The Persuasiveness of Stylistic Properties: the Moderating Role of Ideal-Self Vs. Ought-Self

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Two experiments were conducted to examine the moderating effect of self-concept in the persuasiveness of a stylistic property – camera angle. Study 1 showed that, when an upward-looking camera angle is used to depict a product, respondents with salient ought-self (motivated by duties and obligations) generated more favorable brand evaluations than did respondents with salient ideal-self (motivated by hopes and aspirations). The reverse pattern was found when a downward-looking angle was employed. Study 2 revealed further that this Self by Camera Angle effect occurred only among respondents with high processing motivation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Stylistic properties refer to a variety of factors that impact the manner in which visual material is displayed (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 2005). Studies have suggested that visual images often convey semantically meaningful concepts that impact consumer judgments via their stylistic properties (Messaris 1997). Take camera angle for example, when a product is depicted with a low, upward-looking camera angle, viewers tend to associate the product with potency and powerfulness. This interpretation was found upward-looking camera angle, viewers tend to associate the product with potency and powerfulness. This interpretation was found to influence viewers’ brand evaluations (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 2005).

Despite a steady increase in the study of stylistic properties, little research has examined the effect of self-concept in determining the interpretation as well as the persuasion outcome of these stylistic properties. This research issue is important to address given that self-concept has been found to play intriguing roles in explaining various consumer behaviors, ranging from the persuasiveness of ad messages, to consumers’ brand extension evaluations, and to memory and recall (e.g., Ng and Houston 2006). In this paper, we study a particular self-concept, ideal-self vs. ought-self, and examine whether and how it moderates the effect of camera angle on product attitudes.

Ideal-self refers to whom people want themselves to be and is closely related to people’s hopes, wishes, and aspirations. Ought-self refers to whom people think they should be and is closely related to people’s obligations, duties, and responsibilities. These two selves are associated with distinct motivations (promotion- vs. prevention- focused) and distinct self-regulatory systems (approach vs. prevention strategies) (Higgins 1998). And they have shown to affect the type of information (affective vs. substantive) consumers rely on to form judgment (Pham and Avnet 2004).

We propose that the persuasiveness of camera angle is moderated by the type of self (i.e., ideal vs. ought) that is activated at the exposure to ads. Specifically, when an upward-looking (low) angle is used, consumers whose ought-self is activated would form more favorable brand evaluations than consumers whose ideal-self is activated. This is because consumers with ought-self focus on avoiding loss to achieve their goals and tend to make conservative choices (Liberman et al. 1999), they are more likely to be bound by the hierarchy relationship and to yield to powerful figures. A product shot from a low, upward-looking angle is more likely to make those consumers feel positively about products. Conversely, when a downward-looking (high) angle is used to promote a brand, consumers whose ideal-self is activated would form more favorable brand evaluations than consumers whose ought-self is activated. This is because consumers with ideal-self are less likely to be bound by status-quo interpretations of the stylistic properties and tend to interpret a downward-looking angle favorably.

Study 1, a 2 (self manipulation: ideal-self vs. ought-self) x 2 (camera angle: downward-looking vs. upward-looking) between-subjects design, was conducted to test the prediction. A target ad for a cereal brand was used as a stimulus. The ad featured a large box of the cereal photographed from either one of these camera angles. Participants completed a series of seeming unrelated studies: 1) complete the exercise that is pertinent to manipulation of self (Pham and Avnet 2004); 2) complete the manipulation check items; and 3) review the ad, list their thoughts, and rate their product attitudes.

The manipulation of self was deemed satisfactory. A 2x2 ANOVA yielded a significant two-way Self x Camera Angle effect on product evaluations. Contrast analyses confirmed our expectations.

Study 2 was designed to examine the boundary conditions under which the Self x Camera Angle effect emerges. We argue that although the meaning of the visual stylistic properties is subtle, these properties could serve like central arguments by conveying diagnostic information. We therefore expect that the 2-way interaction effect will emerge only under high motivation of processing. To test this hypothesis, a 2 (self manipulation: ideal-self vs. ought-self) x 2 (camera angle: downward-looking vs. upward-looking) x 2 (processing motivation: high vs. low) between-subjects design was employed. Results confirmed our hypotheses.

To summarize, we find that when a high, downward-looking camera angle is utilized to photograph a product, consumers reported more favorable brand evaluations and thoughts when their ideal-self is temporarily accessible. Conversely, when a low, upward-looking camera angle is utilized, consumers reported more favorable brand evaluations and thoughts when their ought-self is temporarily accessible. In addition, these effects occurred under the high motivation of information processing. Taken together, these results contribute to the visual processing literature by showing the effect of self-concept on the interpretation of the meaning imparted by one stylistic property-camera angle. This project also contributes to the self-concept literature by revealing the power of self in yet another dimension of persuasion efforts—the visual aspect of persuasive messages.

REFERENCES


