Defensive Reactions to Self Threat in Consumption: the Moderating Role of Mode of Threat and Affirmation

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This research identifies two competing coping strategies individuals may employ to deal with self threat in consumption contexts—defensive and compliant strategies. It addresses the relationship between defensive and compliant consumption by investigating the key factors such as the affirmation value of products and mode of threat in moderating what types of consumption strategy consumers adopt.

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Defensive Reactions to Self Threat in Consumption: The Moderating Role of Affirmation

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Extended Abstract

Consumers often receive information posing threats to self in advertising and consumption contexts. For example, the exposure to idealized images in advertising media poses a threat to one’s own physical attractiveness (Richins 1991). In these cases, we could expect two competing outcomes of self threat. On the one hand, consumers who are made insecure about their positive self views could engage in a defensive reaction toward the threat (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998) and dismiss products and brands that claim to boost their self images in the threatened domain. We label it as a defensive consumption strategy. On the other hand, consumers could perceive the same products and brands to be an important means of self improvement (Eisenstadt, Leippe, and Rivers 2002), therefore, would be more likely to welcome and adopt these products and brands. We label it as a compliant consumption strategy.

Surprisingly, scanty consumer research has been done to address the conditions in which a defensive (vs. compliant) consumption mode can be activated and how defensive or compliant reactions toward self threat would affect subsequent consumption behaviors. Recent consumer research on this topic demonstrated a compliant consumption mode resulting from self threat. That is, consumers who experience self threat would resort to products that can directly repair and bolster the threatened self domain (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). What is missing from this stream of research is the lack of identification of those factors in consumer contexts activating a defensive consumption mode.

Our research addresses this issue by first uncover consumer contexts where self threat can activate a defensive consumption mode. We then investigate that consumers who experience self threat would be more likely to reject products that offer low affirmation value or signal self deficiency (i.e., self improvement products) (Study 1). Furthermore, we address the relationship between the two competing coping mechanisms of self threat: compliance and defense. We argue that there are two key factors in modulating whether a defensive or a compliant strategy takes place: 1) opportunities for self affirmation (including general affirmation opportunities and affirmation value offered by products or brands) and 2) the mode of threat (blatant vs. subtle). Specifically, when there are external opportunities for self affirmation, consumers who experience self threat are less likely to engage in defensive consumption (Study 2). This effect is exacerbated when self threat is activated in blatant manner than in a subtle manner (Study 3). We test these propositions in three experiments.

Study 1 explored a consumer context where a defensive reaction to self threat leads to the dismissal of self improvement products. Specifically, we examined consumers’ evaluations of a body enhancement product after a prior exposure to idealized images in a preceding and seemingly unrelated advertisement evaluation task. We expected to find that subjects whose self views on physical appearance are threatened by the exposure to idealized images are more likely to show less favorable attitude toward the product. In addition, we considered the self domain importance as a moderator of the proposed relationship. That is, defensive consumption is only evident when the threatening source is in an important self domain. We used gender as a proxy of domain importance, since physical appearance has been identified to be important for females but not males. ANOVA results of a 2 (self threat: idealized image vs. no image) x 2 (gender) between-subjects experiment yielded a significant interaction ($F(1,104)=4.89, p<.05$). Planned contrast revealed that females who viewed idealized images (vs. no images) devaluated the product ($M=2.99$ vs. 4.04; $F=8.26, p<.01$), whereas no such effect emerged among males ($F<1$).

Study 2 addresses opportunities for self affirmation as the underlying mechanism of a defensive consumption mode. We argue that the reason for consumers to dismiss self improvement products when their self images were threatened is that these products focus on the domain where self image is threatened, therefore providing no opportunities for self affirmation. We test this proposition by adopting affirmation tasks from Sherman and Cohen (2006). We employed the same research context as in Study 1. We expected that for threatened consumers, when self can be affirmed immediately after the threat (i.e., receiving bogus positive feedback in intelligence

References


domain), the overall self-worth will be maintained and the subsequent defensive reactions toward self improvement products will be mitigated. We also argue that self esteem can moderate the relationship between self affirmation and defensive consumption strategy. High self-esteem individuals are more likely to utilize external opportunities to replenish self worth when threatened than low self-esteem individuals (Vohs and Heatherton 2004). Results of a 2 (self affirmation: affirming vs. control) by 2 (measured trait self-esteem, high vs. low) between-subjects experiment confirmed our hypothesis, showing that the affirmation task (vs. no affirmation) reduced defensive consumption among high self-esteem individuals ($A_{product} \cdot M=3.59$ vs. $2.97$; $F(2.87, p<.10)$ but not low self-esteem individuals ($F<1$).

Study 3 intends to reconcile the discrepancy between the present research and prior research on compliant consumption. We propose that a defensive (vs. compliant) consumption mode is activated by available (vs. absent) opportunities to affirm and blatant (vs. subtle) self threat. In this study, participants’ self views were threatened either blatantly (receiving bogus negative feedback) or subtly (performing a difficult task) in intelligence domain. Subsequently, they evaluated products with high affirmation value (products signaling high intelligence of the user) or products with low affirmation value (intelligence improving products signaling low intelligence of the user). Results revealed that defensive consumption mode emerged only in the blatant threat and low-affirmation-value product condition. That is, when participants were threatened blatantly, they held significantly less favorable attitude toward products with low (vs. high) affirmation value ($M=3.38$ vs. $4.21$; $F(1.54)=5.22$, $p<.05$). Moreover, even if the product offers low affirmation value, participants receiving subtype (vs. blatant) threat held more positive attitude toward the products, signaling a compliant consumption strategy ($M=4.13$ vs. $3.38$; $F(1,54)=4.09$, $p<.05$).

Taken together, our research echoes with the recent calls from consumer researchers (Dunning 2007) that we need to understand more about the relationship between consumers’ self views and their consumption behaviors. Whereas previous research has painted a rosy picture of how products and brands are empowering consumers by providing important symbolic values, this research deviates and presents a darker side of the story. That is, when there is a mismatch between products symbolic value and consumers’ fluid self views, consumers would reject these choices as a way to defend their self views. In addition, by delineating how consumers switch between compliant and defensive consumption on the basis of contextual factors (such as the way self is threatened, or affirmation value of products), this research enriches our understanding of the nature of adaptive consumer behaviors.

**Selected References**


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**Co-Branding with an Emotional Brand:**

**Identity Threat and Coping Strategies among Loyal Consumers**

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**Extended Abstract**

Emotional branding is heralded as a key strategy to build stronger consumer-brand relationships compared to functional brand strategies (e.g., Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel, 2006). For example, the success of Apple speaks largely to this type of brand strategy. That is, emotional branding strategy involves crafting brands’ visions and values in lieu of consumers’ deep-seated emotional needs, dreams, and goals, which allows such brands become spokesperson or substitute of consumers’ identity (e.g., Gobe, 2001). In spite its success, in a competitive brand world, a well-crafted emotional brand alone can hardly maintain its success without working together with brands with complementary strength to reach broader consumer segments (co-branding, Leuthesser et al. 2003). For example,