Putting on a Show Or Showing My True Self? Exploring Consumers’ Desire to Signal Accurate Versus Enhanced Identities

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Previous research has established that consumers buy products in order to self-enhance. In contrast, we show that situationally activated self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motives, lead consumers to prefer products that publically signal something accurate about themselves, even when self-views are negative. Further, we examine fear-of-negative-feedback as a boundary condition.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has shown that consumers use self-enhancing products to compensate for negative self-views, especially in the domain of public consumption (e.g., Berger and Heath 2007; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2006). For instance, Rucker and Galinsky found that powerless individuals are more likely to consume status-related products than those who feel powerful (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that consumers are also concerned with signaling accurate self-view information to others, even when these self-views are negative. For instance, the People of Walmart website features low socioeconomic status individuals who seem to intentionally wear unflattering clothes, hairdos, and makeup.

Our research attempts to reconcile prior findings that consumers acquire and display products to be seen favorably with the notion that consumers sometimes want products that accurately signal how they see themselves. We posit that competing motives of self-verification and self-enhancement drive differing consumption responses. In particular, while self-enhancement theory asserts that people are primarily motivated to be seen favorably (Sedikides 1993), self-verification theory argues that people are motivated to be known and understood by others, even in the domain of negative self-views. Drawing on recent research showing that self-verification versus self-enhancement motives can be situationally activated (Kraus and Chen 2009), we demonstrate that an active self-verification motive leads consumers to prefer public products that accurately reflect an underlying self-view. In contrast, activating a self-enhancement motive dampens this effect, as negative self-view consumers no longer desire accurate identity products.

In study 1, we sought evidence that situational activation of a self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive could influence consumers’ preferences for a negative identity product. We conducted a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement, between) × (appearance-esteem, continuous) design. Based on findings that people are motivated to self-verify (vs. self-enhance) when around socially close (vs. socially distant) others (Kraus and Chen 2009; Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon 1994), we asked participants in the self-verification condition to write about a significant other (e.g. close friend or family member) and participants in the self-enhancement condition to write about a loose acquaintance. Next, in a suppos edly unrelated study, we asked participants to rate their likelihood of purchasing a graphic t-shirt with the tagline “Too Ugly for L.A.”

We found a significant motive × appearance-esteem interaction (b = -0.38, t(245) = -2.02, p = .04). Importantly, when people wrote about a close other, activating a self-verification motive, lower appearance-esteem increased preference for the “ugly” t-shirt (b = -0.28, t(245) = -2.06, p = .04). In contrast, when people wrote about a loose other, activating a self-enhancement motive, this effect was dampened (ns). An additional spotlight contrast showed that low appearance-esteem participants were marginally less likely to purchase the shirt in the self-enhancement condition (vs. self-verification condition (b = .54, t(245) = 1.91, p < .06).

In study 2, we replicated this basic finding, but in a different self-view domain and a different product class. We conducted a 2 (motive) × (chronic power, continuous) design. Participants completed the social distance manipulation from study 1 and indicated their preference between a Lexus (high status) and a Kia (low status) branded car. We found a significant motive × power interaction (b = -4.47, t(339) = -2.61, p < .01). Among participants who wrote about a close other (self-verification condition), lower power increased preference for the Kia over the Lexus (b = -4.55, t(339) = -3.71, p < .001). In contrast, among participants who wrote about a distant other (self-enhancement condition), lower power did not increase preference for the Kia (ns). An additional spotlight contrast showed that this dampening was driven by low power participants decreased preference for the Kia in the self-enhancement condition (b = 23.13, t(339) = 2.92, p < .01).

In study 3, we sought to replicate our prior findings using a different situational activation of motive. We ran a 2 (motive) × (power) design. We asked participants to read a Forbes Magazine article entitled “Should You Be Yourself in a Job Interview?” In the self-verification condition, the article argued that interviewees should share accurate information about themselves during the job interview (“…candidates should do all they can to emphasize their true selves, even if means acknowledging their weaknesses…”). In the self-enhancement condition, the article argued that interviewees should only share highly positive information about themselves during the job interview (“…candidates should do all they can to emphasize the positive aspects of themselves, while downplaying the negatives…”). Afterwards, participants again indicated their preference between Lexus and Kia. The motive × power interaction was significant (b = -4.68, t(352) = -2.00, p < 05). When we activated a self-verification motive, lower power increase preference for Kia over Lexus (b = -4.37, t(352) = -2.79, p < .01). In contrast, when we activated a self-enhancement motive, power did not affect preference (ns). Further, a spotlight contrast showed that low power participants exhibited a decreased preference for Kia in the self-enhancement (vs. self-verification) condition (stats).

In study 4, we sought a boundary condition regarding when situational activation of a self-verification motive (via a social distance manipulation) would not increase preference for product signaling an accurate self-view. We predicted that participants with high (vs. low) fear-of-negative-feedback (Watson and Friend 1969) would be less likely to prefer products that signaled an accurate self-view because negative self-view participants with high fear-of-negative-feedback would exhibit a decreased preference for the Kia (vs. Lexus). We ran a 2 (motive) × (fear of negative evaluation) × (power) design. There was a significant motive × fear of negative evaluation × power interaction (b = 8.02, t(180) = 2.25, p < .03). Consistent with predictions, among participants with a low fear of negative evaluation, when we activated a self-verification motive, the power coefficient was negative and significant, such that lower (vs. higher) power increased points allocated to Kia over Lexus (b = -10.27, t(180) = -3.07, p = .003). Among participants with a high fear of negative evaluation, the effect of a self-verification motive on preference was fully attenuated (b = -3.29, t(180) = -.89, ns).
Introduction

"Dressed like this, in the ugliest clothes I could muster, I set off for the estate where Anne Lisbet lived...[The] filthy, ugly clothes I was wearing, the drooping head, all of this was for her benefit, so that she would understand." (Knausgaard 2009)

In the above passage, the character who has been feeling sorry for himself for some time, responds to his girlfriend’s apparent obliviousness by wearing the most unattractive clothing he can find. Indeed, it often appears that consumers acquire and display products to accurately signal something about themselves to others, even if that signal is negative. For instance, people who suffer from depression or low self-esteem may accurately signal how they feel about themselves by wearing clothes and listening to music associated with negative subcultural identities (Sedgwick 2013). However, it also contradicts the popular notion that consumers primarily purchase products in order to signal positive information about themselves to others (e.g. Berger and Heath 2007; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2006). What accounts for this behavior?

Our research investigates this question by building on the theory of self-verification (Swann 1983). According to self-verification theory, people seek to be known and understood by others in a manner that is consistent with their self-views, even when these views are negative. We demonstrate that situational activation of a self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive lead consumers to prefer public consumption that signals accurate (vs. enhanced) self-view information to others.

We make several contributions to the literature. First, we provide a more nuanced understanding of consumer signaling behavior by focusing on a counterintuitive implication of self-verification theory: that consumers sometimes want to publically signal accurate, and even negative self-views, rather than only positive self-views. Furthermore, we contribute to the self-verification literature itself. While studies in this area have largely focused on how self-verification motives drive feedback preferences and partner selection behavior (Swann, Rentfrow, and Guinn 2003), little research to date has explored whether these motives influence how people signal information about themselves to others, for example through their consumption choices. Finally, we demonstrate two boundary conditions of self-verification by showing that the effects of these motives disappear when consumers consider using a product privately (vs. publicly), as well as when consumers have a high (vs. low) fear of negative social evaluation.

Competing Motives: Self-Enhancement Versus Self-Verification

According to self-enhancement theory, people strive to create to maintain a positive self-view (Sedikides 1993). The motive to self-enhance often leads people to misrepresent their actual traits and abilities. For example, people tend to have exaggerated perceptions of their control over outcomes (Taylor and Brown 1988). Based on the plethora of evidence that people want to achieve a positive self-image, several scholars have argued that self-enhancement is a universal human motivation (e.g. Taylor and Brown 1988; Sedikides 1993). Self-enhancement motives can increase consumer preferences for products that signal highly positive information about the self (Belk 1988; Berger and Health 2007; 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005). For instance, people engage in conspicuous consumption of luxury products in order to signal social status and power (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; 2009; Veblen 1899), attract mates and deter rivals (Griskevicius et al. 2007), and maintain or enhance self-esteem (Sivanathan and Pettit 2010). Not only do self-enhancement motives lead consumers to choose products that signal positive information about themselves, they also lead them to avoid products associated with negative or undesirable information. For instance, men eschew products that signal feminine traits (White and Dahl 2006). Consumers also strive to use products that signal unique and differentiated social identities in order to avoid being seen as “conformists” (Berger and Heath 2007).

In contrast, proponents of self-verification theory (Swann 1983) have argued that people are not singularly motivated by self-enhancement motives. Instead, people also have a fundamental desire to be known and understood by others, even in domains of self-perceived flaws and shortcomings. For instance, people prefer interaction partners who give them accurate, as opposed to overly favorable, evaluations of their skills and abilities in several domains (e.g. physical attractiveness, intelligence, and athletic ability), even when these self-views are negative (Hixon and Swann 1993; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 1992; Swann, Pelham, and Krull 1989; Swann et al. 1990; Swann et al. 1992). Furthermore, people who view themselves negatively prefer feedback that validates negative feelings, as opposed to feedback that positively reframes what they are experiencing (Marigold et al. 2014).

Previous research exploring why people sometimes prioritize self-verification over self-enhancement lends insight into how this motive can affect consumer signaling behavior. People self-verify because receiving social confirmation of a self-view provides them with a sense of coherence about their world and themselves (Swann et al. 2003). Even negative self-views may serve as important sources of self-knowledge that must be maintained, not enhanced. Based on this notion, using products that signal accurate self-view information should be a particularly effective method for maintaining self-coherence, as these products provide consumers with an increased sense of assurance that others see them in the same way that they see themselves, without having to explicitly engage in social interactions or elicit direct interpersonal feedback (Oyserman 2009). Based on these ideas, we propose that the situational activation of a self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive will cause consumers to prefer products that signal accurate (vs. enhanced) self-view information, even when these views are negative.

For comparison purposes we consider the relevant baseline condition to be one where consumers have a self-enhancement motive (Baumeister 1989; Kraus and Chen 2009; Sedikides 1993), as prior research has found that people are more practiced at making positive social impressions (Farrow et al. 2015; Swann et al. 1990). We expect that among consumers with an active self-enhancement motive, underlying self-views will not influence product preferences, because all individuals in these conditions will be more concerned with acquiring a product that signals positive (vs. accurate) information about themselves.

Hypothesis 1: There will be an interactive effect of self-view and motive on product preference. Consumers with a self-verification motive will prefer products that are consistent with their self-view, such that consumers with a more negative self-view will exhibit higher evaluations and preference for products that signal negative (vs. positive) information. Among participants with an active self-enhancement motive, no such relationship will exist.
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Of note, we do not predict a pattern that is entirely consistent with compensatory self-enhancement, which occurs when individuals with a negative self-view are more motivated to self-enhance than individuals with a positive self-view (see Mandel et al. forthcoming for a review). In the current research, we investigate how self-verification versus self-enhancement motives influence consumption responses to chronic self-views, which are stable views developed over an individual’s lifetime (Ehrlinger and Dunning 2003). As a result, in our studies, participants do not experience the type of self-threat that creates a temporary self-discrepancy, which can in turn lead to compensatory consumption.

Fear-of-Negative-Evaluation as a Boundary Condition

How might this signaling behavior change among consumers who are averse to negative social evaluations? Individuals with high social anxiety are particularly sensitive to the social evaluations of others (Clark and Wells 1995; Rapee and Heimberg 1997). As a result, socially anxious individuals tend to exaggerate the importance of even mildly negative social feedback (Stopa and Clark 2001), leading them to try to avoid negative social evaluations (Wells 1995). Drawing on these findings, we predict that a fear of negative social evaluation will dampen the effect of a self-verification motive on the product preference. More specifically, among consumers with a higher fear of negative social evaluation, we expect that fear to outweigh any concerns for self-verification, leading those with both positive and negative self-views to prefer products that signal enhanced self-view information. In contrast, we expect to replicate our effect of self-verification motives predicted in H1 among individuals with low fear of negative social evaluation.

Hypothesis 2: Among consumers with low fear of negative evaluation, activating a self-verification motive will lead consumers to prefer products that are consistent with their self-view. Among consumers with a high fear of negative evaluation, activating a self-verification motive will not lead consumers to prefer products that are consistent with a self-view.

We tested our hypotheses across four studies. In studies 1 – 3, we examined whether different situational activations of a self-verification motive led consumers with negative self-views to prefer products that signaled accurate information about themselves. In study 4, we explored a fear-of-negative evaluation as a boundary condition of this effect.

Study 1 – This was a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. self-enhancement, between) × (appearance-esteem, continuous) design. Participants completed a 6-item appearance-esteem scale (Heatherton and Polivy 1991). Next, based on past research finding that people are motivated to self-verify among socially close (vs. socially distant) others (Swann et al. 1994), we situationally activated a self-verification motive by asking participants to write 3-4 sentences about a socially other: “Please write 3-4 sentences about a person whom you have known for a long time...” In the self-enhancement condition, participants wrote about a loose acquaintance: “Please write 3-4 sentences about a person whom you have not known for a long time and do not currently know well...” Afterwards, we gave participants a supposedly unrelated study asking them to evaluate a graphic t-shirt. We asked participants to rate their likelihood of purchasing a t-shirt with the tagline “Too Ugly for L.A.” written on the front. We found a significant motive × appearance-esteem interaction (b = -.38, t(245) = -2.02, p = .04) (see figure 1). Importantly, when people wrote about a close other, activating a self-verification motive, lower appearance-esteem increased preference for the “ugly” t-shirt (b = -.28, t(245) = -2.06, p = .04). In contrast, when people wrote about a distant other, activating a self-enhancement motive, this effect was dampened (ns). An additional spotlight contrast showed that low appearance-esteem participants were less likely to purchase the shirt in the self-enhancement (vs. self-verification) condition (b = .54, t(245) = 1.91, p < .06).

Study 2 – This was a 2 (motive, between) × (self-esteem, continuous) design. Participants completed an 10-item scale of self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965). Next, we asked participants to write about a socially close (vs. distant) other, similar to study 1. Afterwards, participants completed a supposedly unrelated study where they viewed an advertisement featuring a picture of a Kia (low status) and a Lexus (high status) brand car (Mandel et al. 2006). Afterwards, we asked participants to indicate their preference by allocating a total of 100 points between the two cars, with a higher number indicating a stronger preference for the Kia. The motive × self-esteem interaction coefficient was significant (b = -4.47, t(339) = -2.61, p < .01). When participants wrote about a close other, activating a self-verification motive, lower power increased preference for the Kia over the Lexus (b = -4.55, t(339) = -3.71, p < .001). In contrast, when participants wrote about a distant other, activating a self-enhancement motive, lower power did not increase preference for the Kia (ns). An additional spotlight contrast showed that low power participants had a decreased preference for the Kia in the self-enhancement (vs. self-verification) condition (b = 23.13, t(339) = 2.92, p < .01).

Study 3 – We ran a 2 (motive, between) × (power, continuous) design. Participants completed the 8-item scale of chronic power. Next, we activated motive using a different situational manipulation. Specifically, we asked participants to read a Forbes Magazine article entitled “Should You Be Yourself in a Job Interview?” In the self-verification condition, the article argued that interviewees should share accurate information about themselves during the job interview (“…candidates should do all they can to emphasize their true selves, even if means acknowledging their weaknesses...”). In the self-enhancement condition, the article argued that interviewees should only share highly positive information about themselves during the job interview (“…candidates should do all they can to emphasize the positive aspects of themselves, while downplaying the negatives…”). Afterwards, participants allocated 100 points to indicate their preference between Kia and Lexus, similar to study 2. The motive × power interaction coefficient was significant (b = -4.68, t(352) = -2.00, p < .05). When we situationally activated a self-verification motive, the power coefficient was negative and significant, such that lower (vs. higher) power increased the number of points allocated Kia over Lexus (b = -4.37, t(352) = -2.79, p < .01), indicating a desire for the product that accurately signaled participants’ power self-view. In contrast, when we activated a self-enhancement motive, the power did not affect the points allocation (b = .31, t(352) = 1.88, ns).

Study 4 – This study was a 2 (motive: self-verification vs. control) × continuous (fear of negative evaluation) × (power) design meant to test H3. Participants competed the power scale and Watson and Friend’s (1969) Brief Fear-of-Negative-Evaluation Scale. Next, we activated a self-verification motive by asking participants to write about a close other (Kraus and Chen 2009). Participants in the control condition wrote about a neutral topic. We then asked participants to indicate their preference between Kia and Lexus using the point allocation task, similar to study 1. Replicating our previous findings, there was a significant two-way motive × power interaction coefficient (b = -7.18, t(180) = -1.95, p = .05) (H1). More important, and consistent with hypothesis 2, this effect was qualified by a
significant motive × fear of negative evaluation × power interaction ($b = 8.02, t(180) = 2.25, p < .03$). We further examined the motive × power interaction at one standard deviation above and below mean fear of negative evaluation. Consistent with predictions, among participants with a low fear of negative evaluation, when we activated a self-verification motive, the power coefficient was negative and significant, such that lower (vs. higher) power increased points allocated to Kia over Lexus ($b = -10.27, t(180) = -3.07, p = .003$). In contrast, in the control condition power did not affect points allocation ($b = 4.93, t(180) = 1.34, p = .18$). Also consistent with predictions, among participants with a high fear of negative evaluation, the effect of a self-verification motive on preference was fully attenuated, such that power did not affect points allocation ($b = -3.29, t(180) = -0.89, ns$).

In sum, our research offers one possible explanation for reconciling when consumers prefer products that signal something accurate about themselves versus products that signal something favorable. Specifically, we find that situational activation of a self-verification (vs. self-enhancement) motive (such as when people think about a socially close other) can increase preference for products that signal something onciling when consumers prefer products that signal something favorable.

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