Effect of Self-Construal on New Product Adoption Decisions: Role of Innovation Newness and Risk Type

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There is little research into how self-construal affects new product adoption. We found that the impact of self-construal is contingent upon the product’s innovation newness and salience of risk type (social vs. performance). When risks are implicit, consumers with independent versus interdependent self-views are more willing to adopt really new products (RNPs), but equally willing to adopt incrementally new products (INPs). When social risks are salient, the independents are more willing to adopt RNPs, but less willing to adopt INPs than the interdependents. When performance risks are salient, consumers with either self-views are equally unlikely to adopt, regardless of innovation newness.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The self-construal theory recognizes two distinct self-views, that is, the independent versus interdependent self-views. The two self-views are associated with different social orientation and regulatory focus. Individuals with predominantly independent self-views (the ‘independents’) view themselves as different from others and are motivated to seek autonomy, achievements, and success relative to others (Trafimow et al. 1991). People with predominantly interdependent self-views define themselves as part of a group and are motivated to seek social harmony, affiliation with others, and avoidance of risks (Aaker and Lee 2001). Although the existing literature has examined the effect of self-construal on various marketing outcomes such as persuasion, risk-taking, and impulsive consumption, there is little research into the effect of self-construal on new product adoption decisions. We posit that situationally primed self-views have systematic effect on consumers’ new product adoption decisions, and that such effects are dependent on both the innovation newness of the products and on the salience of different risks associated with the products (e.g. performance vs. social risks).

Research on innovation distinguishes between incrementally new products (INPs) and really new products (RNPs) (Hoeffler 2003). RNPs offer newer and more unique benefits but also pose higher risks than INPs (Ram and Sheth 1989). Given the independents’ and interdependents’ different proclivity to risks and benefits, it can be expected that consumers primed with different self-views may react differently to products that vary in innovation newness. Prior research also shows that situational contexts can make certain types of risks salient to consumers. We posit that the independents’ and interdependents’ purchase intentions towards RNPs and INPs may vary according to whether the risks associated with the products are salient, and if they are salient, the types of risks that are made salient (e.g. social vs. performance risks).

When the risks associated with the products are implicit, the independents would give more weight to the unique benefits of RNPs than to the potential risks of such products, given their orientation towards achievements and self-enhancement. On the contrary, the interdependents may attend more to the potential risks of RNPs than their benefits, owing to their general inclination to avoid risks. However, when the product is an INP, the independents may not be more likely to adopt the product than the interdependents, because the limited incremental benefits offered by INPs are not sufficient to satisfy the independents’ promotion-oriented goals.

\textbf{H1:} When the product innovation newness is high, consumers primed with independent self-views state higher purchase intention than those primed with interdependent self-views. When the product innovation newness is low, consumers primed with independent versus interdependent self-views do not differ in stated purchase intention.

When social risks about the new products are made salient, the independents may be either more or less willing to adopt the product than the interdependents, depending on the innovation newness of the product. When the product is an RNP, social risks information may have minimal impact on the independents’ adoption intentions, because the unique benefits offered by RNPs in terms of self-expression and self-enhancements are weighed more heavily by the independents than the risks of social disapproval. Thus, when social risks are salient, the independents may still be more willing to adopt RNPs than the interdependents. However, when the product is an INP, the independents are not motivated to adopt the products in the first place, due to limited incremental benefits of such products. Moreover, in the absence of strong motivation to adopt, the salience of social risks may further dampen the independents’ adoption intention towards the INP. This is because the independents would expect to gain little from such products in terms of intrinsic benefits or differentiation from others. Thus, the independents may exhibit lower purchase intentions toward the INP than the interdependents when social risks are salient.

\textbf{H2:} When a product’s social risks are made salient, consumers primed with independent self-views are more willing to adopt a really new product, but less willing to adopt an incrementally new product than consumers primed with interdependent self-views.

When the performance risks about the products are made explicit, the independents and interdependents may be equally unlikely to adopt the product. Performance risks associated with a product not only have the potential to render the product incapable of delivering the intended benefits, but may also cause safety hazards to the users. When the products’ safety or reliability is called into question, the independents will be as unlikely as the interdependents to adopt the products, regardless of their innovation newness.

\textbf{H3:} When performance risks are salient, the independents and interdependents do not differ in their product adoption decisions, regardless of innovation newness of the product.

We tested the research hypotheses using two experimental studies. The purpose of Experiment 1 is to test the effect of self-construal on new product adoption decisions when risks are not salient (H1). Ninety-eight undergraduate students participated in Experiment 1, which featured a 2 (independent vs. interdependent self-views) \times 2 (INPs vs. RNPs) design. Participants first read a scenario about a tennis match that was pretested to elicit different self-views, and were then prompted to imagine a scenario about a new car, which were pretested to differ in terms of innovation newness. ANOVA of stated purchase intention (PI) showed that, consistent with H1, the independents reported higher PI than the interdependents when the product was an RNP, but their PI did not differ when the products are INPs. Mediation analysis suggests that the effect of self-construal and innovation newness was mediated by perceived product benefits.

The purpose of Experiment 2 is to test the effect of self-construal on new product adoption decisions when different types of risks (social vs. performance risks) are made salient. Two hundred and ninety two undergraduate students participated in this
experiment, which featured a 2 (self construal) x 2 (newness) x 2 (risk types: social vs. performance risks) design. Both self-construal and innovation newness were manipulated in the same way as in Experiment 1. Social risks about the products were made salient by highlighting the negative feedback from other consumers to the car in a purported news report. Performance risks were made salient by highlighting the fact that the car’s safety and reliability has not been fully proven. An ANOVA of stated PI showed a three-way interaction among self-construal, newness, and risk types. Separate ANOVA of PI within the social risk context shows that consumers primed with independent self-views are more willing to adopt a really new product, but less willing to adopt an incrementally new product than consumers primed with interdependent self-views. Thus, H2 was supported. Moreover, mediation analysis shows that observed effect between self-construal and innovation newness was mediated by perceived product benefits. The ANOVA of PI within the performance risks context shows that the independents and interdependents did not differ in their product adoption decisions, regardless of innovation newness of the product. Thus, H3 was also supported.

REFERENCES