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THE IMPACT OF SELF-CONSTRUAL PRIMING ON BRAND ASSOCIATIONS

Abstract: This research shows that self-construal priming influences the type of brand associations recalled from memory. In one experiment, participants who were primed with interdependent self-construal thought more about concrete brand associations (i.e. branded products) while participants who were primed with independent self-construal recalled more abstract brand associations (i.e. descriptive or evaluative brand associations). These results indicate that self-construal influences the accessibility of brand associations in consumers' memory.

Keywords: self-construal priming; brand associations; brand image; culture.

Introduction and objectives

Self-construal refers to how one views oneself in relation to others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Markus and Kitayama (1991) identified two types of self-construal: independent and interdependent. Independents (i.e. individuals with independent self-construal) tend to view the self as stable and separate from social context and situational constraints. They base their identity on personal characteristics, dispositions and traits (e.g. I am intelligent) (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). In contrast, interdependents (i.e. individuals with interdependent self-construal) tend to see the self as flexible and fundamentally linked to the social context. They base their identity on social roles and relationships (e.g. I am a mother of two) (Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee, 1999). The chronic level of accessibility of independent and interdependent self-construals tends to be influenced by culture (Aaker and Maheswaran, 1997; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett et al., 2001). The independent self-construal seems to be typical of individualistic cultures while the interdependent self-construal is dominant in collectivist cultures (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). However, both views of the self can coexist in any individual and in any culture, available to be activated at any time by priming techniques (e.g. Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto, 1991). These two distinct ways of defining oneself in relation to others impact a wide range of cognitive processes such as decision making (Mandel, 2003), brand categorization (Jain, Desai, and Mao, 2007) and advertising persuasion (Agrawal and Maheswaran, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to extend previous research on the impact of self-construal on cognition by examining its effect on the type of brand associations recalled from memory and by using experimentation through a priming technique.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Brand association is anything that is linked in memory to the brand node and contains the meaning of the brand for consumers (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). Brand association plays an important role in consumers' evaluation and categorization of brands (Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994; Sujan, 1985) and is one of the determinants of brand equity (Jayswal and Vora, 2019; Keller, 1993). In the marketing literature, several typologies of brand associations have been proposed (Aaker, 1991; Farquhar and Herr, 1993; Keller, 1993; Korchia, 2001). One way to classify them is by their level of abstraction, that is, how much information is summarized or subsumed in the association (Keller, 1993). For example, Ng and Houston (2006) distinguish "global beliefs" associations from "exemplar" associations. Global beliefs are general descriptive or evaluative thoughts related to the brand name (e.g. Apple is trendy). In contrast, exemplars are thoughts about specific products or subcategories (e.g. iPhone, smartphones). Global beliefs are relatively abstract and context-independent and are derived from experiences with the product, marketing communication or word-of-mouth. Thus, to form this type of associations, the consumer must gather information from several purchasing contexts. In contrast, exemplars are more concrete because they include more detailed information about a specific brand product, such as the usage situation or the place of purchase.

These two types of brand associations might not be equally accessible to independents and interdependents. Several studies suggest that developing and maintaining independent self-construal involves a different style of cognitive processing than developing and maintaining interdependent self-construal (Choi, Nisbett, and Norenzayan, 1999; Masuda and Nisbett, 2001; Nisbett et al., 2001). Specifically, interdependents tend to have a holistic mode

of thinking while independents tend to have an analytic mode of thinking. Holistic thinking involves considering the context of objects, analyzing the relationships between objects and their context, and explaining and predicting events based on those relationships. In contrast, analytic thinking involves detaching objects from their context, focusing on their attributes, assigning them to categories, and using category rules to explain and predict the behavior of objects (Nisbett et al., 2001). Thus, holistic thinkers are more sensitive to external contextual factors as determinants of behavior while analytic thinkers ignore context and focus on the object or event itself (Choi, Nisbett, and Norenzayan, 1999). Furthermore, in analytic thinking, the process of decontextualizing an event or object leads to the storing in memory of more context-free and more abstract beliefs about the object or event. On the other hand, in holistic thinking, the process of thinking about an object or an event by referring to a specific context leads to memorizing more concrete and context-related examples (Cousins, 1989).

Ng and Houston (2006) argue that since independents rely on abstract information, such as traits and attributes, not on context, to describe themselves and understand others, they should exhibit parallel behavior toward other social phenomena such as brands. Thus, global belief-type brand associations, which are abstract, should be relatively more accessible in their memory than exemplar-type brand associations, which are concrete. On the other hand, to the extent that interdependents focus more on concrete information such as context to make judgments about themselves and others or events, they should, when thinking about a brand, recall concrete exemplar brand associations from their memory more easily. We propose to test the following hypotheses using a priming technique to temporarily activate independent and interdependent self-construals.

H1a: When prompted with a brand name, interdependents will retrieve more exemplars of the brand than independents.
H1b: When prompted with a brand name, independents will retrieve more global beliefs about the brand than interdependents.

Study

Sample. 205 undergraduate and graduate students from a French university participated in the study (45% female, 54% male). 103 students were assigned to the independent priming and 102 students to the interdependent priming.

Self-construal priming. Participants completed « the word-search task ». Several studies have validated this experiment to activate the independent or interdependent self (e.g. Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee, 1999; Krishna, Zhou, and Zhang 2008; Oyserman and Lee, 2008). It involves reading a paragraph that describes a visit to the city and circling all the pronouns found within the paragraph. The independent and interdependent versions of the exercise have identical descriptions of the city and differ only in the pronouns used (see Appendix A). In the independent prime condition, all pronouns are singular (e.g. I, my, me). In the interdependent prime condition, all pronouns are plural (e.g. we, our, us). After the priming manipulation, participants were asked to indicate on two separate 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a lot*) the extent to which reading the paragraph made them think about themselves and about their friends and family.

Brand Concept Map (BCM). After completing the self-construal priming task, participants were asked to draw a brand concept map of Apple. This technique, developed by

Roedder et al. (2006), is used to elicit individuals' knowledge about specific concepts and how these concepts relate to each other. The brand concept map is a graphic representation that not only identifies the type of brand association (i.e. exemplars or global beliefs) but also reveals those that are directly related to the brand (i.e. first-order associations) and those that are indirectly related (i.e. second-order associations) (Appendix B). A pretest showed that participants spontaneously associated with Apple as many exemplar-type associations as global belief-type associations. That rules out the possibility that different numbers of exemplars and global beliefs may influence brand representation.

Analyses and results

To check the validity of the self-construal priming, a 2 (priming: independent vs. interdependent) x 2 (thought type: self vs. other) mixed ANOVA was conducted with self-construal as a between-subjects factor and thought type as a repeated measure. The analysis revealed a significant interaction between self-construal and thought type ($F(1, 203) = 299.38$, $p < 0.01$). Participants primed with an independent self-construal thought more about themselves (M = 4.53, $F(203) = 4.40$, $p < 0.05$) than those primed with an interdependent self-construal did (M = 3.69). In contrast, participants primed with an interdependent self-construal thought more about their friends and family (M = 5.27, $F(203) = - 14.40$, $p < 0.05$) than those primed with an independent self-construal did (M = 3.03). These results confirm the effectiveness of the self-construal priming.

Brand associations' accessibility was determined by their frequency (i.e. the number of associations mentioned) as well as their importance (i.e. the number of associations linked directly or indirectly to the brand). Thoughts were coded into either exemplars or global beliefs of Apple. Thoughts referring to specific products of the brand were coded as exemplars (e.g. iPad or Apple smartphones) while general descriptions (e.g. design, expensive) were coded as global beliefs.

The Manova results for the brand concept task showed a significant priming effect ($F(2, 202) = 26.07$; $p < 0.01$). Independents linked significantly more global beliefs to Apple (M = 5.38) than did interdependents (M = 3.66, $F(1, 203) = 48.40$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, interdependents linked significantly more exemplars to Apple (M = 4.41) than did independents (M = 3.15, $F(2, 202) = 26.66$, $p < 0.01$). These results confirm hypotheses H1a and H1b. Moreover, there was a significant difference in the type of associations linked directly to Apple ($F(2, 202) = 50.45$, $p < 0.01$). Independents linked significantly more global beliefs directly to the brand (M = 3.59) than did interdependents (M = 1.93, $F(1, 203) = 101.26$, $p < 0.01$) while interdependents linked significantly more exemplars direclty to Apple (M = 3.08) than did independents (M = 1.84, $F(1, 203) = 47.57$, $p < 0.01$). However, there was no significant difference in the type of associations linked indirectly to the brand ($F(2, 202) = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$). this means that independents and interdependents have both types of associations (i.e. global beliefs and exemplars) and that the difference lies mainly in their accessibility. Global beliefs are more accessible to independents because they are directly linked to the brand in their memory, whereas exemplars are more accessible to interdependents for the same reason.

Discussion

This research argues that the nature of self-construal affects the way consumers perceive, understand, and organize information about brands. More specifically, the abstract versus concrete nature of brand information influences its accessibility in consumers' minds. Thus, general descriptive or evaluative brand associations are more accessible to independents

whereas brand associations referring to specific products of the brand are more accessible to interdependents. These results are consistent with a body of research suggesting that independents are more likely to adopt a de-contextualized and analytical mode of thinking and process stimuli as if unaffected by a given context. On the other hand, interdependents are more likely to adopt a contextualized and holistic mode of thinking and process information about stimuli more by taking their context into account (Church et al., 2003; Cousins, 1989; Kühnen, Hannover and Schubert, 2001; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Masuda and Nisbett, 2001). For example, to describe a behavior, interdependents will tend to link it to one or more specific situations (e.g. they always give up their place on the bus to the elderly) while independents will tend to abstract the characteristics of the behavior from these situations (e.g. they are respectful towards the elderly).

Managerial contributions

From a managerial perspective, this study can help professionals on two levels. First, companies concerned with developing their marketing offerings in international markets could tailor their branding efforts to culture by capitalizing on the right type of association in their communication. For example, in individualistic cultures where consumers are more independent and for which brand-level associations are more accessible, marketing communication would have to be more at brand level to be effective. Thus, advertisements that seek to influence overall brand beliefs (e.g. Dove's advertisements that encourage women to accept their bodies and stop self-deprecating) should be viewed favorably by independents. In contrast, in collectivist cultures where consumers more readily recall exemplar-type associations from memory, ads that focus on beliefs about the brand's products should be more effective.

Another implication concerns brand extension. Aaker and Keller (1990) argue that the notion of fit (i.e. consistency) is central to the evaluation of a brand extension. The fit of an extension describes the extent to which the consumer accepts the product as logical in relation to the parent brand and expects to see the product under that brand (Tauber, 1988). Mao and Krishnan (2006) distinguish two dimensions of fit: brand prototype fit (i.e. consistency with the beliefs associated with the brand) and brand exemplar fit (i.e. consistency with the brand's existing products). Drawing from this paper findings on the impact of self-construal on brand associations' accessibility, one would expect that independents, for whom the brand prototype is more accessible than exemplars, should evaluate a prototype-based extension more favorably. Interdependents, in contrast, have easier access to exemplars of a brand and therefore should evaluate an exemplar-based extension more favorably.

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Appendix A: the word-search task

Independent condition:

Please read the paragraph in this page carefully and *circle* all the PRONOUNS found within the paragraph. The pronoun may be singular (e.g. he, she, me, I, you, mine, yours, etc.) or plural (e.g. we, they, our, their, us etc).

I go to the city often. My anticipation fills me as I see the skyscrapers come into view. I allow myself to explore every corner, never letting an attraction escape me. My voice fills the air and street. I see all the sights, I window shop, and everywhere I go I see my reflection looking back at me in the glass of a hundred windows. At nightfall I linger, my time in the city almost over. When finally I must leave, I do so knowing that I will soon return. The city belongs to me.


Interdependent condition:

Please read the paragraph in this page carefully and *circle* all the PRONOUNS found within the paragraph. The pronoun may be singular (e.g. he, she, me, I, you, mine, yours, etc.) or plural (e.g. we, they, our, their, us etc).

We go to the city often. Our anticipation fills us as we see the skyscrapers come into view. We allow ourselves to explore every corner, never letting an attraction escape us. Our voices fill the air and street. We see all the sights, we window shop, and everywhere we go we see our reflections looking back at us in the glass of a hundred windows. At nightfall we linger, our time in the city almost over. When finally we must leave, we do so knowing that we will soon return. The city belongs to us.

Appendix B: the brand concept map task for Apple

We want you to construct an image of how you view Apple. To do this, you may use any products and attributes qualities that you deem best describe the brand Apple. To illustrate what we mean, we have constructed 2 sample images of how people may view Bic below. Remember these are just sample images.
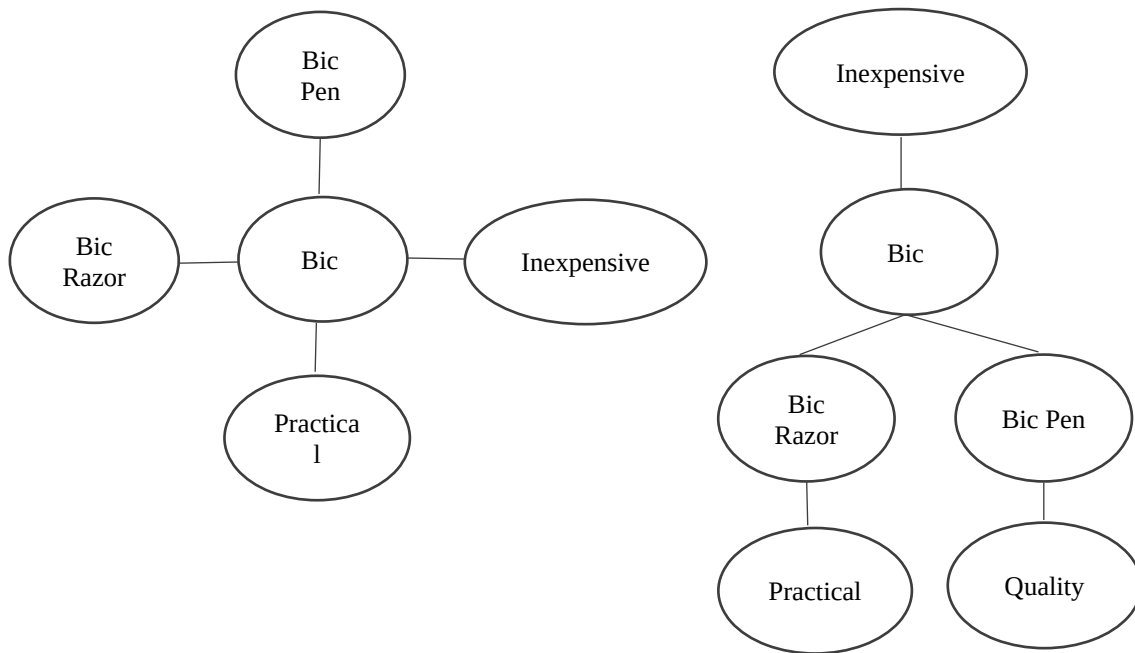
From the diagrams above, you can see that you can draw the images any way you want. The products and attributes can be connected in any fashion you deem appropriate and the same product or attributes may be used more than once.