My Louis Vuitton Bag From Ebay Is Definitely Genuine: Closing the Self-Discrepancy Gap Through Self-Deception With Brands

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This research demonstrates not only that brands associated with the ideal self reduce self-discrepancy, but also that this reduction occurs through a self-deceptive process. As a result, consumers can use counterfeit products of ideal brands to reduce their self-discrepancy by deceiving themselves into believing that the counterfeit product is genuine.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

We all have moments in our lives when we feel far from the ideal person that we would like to be. A student fails an exam. A dieter sneaks a cookie after dinner. An academic researcher receives a rejection letter from a journal. The distance between one’s actual and ideal selves is known as self-discrepancy (Higgins 1987; Higgins et al. 1986). Given that being far from one’s ideal self is an uncomfortable and aversive state, individuals are motivated to reduce such discomfort (see Higgins 1987 for a review).

Brands bolster self-views (Gao et al. 2009) and can correspond to our ideal selves (Reed and Bolton 2005). Yet while there is abundant evidence that actual self-congruency drives brand preference (Birdwell 1968; Dolich 1969; Landon 1974; Malär et al. 2011; Ross 1971), support for ideal self-congruency as a driver of brand preference has been limited. The lack of research into ideal-self congruency as a driver of brand preference is especially surprising given the research on luxury brands (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006; Reed and Bolton 2005; Rucker and Galinsky 2009; Wilcox, Kim, and Sen 2009). Thinking about future successes, feeling powerless, and wanting to gain approval from others all increase consumers’ preferences for luxury brands (Mandel et al. 2006; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Wilcox et al. 2009). To the extent that consumers see power, success, and social acceptance as characteristics of their ideal self, this research suggests that a consumer’s ideal self may drive their preference for luxury brands.

Self-discrepancy may also help explain consumers’ preferences for counterfeit luxury brands. Counterfeits, however, may only reduce self-discrepancy when a consumer can mislead himself into believing that the counterfeit product is genuine via self-deception. Self-deception should reduce self-discrepancy because individuals do not engage in self-deception needlessly or out of ignorance, but rather out of a lack of awareness (Gur and Sackheim 1979). Therefore, consumers who engage in self-deception to feel closer to their ideal selves should actually convince themselves that their behavior is moving them towards their ideal selves and consequently reduce self-discrepancy.

Study 1 focused on a particular “self,” an individual’s American self, and manipulated self-discrepancy through the difficulty of a quiz on American history and government. Participants then evaluated one of three advertisements for a laptop. The advertisement was either for an American brand (ideal), foreign brand (unideal), or was unbranded. In addition to testing whether interacting with the advertisement for the American brand would lower participants’ self-discrepancies, we also measured brand attitude. An ANOVA revealed that those with high self-discrepancy (hard quiz condition) had greater brand attitudes toward an American brand compared to consumers with low self-discrepancy (easy quiz condition). Furthermore, we found that by interacting with an advertisement for the American brand consumers with high self-discrepancy lowered their self-discrepancy. These results only occurred with an American (ideal) brand and did not occur with a foreign (unideal) brand.

Study 2 was similar to study 1 except we also measured participants’ belief in entity versus incremental theories of personality. Individuals who endorse incremental theory believe their personality to be malleable and amenable through their own efforts while entity theorists believe their personal traits are fixed and therefore unsusceptible to improvements through their efforts (Dweck 2000). As such, incremental theorists should be more like to behave in self-deception than entity theorists. If self-deception is at play, then we would expect our results from study 1 to hold for incremental theorists, but not entity theorists. We found an interaction of implicit self-theory with quiz condition predicting brand attitude such that the effect of implicit self-theory was significant and positive in the hard quiz (HSD) condition (b = .26, t(98) = 2.28, p < .03) but not significant in the easy quiz (LSD) condition (b = -.04, t(98) = -.34, p > .73). A spotlight analysis revealed that incremental theorists (+1 SD) reported greater brand attitudes in the hard quiz condition than the easy quiz condition (b = .62, t(98) = 2.00, p < .05). There was no effect of quiz condition among entity theorists (-1 SD; b = -.26, t(98) = -.81, p > .41).

Study 3 examined whether consumers deceive themselves into believing in the authenticity of a likely counterfeit product. We focused on students’ business identities in study 2 and again manipulated self-discrepancy through the difficulty of a quiz. Participants then imagined they had purchased one of four leather business portfolios: a luxury brand portfolio purchased at a premium price ($500) at a store, a luxury brand portfolio purchased at a discount ($50) on eBay, a counterfeit luxury brand portfolio purchased at a discount ($50) on eBay, or an unbranded portfolio ($50). We find that individuals with HSD evaluate a (probable) luxury brand portfolio sold at a discount on eBay just as highly as one purchased in the store, and significantly more than an unbranded, comparably priced, portfolio. When they were told the product is counterfeit, however, they decreased their evaluation of the portfolio. This pattern of results suggests that those who imagined purchasing the Louis Vuitton portfolio on eBay for a discounted price, but were not explicitly told that the good was counterfeit, are self-deceptively convincing themselves that the good is genuine. Furthermore, both the eBay-bought and store-bought portfolios reduced self-discrepancy for participants in the hard quiz condition, while the counterfeit portfolio did not.

This paper examines the effect of self-discrepancy on brand attitudes and counterfeit product evaluations, the self-deceptive process underlying these behaviors, and whether these behaviors help individuals feel closer to their ideal selves. The contributions from this research are threefold. First, the results add to literature on the self-expressive function of brands by highlighting an important individual difference variable (self-discrepancy) that drives preference for brands and charities that express one’s ideal self. Second, we shed light on the self-deceptive process that allows consumers to “lie” to themselves and believe that they are closer to their ideal self. Finally, this research contributes to work on compensatory consumption (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Rucker and Galinsky 2009) showing not only that consumers use brands and counterfeits to reduce their self-discrepancy, but also that these behaviors are effective.

**REFERENCES**


