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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

The “Shaken Self”: Product Choices As a Means of Restoring Self-View Confidence

Leilei Gao, Stanford University

Christian Wheeler, Stanford University

Baba Shiv, Stanford University

We show that subtle situational factors (e.g. writing with one’s non-dominant hand) can temporarily “shake” one’s self-view confidence, resulting in an increased propensity of choosing self-view bolstering products. This effect, however, is attenuated when individuals have an opportunity to restore their self-view confidence prior to the final choice task.

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Leilei Gao, Stanford University, USA
S. Christian Wheeler, Stanford University, USA
Baba Shiv, Stanford University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consider the following scenario. Pat and Robin, both aspiring marketing academics, are equally confident about their intelligence. Pat and Robin are each asked to write a short essay titled “I am an intelligent person.” Unfortunately, Pat recently suffered a fracture in his dominant hand from an accident during a ski trip. He, therefore, uses his non-dominant hand to write the essay; Robin writes the essay with her dominant hand. Later, Pat and Robin are confronted with a choice between two options—subscriptions to either the *Wall Street Journal* or *Sports Illustrated*. Assuming that the subscriptions cost the same, is it possible that Pat and Robin would display systematic shifts in preferences for the choice options as a consequence of writing their respective essays? For instance, is it possible that Pat, who wrote the essay with his non-dominant hand, would be more likely to choose *Wall Street Journal* over *Sports Illustrated*? Although intuition might suggest that the task of writing the essay with one’s non-dominant (vs. dominant) hand should not affect subsequent choices, the basic thrust of this article is to suggest otherwise. Specifically, a goal of this paper is to examine the effects of the “shaken self,” that is a momentary lapse in self-confidence on subsequent product choices.

Previous research suggests that self-view confidence depends on the availability of stable evidence in support of that self-view, and that a lack of such confidence motivates efforts to restore it either directly (Festinger 1954; Tiedens and Linton 2001) or indirectly (Steele 1988). The purpose of this research is to extend prior work by examining how subtle situational factors can induce lowered confidence in a particular self-view and thereby affect subsequent product choices. Specifically, we posit that seemingly inconsequential actions, such as writing an essay with one’s non-dominant hand, can lower self-confidence and lead to self-bolstering product choices. Thus, in the scenario presented earlier, we posit that Pat, writing with his non-dominant hand, would begin to experience uncertainty regarding his intelligence. As a result, Pat would display a strong propensity to systematically choose products (such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the more “intelligent” of the two options) that would help him restore his confidence in his intelligence.

In developing our conceptualization, we propose that subtle situational factors that reduce self-confidence will instigate processes aimed at restoring the self-concept. We argue that this restoration can occur via multiple means, including more direct methods (e.g., purchasing products to restore the specific shaken self-dimension) and more indirect methods (e.g., affirming an unrelated self-value). Once the self-restoration has occurred, individuals make choices similar to those whose self-concept was never shaken in the first place. We tested these notions across a series of three experiments. In these experiments, we relied on a previously validated handwriting procedure (Briñol & Petty, 2003) to subtly reduce self-confidence (or not) and tested the effects across three self-dimensions (being exciting, intelligent, and health-conscious). We predicted that this subtle manipulation would lead participants to choose products affirming the shaken self-confidence dimension, unless they were first provided with a means of restoring the self-concept.

In the first experiment, we tested the core hypothesis that those who wrote about a self-dimension with their non-dominant hands

would be more likely than dominant hand participants to choose products consistent with that self-dimension. Specifically, participants in this experiment were instructed to write an essay portraying themselves as being exciting. Some participants were assigned to write the essay with their dominant hands; others were assigned to write the essay with their non-dominant hands. Participants then engaged in a purportedly unrelated task choosing between exciting brands (e.g. Apple) and competent brands (e.g. IBM). Results indicated that compared to participants who wrote about their excitingness with their dominant hand, those who wrote with their non-dominant hand were more likely to choose exciting brands in the final choice task.

In the second experiment, we replicated this basic result in a different self-domain (intelligence) and demonstrated the self-view recovery function of product choice. Specifically, participants in this experiment were instructed to write about their intelligence either with their dominant hand or non-dominant hand. The final choice task was between a fountain pen and a pack of candy. As expected, non-dominant hand participants were more likely to choose the fountain pen (vs. candy) as their study reward. However, this effect was attenuated if non-dominant hand participants were given an opportunity to select self-bolstering products (e.g. a bookstore gift certificate) before the final choice task.

In the third experiment, we replicated the core effect in a third domain (health-consciousness) and showed that indirect means of self-bolstering (i.e., self-affirmation) similarly eliminates the effect of the manipulation on choice. We found that compared to participants who wrote about their healthy life habits with their dominant hand, participants who wrote with their non-dominant hand were more likely to choose a healthy snack (an apple) versus a non-healthy snack (M&M’s). This effect, however, was attenuated after participants were given the opportunity to reaffirm a most important value in their life before the final choice task.

The findings from three experiments provide support to the hypotheses that subtle situational factors such as writing about one’s self-views with one’s non-dominant hand can lower self-confidence and increase the propensity to choose self-view bolstering products. Further, these effects on product choices will be attenuated when participants are first provided with the opportunity to bolster the self-concept either directly (through choosing products from sets of self-view bolstering products) or indirectly (through self-affirmation). These results highlight the importance of the self-concept and self-view confidence for product choice and illustrate the role of product choices in maintaining stable self-views. We discuss the implications of our findings and present several directions for future research.

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