When individuals struggle with a difficult task, using brands with strong images can enhance feelings of self-efficacy (belief in one’s capabilities) in domains related to the brand’s image, enhancing task performance. This beneficial effect of using brands is evident among entity theorists but not incremental theorists.

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I Think I Can, I Think I Can: Brand Use, Self-Efficacy, and Performance
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
When individuals struggle with a difficult and challenging task, can using a brand with a strong image related to the task’s domain empower them to perform better? For example, can individuals perform better when engaging in strenuous physical exercise if they wear Under Armour accessories (athletic image) while exercising? Our answer is yes. We propose that using brands with strong images while performing a difficult task can enhance feelings of self-efficacy (beliefs in one’s capabilities; Bandura 1995) in a domain related to the brand’s image, and this heightened sense of self-efficacy can lead to better task performance.

Further, we propose that the self-efficacy effect is not experienced by everyone—it depends on the implicit self-theory held by individuals (Dweck 2000). Individuals who endorse entity theory (“entity theorists”), who view their personal attributes as something they cannot improve through their own direct efforts, will rely on feelings of self-efficacy that using brands can trigger to perform better on difficult tasks. In contrast, individuals who endorse incremental theory (“incremental theorists”), who view their personal qualities as something they can develop through their own direct efforts at self-improvement, will be less reliant on the self-efficacy effect of brands. Thus, we predict that brand use will result in a heightened sense of self-efficacy and better task performance for entity, but not incremental theorists.

We examine these propositions in three studies. In a first study, we examined the effect of using an MIT pen on performance for a challenging GRE test. The MIT brand is strongly associated with the image of “intelligence”, and we expected that using a pen embossed with the MIT name would enhance GRE test performance for entity, but not incremental theorists. Undergraduate students were given 30 minutes to take a GRE test that consisted of 15 difficult and 15 easy math problems. Implicit self-theory was measured prior to the test. As expected, entity theorists who used the MIT pen (vs. regular pen) performed better on the 15 difficult GRE problems, where test takers tend to struggle the most and the beneficial effects of using the MIT pen should be most pronounced. In contrast, the performance of incremental theorists did not vary across pen conditions. Additionally, incremental theorists performed more poorly than entity theorists using the MIT pen. Simply using the MIT pen without having training opportunities to directly improve their intelligence did not enhance performance among incremental theorists.

In a second study, we extended our findings using a different brand (Gatorade) associated with a different brand image (athletic) and a different type of task (strenuous athletic task). Also, we manipulated beliefs in entity versus incremental theory (Chiu, Hong, and Dweck 1997) prior to brand usage. Participants were invited to evaluate a new bottled water from Gatorade (athletic brand) or Ice Mountain (control brand). In the Gatorade condition, participants drank cold tap water in a cup featuring the Gatorade brand name and logo; in the Ice Mountain condition, they drank the same water in a plain cup. They were asked to drink water continuously while exercising with a hand-grip, which had a counter to record the number of times the hand-grip was pressed. This athletic task is initially easy, but gets harder (due to fatigue) as the hand-grip is pressed more times. As expected, participants in the entity theory condition performed better on hand-gripping (higher hand grip count) when drinking Gatorade (vs. Ice Mountain) water. In contrast, those in the incremental theory condition performed similarly regardless of the water they drank. Additionally, their performance was lower than that of entity theorists who drank water from the Gatorade cup.

In a third study, we examined the mechanism underlying increases in task performance for entity theorists observed in the first two studies. Participants read several articles, including one about Gatorade that presented evidence that Gatorade increases athletic performance (high brand effectiveness) or does not increase athletic performance (low brand effectiveness). Next, participants completed the hand-grip task while drinking the tap water in the Gatorade cup. Finally, participants rated the degree of confidence they had about their ability during the hand-grip exercise (self-efficacy measure). If entity theorists (but not incremental theorists) derive a sense of self-efficacy from using brands such as Gatorade, which allows them to perform better on strenuous athletic endeavors, only entity theorists should be affected by the manipulation that Gatorade can (vs. cannot) make you a better athlete. Our results supported this line of reasoning. Entity theorists showed a heightened sense of self-efficacy and performance on the hand-grip task in the high (vs. low) brand effectiveness condition. However, incremental theorists did not show such a difference. More importantly, results from a mediation analysis showed that using Gatorade in the high (vs. low) brand efficacy condition enhanced self-efficacy among entity theorists, which led to better performance on the hand-gripping exercise.

Our findings show, for the first time, that using brands can be beneficial for consumers who find it difficult to believe that they can improve their abilities through their own direct efforts at self-improvement (entity theorists). Using a brand with a strong image empowers entity theorists to perform better on difficult and challenging tasks in a domain related to the brand’s image. Using an MIT pen empowered entity theorists to perform better on difficult GRE questions (study 1) and drinking tap water from a Gatorade cup empowered them to perform better on a physically challenging athletic exercise (study 2 & 3). Brands can activate goals (FitSimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2008), but when tasks are difficult and challenging, simply possessing a goal to perform well may not be sufficient. A cognitive appraisal of personal efficacy is required to increase the level of challenge that individuals are willing to undertake and to encourage them to mobilize effort to perform well (Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons 1992). For people (entity theorists) who need an external cue to enhance appraisals of one’s capabilities, using brands provides the needed boost.

REFERENCES