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## **The Self-Activation Effect of Advertisements: Ads Can Affect Whether and How Consumers Think About the Self**

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The current research explores the different meaning that products acquire when they, by very subtle manipulations, change from self-defining products into advertised consumer products. The authors propose the self-activation effect of ads, which holds that hedonic (as opposed to utilitarian) products in ads address individuals in their capacity as consumers, and consequently, consumers' self-concept is activated and changed. Three experiments provide support for this hypothesis. That is, after viewing hedonic products in an advertisement context, thoughts about the self are more salient and different than after viewing the same hedonic product outside of its ad context.

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# The Self-Activation Effect of Advertisements: Ads Can Affect Whether and How Consumers Think About the Self

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of the signature strengths of the advertising industry lies in its ability to transfer seemingly mundane objects into highly desirable products. Products can transform into different entities once they are placed in advertisements. In their everyday appearance, products are relatively distant, self-defining stimuli: Shoes are for walking and cars are for driving. However, the meaning that is conveyed by such products can change dramatically once they are placed in an advertisement. Then, these products can become consumer products, things that can be bought and owned. Then, shoes and cars are for buying. To give an example, the meaning signaled by a high-heeled shoe in an advertisement is radically different from the meaning that is conveyed when one encounters the exact same shoe outside of its advertisement context. In the latter situation, the shoe is a relatively distant, neutral product. However, in the former advertisement context, the shoe is a desirable, potentially self-relevant product that one can buy and that suggests a possible self-image of beauty and attractiveness.

The present paper looks at important but understudied consequences of the different meaning that advertised versus non-advertised products can convey. In three experiments, we test the proposed self-activation effect of advertisements, which suggests that the different meaning products convey once they are placed in an advertisement can trigger important self-processes. By postulating the self-activation effect of ads, we suggest that when placed in an advertisement context, products become potentially desirable consumer products that address people in their capacity as consumers—people who buy and own things, and thus make specific consumer choices and decisions. Moreover, we expect this effect to be especially true for hedonic products, but not for more utilitarian products. Specifically, we suggest that advertised hedonic products, as opposed to non-advertised hedonic products, can affect both *the extent* to which individuals think about the self, and *how* they think about the self.

Interestingly, the relevant literature has not yet explicitly acknowledged the idea that the meaning that is conveyed by advertised products may be very different from the meaning that is conveyed by non-advertised products. However, previous studies have focused on how advertisements can employ all sorts of techniques to convey their message in an implicit fashion, such as implicatures (Phillips 1997) and stylistic properties (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 2005). Contemporary consumer research acknowledges that advertisements can possess symbolic features and that advertisements are often highly stylized representations that compel consumers to engage ads as symbolic systems (Aaker 1999; Philips and McQuarrie 2004; Scott 1994; Solomon 1983). That is, rhetorical theory posits that advertisements can convey meaning that goes beyond their physical characteristics and as a consequence, consumers must draw upon associations and cultural knowledge to grasp the implicit meaning the ad conveys. However, past studies have commonly focused on how the content of ads can affect product perceptions, evaluations, and processing style. In other words, most consumer research has studied variations within consumer situations, rather than variations between consumer and non-consumer situations. Or, using Folkes' (2002) words "... little

consumer research directly compares consumption with non-consumption or customer with non-customer behavior". The present paper attempts to fill a void in the current literature by making comparisons between consumer and non-consumer situations.

Taken together, the results of three experiments indicate that very subtle manipulations (merely adding a brand name and a relatively simple background) can interact with the hedonic level of the products to transform products into advertised consumer products. The consequences of this change in meaning were found to be substantial. First, Study 1 found that a hedonic product that was placed in an ad activated the self (as exemplified by an increase in the salience of first-person pronouns), as compared to the same hedonic product when it was not advertised. That is, when research participants had been exposed to an ad featuring eye shadow (a product previously rated as relatively hedonic), they were more likely to translate fictitious words as first-person pronouns than when they had viewed the eye shadow without the ad context.

Study 2 was designed to address the self-evaluative consequences of Study 1's finding that ads can interact with the hedonic level of products to activate the self. Study 2 revealed that ads for hedonic products (as opposed to a more utilitarian product) were used as a standard against which consumers evaluated the self. Specifically, individuals were found to evaluate their self-image more negatively when they had viewed, for example, a high-heeled shoe (a product previously rated as relatively hedonic) in an ad than when they were exposed to the exact same shoe when it was cut out from its advertisement context.

Further support for the notion that the activation of the self is an important underlying mechanism was provided by Study 3's finding that experimentally activating the self interacted with the hedonic level of products to produce similar effects on self-evaluation as did exposure to advertised products. That is, when the self was directly activated, exposure to the hedonic products in ads resulted in more negative self-evaluations than when the self was not activated.

To sum up, the three experiments provide evidence for the self-activation effect of ads: placing products in an advertisement context can interact with the hedonic level of products to activate the self, and as a consequence, ads can exert self-evaluative effects on consumers. By demonstrating this, the current studies contribute to the literature on visual imagery in ads. This literature has revealed important knowledge about how consumers draw meaning from ads. The current studies add to this research body by demonstrating that an advertisement context itself can also serve as a "figure of thought" that should not be processed literally, but rather by using implicit associations and knowledge. Stated differently, the current research adds to the existing literature on rhetorical theory by examining how people interpret themselves on the basis of advertisements, rather than looking at how people interpret the advertisement on the basis of themselves (i.e., their knowledge structures).

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## **My Brand and I: The Impact of Self-Construal on Self-Brand Closeness**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Three studies demonstrate that consumers with independent self-construals are more inclined to incorporate brands into the self and hence maintain close connections with them than consumers with interdependent self-construals. We demonstrate the underlying role of self-expression in explaining this effect. Unlike interdependent consumers, independent consumers have a high need for self-expression, and are inclined to use brands to communicate the self, which should further strengthen their self-brand connections.