direct an individual’s attention to “his conscious state, his personal history, his body, or any other personal aspects of himself” (Duval & Wicklund, p. 2).

Self-consciousness can refer to a state or trait. Fenigstein et al. (1975; see also Fenigstein, 1979) proposed that the trait of self-consciousness has two dimensions: private and public. The former concerns attention to one’s thoughts, motives, and emotions, whereas the latter pertains to awareness of others’ responses to oneself. Nashy (1989) argued that private and public self-consciousness are not polar anchors of a continuum. Indeed, past research has demonstrated that these two types of self-consciousness are positively correlated (e.g., Abe, Bagozzi, & Sadarangani, 1996).

Even though self-consciousness can be an inherited personal tendency (Fenigstein, 1979), it also can vary as a function of situational factors (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). For example, self-consciousness has been enhanced experimentally by having participants look into a small mirror (Carver & Scheier, 1978; Duval & Wicklund, 1973); listen to their own voices (Ickes, Wicklund & Ferris, 1978); write a story about themselves using first-person terms (Fenigstein & Levine, 1984); and focus their thoughts on themselves (Ellis & Holmes, 1982). This line of research does not specifically distinguish public from private self-consciousness. Given these dimensions positively correlate, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1987) argued that distinguishing between them does not seem necessary when studying self-consciousness as a state. It is likely that directing attention toward the self will cause activation of both the private and public forms of self-consciousness.

Empirical evidence in social psychology has indicated that enhancing a self-consciousness state encourages self-examination and evaluation (e.g., Duval & Wicklund, 1972), self-attrition (e.g., Fejfar & Hoyle, 1990; Wicklund, 1975), and intense emotional experiences (Scheier & Carver, 1977). However, consumer research has been concerned mainly with the influence of the public self-consciousness trait on consumption behaviors. Studies have shown that individuals high in public self-consciousness wear more makeup (Miller & Cox, 1982), express more interests in clothing (Solomon, & Shopfier, 1982), attribute more control to service managers for waiting in line (Marguis & Filiatrault, 2003), and prefer national brands to bargain brands (Bushman, 1993). This paper will extend consumer research by exploring the influence of the self-consciousness state on ad processing.

As mentioned earlier, instructing participants to think about themselves can enhance self-consciousness (Ellis & Holmes, 1982). I propose that certain magazine articles may be able to direct individuals’ attention to themselves. Past literature has shown that using the second-person perspective, as opposed to third-person, increases self-referencing and self-related thinking (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1989). Moreover, instructing participants to construct a story using first-person terms directs their attention to themselves (Fenigstein & Levine, 1984). Davis and Brock (1975) also showed that participants placed in self-consciousness enhancing situations used more first-person pronouns when determining pronouns in articles written in ambiguous foreign languages. These findings suggest that first-person or second-person perspectives in writing can direct attention to the self. Therefore, I reason that magazine articles written in the second-person will direct readers’ attention to themselves, thereby enhancing self-consciousness.

Assuming a positive correlation between private and public self-consciousness, this paper will explore the effect of enhancing self-consciousness in general, not distinguishing between the two types. The focus of this investigation will be on comparing the effect of reading magazine articles that direct attention to the self, as opposed to articles that do not direct attention to the self, on participants’ responses to advertising messages.

SELF-MONITORING

How likely individuals are to tailor their self-presentation to accommodate situational needs can be measured by their “degree of self-monitoring” (e.g., Snyder, 1974, 1979). According to Snyder’s (1979) discussion,

[T]he prototypic high self-monitoring individual is one who, out of a concern for the situational and interpersonal appropriateness of his or her social behavior, is particularly sensitive to the expression and self-presentation of relevant others in social situations and uses these cues as guidelines for monitoring (that is, regulating and controlling) his or her own behaviors. (p. 89)

In contrast, “the prototypic low self-monitoring individual is not so vigilant to social information about situational appropriateness self-presentation” (p. 89). Snyder developed a self-monitoring scale to measure individual differences on this construct (e.g., Snyder, 1974, 1979). Different from public and private self-consciousness, which are positively correlated, high self-monitoring and low self-monitoring polar anchors of a continuum.

Since consumption to a certain extent is related to self-presentation, self-monitoring has been well explored in consumer literature. Past research has found that high self-monitoring individuals favor products advertised with an emphasis on user image (Snyder & DeBono, 1985). This seems to indicate that those high in self-monitoring direct more of their attention to the self, in general, and self-image, in particular, compared with those low in self-monitoring. Therefore, I hypothesize that individuals higher in self-monitoring will also be higher in self-consciousness, both private and public forms.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals’ self-monitoring is positively correlated with their public and private self-consciousness.

Aaker (1999) demonstrated that situationally primed self-concepts are more important to high self-monitoring decision makers than chronically accessible self-concepts, which are, conversely, more important to low self-monitoring decision makers. She concluded that high self-monitors are more susceptible to the influence of situational factors. Therefore, it is argued that people high in self-monitoring will be more affected by stories containing self-related cues. Specifically, they will be more favorable of magazine articles written in the second-person, which direct attention to the self. This preference will carry over to improve their responses to the ads and brands embedded within these articles. As a result, they will rate the ads as more diagnostic and likable, rate
the brands as more favorable, and express greater purchase intention. On the contrary, individuals low in self-monitoring will not respond differently to magazine articles that direct attention to the self versus others.

Hypothesis 2: When reading magazine articles that direct attention to the self versus others, those high in self-monitoring will rate ads as more diagnostic (2a) and likable (2b), evaluate brands as more favorable (2c), and report higher levels of purchase intention (2d). In contrast, those low in self-monitoring will not respond differently on these measures when reading articles that direct attention to the self versus others.

**IMAGE VS. UTILITARIAN APPEALS**

The two most widely used types of advertising appeals are image and utilitarian appeals (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). The image appeal, also known as the value-expressive or symbolic appeal, “holds a creative objective to create an image of the generalized user of the advertised product (or brand)” (Johar & Sirgy, 1991, p. 23). In contrast, the utilitarian appeal is “a creative strategy that highlights the functional features of the product (or brand)” (Johar & Sirgy, 1991, p. 23). Utilitarian appeal ads focus on product attributes or performance. This type of appeal is also referred to as the functional appeal (Johar & Sirgy, 1991) or the quality-oriented appeal (Snyder & DeBono, 1985).

Snyder and DeBono (1985) found that high self-monitoring individuals are influenced more by image advertising appeals, whereas low self-monitors are influenced more by utilitarian appeals. When image appeals are used, high self-monitoring individuals judge the advertised product to be of better quality (DeBono & Snyder, 1989), rate it as more personally relevant (DeBono & Packer, 1991), and are willing to pay more for the product (Snyder & DeBono, 1985). In contrast, low self-monitoring individuals judge the product to be of better quality (DeBono & Snyder, 1989), rate it as more personally relevant (DeBono & Packer, 1991), and show greater willingness to pay (Snyder & DeBono, 1985) when utilitarian appeals are employed.

As discussed earlier, people high in self-monitoring may evaluate image appeals more favorably because they pay more attention to themselves and their self-images. In line with this argument, I hypothesize that directing attention to the self will cause individuals to perceive the image of the product users as relevant to their judgments. Consequently, the effectiveness of image appeal ads will increase, resulting in more favorable attitudes toward the ad and the brand, which will further lead to greater purchase intentions. In contrast, directing attention to the self will not influence the effectiveness of utilitarian appeal ads.

Hypothesis 3: When reading magazine articles that direct attention to the self versus others, participants exposed to image appeal ads will rate ads as more diagnostic (3a) and likable (3b), evaluate brands as more favorable (3c), and report higher levels of purchase intention (3d). In contrast, participants exposed to utilitarian appeal ads will not respond differently on these measures when reading articles that direct attention to the self versus others.

Study one tests hypothesis 1, and study two tests hypotheses 2 and 3.

**STUDY ONE**

**Methods**

Participants (N=97) were recruited from a university in a metropolitan area. They were told a professor in the Psychology department was interested in understanding personality traits in college students. They completed a self-administered survey for which they rated themselves using a 7-point scale on a long list of personality trait measures, including a self-consciousness scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975) and a self-monitoring scale (Snyder, 1974).

**Results**

Means for public self-consciousness, private self-consciousness, and self-monitoring were 5.60 (SD=0.99), 5.43 (SD=0.85), and 4.34 (SD=0.61), respectively. The difference between participants’ ratings of public and private self-consciousness was not significant, t(96)=1.69, p=.09, indicating that participants were paying attention to their internal selves as well as others’ responses to their self-presentation. Also, consistent with past research, public and private self-consciousness were positively correlated (Pearson’s r(95)=.42, p<.01). Most importantly, ratings of self-monitoring were positively correlated with ratings of private self-consciousness (Pearson’s r=.23, p<.01) and public self-consciousness (Pearson’s r=.26, p<.01). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

**STUDY TWO**

**Methods**

Participants (N=131) were recruited from the campus of a metropolitan area university and were paid for their participation. Fifty-two percent were male.

**Design**

This experiment was a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design. The factors were: article type (self-directed vs. non-self-directed), ad appeal (image vs. utilitarian), and self-monitoring (high vs. low).

**Materials**

Magazines articles. Magazine articles served as the contextual priming material for directing attention and enhancing self-consciousness. The article directing attention to the self was written in the second-person perspective, whereas the article that did not direct attention to the self used the third-person. Participants were told that the magazine was going to be launched in the area and targeted at college students. The featured article was about college life.

**Ad stimuli.** Professional copy writers and designers at advertising agencies wrote the ad messages used in this experiment. The featured products were shoes. The utilitarian appeal ad featured product attribute information that was selected based on a pretest in which 20 participants listed the attributes they considered most important when purchasing shoes. The image appeal ad described product users but did not address specific product attributes.

**Procedures**

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four manipulated conditions. To discourage participants from guessing the true aim of the study, at the beginning of the experiment the research coordinator falsely informed them that they would be participating in three independent studies. The first study was a survey of college students’ values and traits. The second study was designed to understand how people respond to layout and formats in magazine articles. The third study examined the effects of different ad layouts.
on reader responses. Participants first rated themselves on a number of scales including the self-monitoring scale (Snyder, 1974) and other filler scales. Next, participants read a magazine article and rated how comprehensible the article was and how much they liked the format. They then completed the private and public subscales of the self-consciousness scale (Feinigstein et al., 1975). Finally, they read the target ad, rated its diagnosticity, and reported their attitudes toward the ad and the featured product.

Independent Variables

Article type. Following presentation of the magazine articles, the private and public self-consciousness subscales (Feinigstein et al., 1975) were administered as a manipulation check. Responses to the subscale items were averaged together. As expected, articles written in the second-person perspective generated significantly higher self-consciousness ratings, $F(1, 129)=6.90$, $p<.01$, $M_{self}=5.81$, $SD=0.83$, $M_{non-self}=5.45$, $SD=0.72$.

Ad appeal. Responses to four statements measured on 7-point Likert-type scales were used for the manipulation check. The statements included: “The ad features product attributes,” “The ad focuses on product functions,” “The ad describes product users,” and “The ad features a profile of consumers.” The last two items were reverse scored, and then all items were averaged. The manipulation was successful, as ratings for utilitarian appeals were significantly higher than ratings for image appeals, $F(1, 129)=33.32$, $p<.01$, $M_{utilitarian}=4.50$, $SD=0.67$, $M_{image}=3.67$, $SD=0.95$.

Self-monitoring. Using a 7-point Likert scale, participants completed Snyder’s (1974) self-monitoring scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.69). Participants were categorized as high or low self-monitoring based on a median split of their ratings. The two groups’ average ratings differed significantly, $F(1, 129)=223.45$, $p<.01$, $M_{high}=4.72$, $SD=0.37$, $M_{low}=3.77$, $SD=0.34$.

Dependent Variables

Ad diagnosticity. A 3-item, 7-point Likert scale was adopted from Chang (2003) to measure ad diagnosticity. The items were: “The ad made me confident in making judgments of the product,” “The ad made me able to evaluate the advertised product,” “The ad made me confident to make a purchase decision.” Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .89, indicating good internal reliability.

Ad attitudes. Attitudes toward the ads were measured using a 5-item, 7-point Likert scale adopted from MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986) and Madden, Allen, and Twible (1988). The items were “interesting,” “good,” “likable,” “favorable,” and “pleasant.” The scale had high internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha=.89).

Brand attitudes. Brand attitudes were measured with a 5-item, 7-point Likert scale adopted from Mitchell and Olson (1981) and Holbrook and Batra (1987). The items were “good,” “likable,” “pleasant,” “positive,” and “high quality.” Cronbach’s alpha was .92, indicating good reliability.

Purchase intentions. A semantic differential scale was adopted from Zhang (1996) to measure purchase intentions. It contained three items: “improbable-probable,” “unlikely-likely,” and “impossible-possible.” Reliability for this scale was high (Cronbach’s alpha=.93).

Results

Between-subjects analyses of variance followed by simple effects tests were conducted on the four dependent variables to test hypotheses 2 and 3. As expected, the interaction between self-monitoring and article type on ad diagnosticity was significant, $F(1, 123)=4.79$, $p=.03$. For participants high in self-monitoring, the influence of article type was marginally significant, $F(1, 69)=3.57$, $p=.06$, with means in the expected direction, $M_{self}=3.58$, $SD=1.26$, $M_{non-self}=3.07$, $SD=1.48$. However, as expected, for participants low in self-monitoring, the influence of article type was not significant, $F(1, 54)=1.56$, $p=.22$, $M_{self}=3.10$, $SD=1.48$, $M_{non-self}=3.46$, $SD=1.24$. Therefore, hypothesis 2a was moderately supported.

There was also a significant interaction between self-monitoring and article type on ad attitudes, $F(1, 123)=5.05$, $p=.03$. For participants high in self-monitoring, reading self-directed magazine articles resulted in more favorable attitudes toward the ad, $F(1, 69)=7.61$, $p<.01$, $M_{self}=4.44$, $SD=1.14$, $M_{non-self}=3.71$, $SD=1.20$. As expected, the influence of article type was not significant for participants low in self-monitoring, $F(1, 54)=2.86$, $p=.16$, $M_{self}=4.17$, $SD=1.17$, $M_{non-self}=4.27$, $SD=1.02$. Therefore, hypothesis 2b was fully supported.

The self-monitoring by article type interaction was also significant for brand attitudes, $F(1, 123)=5.74$, $p=.02$. For participants high in self-monitoring, reading self-directed magazines articles led to more favorable brand attitudes, $F(1, 69)=4.24$, $p<.04$, $M_{self}=4.30$, $SD=1.30$, $M_{non-self}=3.74$, $SD=1.28$. Consistent with expectations, for participants low in self-monitoring, the influence of article type was not significant, $F(1, 54)=1.91$, $p=.17$, $M_{self}=4.06$, $SD=1.19$, $M_{non-self}=4.41$, $SD=1.03$. Therefore, hypothesis 2c was fully supported.

For the analysis of purchase intentions, the interaction between self-monitoring and article type on ad diagnosticity, $F(1, 123)=4.44$, $p=.04$. Self-directed articles led to higher diagnosticity ratings for image appeal ads, $F(1, 63)=4.78$, $p<.03$, $M_{self}=3.18$, $SD=1.26$, $M_{non-self}=2.54$, $SD=1.09$. Consistent with expectations, the influence of article type was not significant for utilitarian appeal ads, $F(1, 62)=1.44$, $p=.23$, $M_{self}=3.56$, $SD=1.47$, $M_{non-self}=3.96$, $SD=1.28$. Therefore, hypothesis 3d was fully supported.

The interaction between ad appeal and article type on ad attitudes was not significant, $F(1, 123)=1.56$, $p=.22$. Given that a hypothesis regarding lower level differences was established a priori, lower level comparisons were justified (Winer, Brown, & Michels, 1991). The results of simple effects tests were consistent with expectations. For image appeal ads, self-directed articles led to significantly more favorable attitude ratings, $F(1, 63)=5.18$, $p<.03$, $M_{self}=4.26$, $SD=1.18$, $M_{non-self}=3.61$, $SD=1.12$. For utilitarian appeal ads, the effect of article type was not significant, $F(1, 62)=.03$, $p=.87$, $M_{self}=4.39$, $SD=1.14$, $M_{non-self}=4.32$, $SD=1.08$. Hypothesis 3b, therefore, was supported only by the results of simple effects tests.

Contrary to expectations, the interaction between ad appeal and article type on brand attitudes was not significant, $F(1, 123)=5.8$, $p=.45$. Simple effects tests showed no significant influence of article type for image appeal ads, $F(1, 63)=1.32$, $p=.25$, $M_{self}=4.03$, $SD=1.24$, $M_{non-self}=3.69$, $SD=1.14$, or for utilitarian appeal ads, $F(1, 62)=.04$, $p=.84$, $M_{self}=4.36$, $SD=1.26$, $M_{non-self}=4.40$, $SD=1.19$. Therefore, hypothesis 3c was not supported.

Finally, there was a significant interaction between ad appeal and article type on purchase intentions, $F(1, 123)=10.86$, $p<.01$. For image appeal ads, self-directed articles led to greater purchase intentions, $F(1, 69)=6.64$, $p<.01$, $M_{self}=3.77$, $SD=1.47$, $M_{non-self}=1.97$, $SD=.98$. Whereas, for utilitarian appeal ads, self-directed articles generated lower purchase intentions, $F(1, 54)=4.51$, $p<.04$, $M_{self}=2.23$, $SD=1.29$, $M_{non-self}=2.92$, $SD=1.35$. Therefore, the results for image appeal ads were consistent with hypothesis 3d.
Discussion

The relationship between self-monitoring and responses to ad appeals has been widely explored in the consumer literature (e.g., DeBono & Packer, 1991; DeBono & Snyder, 1989; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). However, the possible influence of self-consciousness on the effectiveness of different ad appeals has never drawn research attention. Findings reported in this paper suggest that self-consciousness moderates the effectiveness of image and utilitarian appeals, the two most common advertising appeals. Image appeal ads were more favorably perceived when self-consciousness was enhanced, paralleling the research on high self-monitoring. However, contrary to research findings on low self-monitoring, utilitarian appeal ads were not preferred more when self-consciousness was not enhanced. Past research found that less than six percent of the variance in each of the self-consciousness subscales is shared with variance in self-monitoring (Turner, Scheier, Carver, & Ickes, 1978), indicating that self-consciousness deserves its own research attention. Future research can explore how self-consciousness interacts with other advertising appeals.

As previously reviewed, more research attention in the consumer literature has focused on individual differences in self-consciousness as a stable personality trait. In this paper self-consciousness was explored as a state, which was manipulated by reading magazine articles. However, Aaker (1999) pointed out that individuals’ traits can moderate the influence of situational primes. It seems likely that individuals who are more self-reflective may be more susceptible to a self-consciousness manipulation than less self-reflective individuals. Future studies can explore the interaction of situation-primed self-attention and existing difference in attention orientation on individuals’ responses to advertising messages or product information.

Study two focused on a state of general self-consciousness, not specifically distinguishing between private and public self-consciousness. In this experiment self-consciousness was enhanced by reading a magazine article, which generally provides a personal context. However, public self-consciousness is more likely triggered by the context of the social environment (Buss, 1980). Therefore, public self-consciousness may have been less enhanced in this experiment. Given that private and public self-consciousness are positively correlated, however, it is likely that activating one type of self-consciousness may automatically increase activation of the other type. As the definition suggests, when public self-consciousness increases, an individual pays more attention to others’ responses to the self. Attending to others’ responses to the self may cause attention to be directed toward one’s own view of the self as well, thereby enhancing private self-consciousness. Yet, the same spreading activation effect may not occur in the other direction. Future research can explore this possible difference. In addition, how variance in consumers’ responses to advertising is explained is by each type of self-consciousness and how important it is to distinguish these two constructs in advertising research should be further explored.

This study extended contextual priming literature by showing that magazine articles can direct attention to the self and enhance the effectiveness of image appeals. This finding has important implications for practitioners. For instance, fashion products marketed with a focus on boosting the consumer’s image could purchase more space in magazines featuring articles that direct attention to the self. There are many ways to direct consumers’ attention to themselves; featuring stories in second-person perspectives is simply one of them. A future direction for research in this area could be to establish the specific characteristics of magazines or articles that are capable of enhancing self-consciousness in consumers and thereby influencing their product judgments.

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