

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTUAL/IDEAL SOCIAL SELF-CONCEPTS AND BRAND PREFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between self-/brand concept congruence and brand preference. Factors considered include actual self-concept, ideal social self-concept, and need for cognition. The results indicate that people prefer brands whose concepts match their self-concepts, either using actual or ideal social self-concept. Ideal social self-concept will be more related to brand preference when the product is conspicuous. Moreover, the relationship between self-concept and brand preference is stronger for consumers high than low in need for cognition.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Self-concept plays an important role in influencing consumer behaviors. Researchers who used a single self-construct focused on actual self-concept - an individual's view of who he/she is [15]. The simplest multiple self-construct perspective treats self-concept as having two components—the actual and ideal self-concept, the latter refers to the way a person wants to be or would like to see himself [12]. Sirgy [13] proposed a more complex multiple self-construct perspective with four components: actual, ideal, social, and ideal social self-concept. Of them, ideal social self-concept is defined as the perception of one's image as the person would like others to have of him/her [9]. Symbolic use of brand is possible [1]. People are motivated toward enhancing their self-concepts through the symbolic value of consuming goods [9]. The concept congruity model suggests that a person will select a brand whose image is close to his/her self-image [8]. The greater the congruence, the more preferable the brand [5] [3] [6]. To elaborate on this idea, we want to test:

H1a: The consumer prefers a brand perceived by him/her to be more rather than less congruent to his/her own actual self-concept.

H1b: The consumer prefers a brand perceived by him/her to be more rather than less congruent to his/her own ideal-social self-concept.

Dolich [5] argued that purchases of some products were influenced more by the real self, and others more by the ideal self. Ross [12] also sought to distinguish the roles of actual and ideal self-concept. He hypothesized that ideal self-image was more related to brand preference when the product was more conspicuous. When a person purchases a conspicuous product, we think s/he tends to form brand preference in terms of the kind of person s/he would like to be seen by others. Hence, ideal social self-concept should be more related to brand preference than actual self-concept.

H2: Ideal social self-concept is more closely related to brand preference than actual self-concept is when the product is conspicuous.

Personality can have a moderating effect on the relationship between self-/brand concept congruity and brand preference. Need for cognition, defined as the tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy thinking [4], is such a personality. Belch [2] indicated that people who had the opportunity to explore and became aware of their self-concept relied on the self-image as a guide to their purchase intentions. As a result, we infer that the congruence of self-/brand concept will be more closely related to brand preference for those high in need for cognition.

H3: Self-/brand concept congruence is more closely related to brand preference for high in need for cognition than for low in need for cognition consumers.

METHOD

Passenger car and five brands in Taiwan were chosen as the testing targets. The product possesses strong symbolic association and its usage is highly conspicuous. The brands chosen are similar in size and price. In order to measure both self-concept and brand concept, two scales proposed by Malhotra [10] and Ross [12] were combined into an initial pool of 22 concept items. Delphi method was adopted to reduce the number of items to eleven.

Considering the relative importance of each concept item, a weighted simple-difference model suggested by Hughes and Naert [7] was used to calculate the self-/brand concept congruence score. Need for cognition was measured by an inventory developed by Petty and Cacioppo [11]. This study divided all the subjects into high and low groups using the median as the cut-off.

Totally 350 questionnaires were sent out and 156 (45%) were received. After choosing their most and least preferred brands out of the five brands provided, respondents rated the preference level for the two brands. They evaluated the brand concept as well as their actual and ideal social self-concept using the self-/brand concept scale we developed. Then, the importance rating for each concept item, the level of need for cognition, and demographic information was asked.

ANALYTICAL RESULTS

Congruence score between the actual self-concept and brand concept was calculated for respondent's most preferred and least preferred brand. Discrepancy between the two congruence scores was examined by t test. The same computation was done using ideal social self-concept. The results show that the two discrepancies differ significantly ($t_{Actual}=-6.06$ $p<0.01$, $t_{Ideal}=-7.82$ $p<0.01$). The congruence score for the most preferred brand is smaller than that of the least preferred brand, no matter the actual or ideal social self-concept was used. H1a and H1b are supported.

For H2, both actual self-/brand concept congruence (AB) and ideal social self-/brand concept congruence (IB) are significantly related to brand preference ($F_{AB}=52.36$ $p<0.01$; $F_{IB}=62.51$ $p<0.01$), while the coefficient of determination for the latter is greater than that for the former ($0.1678>0.1445$). The results support H2 and also provide evidence of H1a and H1b.

Two multiple regression models were run for people with high and low need for cognition groups. Both regression models are significant when AB and IB are used to predict brand preference ($F_{High}=25.28$ $p<0.01$; $F_{Low}=8.79$ $p<0.01$). Yet the group with high need for cognition has larger adjusted

R-sq than the other (0.24 vs. 0.09). H3 is confirmed.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Our results show that consumers prefer brands which are similar to their self-concept. Brand concept should be clearly established and conveyed to the target market. It also needs to match target consumers' self-concepts. Marketers should pay more attention to ideal social self-concept when a product is highly visible when consumed. People high in need for cognition will have a propensity to engage in effortful cognitive activities, so mismatch of their self concepts with the brand concept will be alerted to them more easily, which may lower their chance of purchasing that specific brand. Although the relationship between self-concept and brand preference has been discussed in the literature, this study goes one step further to verify that the ideal social self is more effective than the actual self in predicting brand preference. Furthermore, the comparison between high and low need for cognition groups confirm the moderating role of need for cognition.

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