Because I'm Worth It (And You're Not): Separating the Effects of Narcissism and Self-Esteem on Prestige Purchases

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Narcissism indicates a chronic tendency toward artificially inflating self-esteem, while true high self-esteem indicates genuine feelings of self-worth. Two studies separate the effects of narcissism and self-esteem, showing that threatened low self-esteem participants mimic narcissists by increasing prestige consumption, while high self-esteem participants prefer value-based purchases regardless of ego-threat condition.

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Extended Abstract

Consumer researchers typically assume that higher self-regard indicates greater benefits to the individual than lower self-regard. High self-regard is associated with ability to resist high calorie treats following mortality salience (Mandel and Smeesters 2008), lower materialism in adolescents (Chaplin and John 2007), and lower proclivity toward compulsive buying (O’Guinn and Faber 1989). However, evidence in the psychology literature suggests that high self-regard is not simply a de facto “good thing:” for example, it has been implicated as a predictor of violence and aggression (Baumeister et al. 1996); perceived invulnerability to health threats, resulting in lower levels of compliance (Lin et al. 2003), and self-protection at the cost of interpersonal relationships (Heatherton and Vohs 2000). Overall, there seem to be two somewhat contradictory patterns of behavior: one suggesting high regard leads to better decision making or more functional behavior, and another pattern suggesting it leads to negative or less functional behavior.

These somewhat contradictory findings may relate to whether self-regard reflects a stable, “true” sense of self, or an attempt to create an overly positive identity by inflating feelings of self-worth. In order to better understand the relationship between self-regard and consumption choices, the current research compares the effects of self-regard in terms of both self-esteem and narcissism under varying conditions of ego-threat. While these measures are typically correlated, the construct of self-esteem is concerned with an individual’s feelings about the self in terms of worthiness, likeableness and acceptance (Kernis 2003), whereas narcissism is concerned more with a chronic tendency to inflate or exaggerate self-regard (Raskin, Novacek, and Hogan 1991).

Galinsky and Rucker (2008) suggest consumption of luxury items serves as a method of regaining equilibrium following ego-threat. Since narcissism involves the goal of protecting fragile self-image from threat, it is proposed that narcissists will tend to use consumption of prestige products to reinforce high self-regard more than non-narcissists. The chronic nature of their self-esteem goals should lead narcissists to prefer prestige items even in the absence of any obvious external ego-threats.

In contrast, self-esteem is thought to function in part to help consumers make better decisions (Baumeister 2002), which might be expected to lead to a preference for value based options rather than items that provide prestige without corresponding performance. Also, since low self-esteem indicates a tendency to experience global changes in feelings of self-worth in response to changing circumstances (Deci and Ryan 1985; Kernis 2003), it is predicted that low esteem individuals will be more reactive to external sources of threat, leading to a greater need to choose prestige products. In contrast, high self-esteem individuals should show greater ego-strength in the face of threat (Steele 1988), and should therefore be in a position to stay focused on making better, value-based decisions (Baumeister et al. 2000). The theoretical contribution of this research is that it helps broaden our understanding of the different ways in which self-regard can relate to consumer choice, as well as identifying a new subset of consumers who are particularly vulnerable to self-esteem or prestige based marketing.

Study 1 tested the relationship between narcissism, self-esteem, and the choice of prestige products. Participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). They were randomly assigned to either an ego-threat condition, where they were provided with unsolvable puzzles and informed that most college students could complete them within 5 minutes and that the results would be displayed publicly; or a non-threat condition with solvable puzzles and no display threat. Under the guise of a separate study, participants were asked for feedback on a new consumer guide that rated products according to whether they provided fair performance at a lower price, superior performance at a reasonable price, or provided prestige to owners. The reviews for the prestige products contained information suggesting that performance was similar to the lower cost items. For the dependent measure, participants were asked which item they would select for purchase in each of 4 product categories. As expected, narcissism predicted a greater number of prestige items chosen ($\beta=.436, p<.001$), and this effect was not moderated by ego-threat. A spotlight analysis on the interaction between threat and self-esteem indicated that low self-esteem participants in the threat condition increased their preference for prestige items ($\beta=.645, p=.05$) while high self-esteem participants were unlikely to choose the prestige products regardless of threat.

For study 2, advertisement based ego-threats were used to examine the more subtle forms of ego-threat that occur in marketing settings. After completing the NPI and RSE, participants received 4 advertisements, which provided either threats to self-image associated with the product (e.g. an ad for The Economist stated “I never read The Economist: 42-year old management trainee”) or non-threatening messages (e.g. “The Economist: Turning Average Joe into Mr. Joe.”) Dependent measures were attitudes to the ads and the products, as well as purchase intentions toward the products. As predicted, narcissism was marginally associated with higher purchase intentions regardless of the condition ($\beta=.176, p=.07$). Spotlight analysis showed an interaction between threat and self-esteem, with low self-esteem participants more likely to express interest in purchasing the products in the threat condition ($\beta=.411, p=.07$). The effects here show that the basic pattern of ego threat replicated when this took the form of threatening advertising messages, although the significance levels of these results were more marginal in strength. We attribute the latter to more subtle forms of threat in marketing versus the achievement related contexts used in study 1.

Both studies showed narcissists were vulnerable to marketing tactics/options that suggested a means for creating a positive self-image. Consumers with low self-esteem were similarly vulnerable following a threat. In contrast, high self-esteem consumers made better choices in the sense that they tended to disregard the highly expensive prestige items, regardless of threat. These findings suggest that some of the mixed conclusions concerning the relation of self-regard to purchase decisions may be explainable in terms of the manner in which this construct is operationalized.
Current ecological and economical upheaval demonstrates the need for individuals to rethink their consumption pattern and its impact on their social, ideological and ecological environment. Public and private initiatives undertaken with this goal have been proven to be of limited success. Therefore, further research on the factors associated with socially responsible behavior is warranted. In the current paper, we investigate the potential role of the individual's self-construal (e.g., Sedikides & Brewer, 2001) on the shaping of ethical consumer behavior (e.g., choosing fair trade and locally produced products, or boycotting firms with poor ethical standards). From a public policy perspective, an interesting aspect of self-construal is that individualism and collectivism represent separate dimensions within the individual (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). In other words, a person possesses both individualistic and collectivistic tendencies to a smaller or larger extent (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). This implies that if, as hypothesized, collective self-construal is associated with socially responsible behavior, such behavior can be promoted by emphasizing or activating the collective self.

Self-construal refers to different ways of defining one's identity. Sedikides and Brewer (2001) distinguish between three types of self-construal: the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self. Defining the self by emphasizing unique traits and independence from others is characteristic for the independent self. The relational and collective self are typically defined in terms of relationships with other individuals and group membership, respectively. At the individual level, multiple tendencies can exist within the same person (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). Recent research has demonstrated that socially conscious consumer behavior, like its ecological counterpart, appears to be an expression of prosocial values, like universalism and benevolence (Pepper, Jackson, & Uzzell, 2009). These are the values that are typically associated with collectivism, as opposed to individualism (Triandis, 1995). For example, people with an interdependent self construal (i.e., relational or collective) emphasize group goals over personal goals (e.g., Utz, 2004). Therefore we expect self-construal to be related to socially responsible consumer behavior. Rather than to merely ascertain this relationship, we are interested in uncovering the process which connects both constructs. Additionally, we intend to test whether it is possible to temporarily alter one’s dominant self-construal through a priming procedure and thus influence the likelihood of engaging in socially responsible consumption.

Using data from a large scale survey we verified the relation between self-construal and the tendency to engage in socially responsible consumer behavior. A representative sample of 754 US citizens completed a number of measures related to self-construal (Selenta & Lord, 2005), socially responsible consumer behavior (Vitell & Muncy, 2005; Webb, Mohr, & Harris, 2008), and Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE; Roberts, 1996), among others.

As expected, we found a strong relationship between relational and collective self-construal on the one hand and ethical consumption on the other. The more the individual describes him/herself in interdependent terms, the more s/he is inclined to make ethical consumer decisions. Relations between ethical consumption and the independent self were smaller or non-significant. More interestingly, we found that PCE mediated the relationship between self-construal and ethical consumption using a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We used this method because it offers a number of advantages compared to other procedures based on multiple regressions (e.g., Baron and Kenny’s procedure). Bootstrapping allows for examining all hypotheses in one statistical model, it does not rely on the assumption of normal distribution, and it provides a direct evaluation of the size and significance of the indirect effect. The analysis

### References


