Effects of Activated Self-Concepts on Advertisement and Brand Attitudes

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ABSTRACT. Consumers often choose to purchase a brand based on its associations with perceived reference groups. The brand imbued with a personality then helps consumers create or maintain various types of self-concepts. Escalas and Bettman (2003) have found that people who tend to self-enhance prefer brands that are associated with aspirational groups while people who tend to self-verify prefer brands that are associated with membership groups. Extending upon their findings, the present study investigates how priming self-enhancement goals or self-verification goals influences consumers’ attitudes toward brands and advertisements that are associated with either membership groups or aspirational groups. The results demonstrate that while priming does not have a direct correlation with ad and brand attitudes, the combination of priming and preexisting self-motivation tendencies significantly influence brand and ad preferences. Participants who agreed with the self-enhancement statement had more positive attitudes for the brand and the advertisement associated with aspirational groups, and participants who agreed with the self-verification statement had more positive attitudes for the brand and the advertisement associated with membership groups. In addition, the degree to which participants identified or wished to identify with the reference groups was positively correlated to their ad and brand attitudes. The findings’ marketing and self-concept implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, consumer research has paid increasing attention to the psychological benefits that people seek in brands (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Belk, 1998; Chan, Berger, & Boven, 2012; Englis & Solomon, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Gasana, 2009; Landon, 1974; White & Dahl, 2006). Marketers have realized that tapping into consumers’ self-goals or needs is a key instrument in building a connection between brands and consumers and eventually turning it into brand loyalty (Keller, 1993). Not surprisingly, a considerable number of studies have been published on the relationship between the self-concept and brand usage in consumer behavior, illustrating that consumers use brands to construct or maintain their self-concepts (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Graeff, 1996; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Reed, 2002).

One important aspect of this process derives from brands’ associations with reference groups (Childers & Rao, 1992; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Reference groups not only imbue brands with certain types of personality but also influence consumers’ preferences and evaluations. Consumers use reference groups to judge whether there is a fit between their self-concepts and the brand’s personality and make purchase decisions accordingly. If the self-concept of the consumer and the brand personality are congruent, a self-brand connection is formed and results in a brand preference. Because a self-brand connection is not easily changeable and can turn into brand loyalty, investigating the relationship between the self-concept and brand preferences can have significant marketing implications. This thesis contributes to the literature by examining self-enhancement and self-verification, which are aspects of self-goals, and their effects on consumers’ attitudes toward brands that are associated with various reference groups.

The Self-Concept

The self-concept is denoted as “the sum of an individual’s thoughts and feelings about herself or himself with respect to others” (Choi & Rifon, 2012, p. 640). There has been much debate in the self-concept literature about whether the self-concept is fixed or flexible, but studies
have suggested that self-concepts are dynamic and malleable (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Those who argue that the self-concept is dynamic state that the self-concept comprises a set of various self-conceptions that becomes salient depending on social and contextual factors (Aaker, 1999; Markus & Kunda, 1986). For example, the self that is salient during a meeting with a professor may be composed, intellectual, and polite while the self that is salient during a road trip with friends may be adventurous, spontaneous, and goofy. Following this idea, the theory of the working self-concept proposes that while people have stable self-concepts that are present throughout, situational factors significantly influence which particular aspect of the self-conceptions becomes accessible (Aaker & Lee, 2001). In other words, the self that an individual carries at any given moment consists of a set of core and tentative self-conceptions that become active in memory based on social circumstances.

The malleability of the self-concept implies that the self that is salient when forming a self-brand connection can be influenced by situational cues. Previous studies have found that it is possible to make an advertisement more effective or a brand more likable by presenting cues that will elicit a certain type of self in consumers (Chang, 2010; Yi, 1990). In this paper, I use this concept to explore how activated self-concepts can affect people’s attitudes towards various advertisements and brands. Various types of the self such as the actual self, the ideal self, and the avoided self affect self-conceptions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This paper focuses on the ideal self and the actual self. The actual self pertains to how an individual perceives him or herself, and the ideal self pertains to how an individual wishes to perceive him or herself (Sirgy, 1982). People who prioritize their actual selves are more likely to look for self-verifying feedback from others to maintain their current self-concepts whereas people who focus on discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self are more likely to look for self-enhancing feedback (Higgins, 1987). The ideal self includes a range of positive selves that are not included in the current self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Ironically, the range of ideal selves is constrained and usually derives from types that are visible in the media and individual’s social background and experiences (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This notion has important implications for marketers and suggests that they can utilize appropriate cues to make certain types of possible selves accessible.

Some researchers in the past have attempted to distinguish the relationship between the actual self or the ideal self and brand connections (Landon, 1974; Mehta, 1999). For example, Landon (1974) examined how the actual self and the ideal self affect consumers’ purchase intent and tried to determine whether one type of self has a greater influence than the other. He found significant individual differences in the correlations between the type of self-concept and purchase intent and concluded that there is no dominant type of self that affects purchase decisions more than the other. One of the study’s limitations is that it used product categories rather than real brands to correlate them to actual or ideal self. It is unclear how strong of a personality a generic product could have had compared to a brand which is commonly imbued with a distinct personality. The present study overcomes this limitation by using a brand as a stimulus rather than focusing on a product category.

Nevertheless, Landon (1974) provided important concepts in terms of possible moderating factors. He conjectured that individuals who follow “the actualization school” would show a higher correlation between the actual self-image and purchase intention because they strive to preserve their actual self-concepts. On the other hand, those who follow “the perfection school” would show a higher correlation between the ideal self-image and purchase intention because they would want to present themselves most positively by purchasing the product. Consumer psychology has developed considerably since then, and his conjecture has been confirmed true (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Here I interpret “the actualization school” as self-verification and “the perfection school” as self-enhancement.

Individuals rely heavily on social approval in maintaining their self-concepts, indicating that this effort will also transfer to their consumer behavior (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Reed, 2002; Westen, 1992). Indeed, researchers found that various aspects of self-conceptions including interdependence (Chang, 2010) and public self-consciousness (Miller & Cox, 1982) have significant impacts on consumer behavior.

**Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification**

Self-enhancement theories state that individuals desire to present themselves in a positive manner and seek out favorable feedback regardless of whether the evaluations are accurate or inaccurate (McCaslin, Petty, & Wegener, 2010). On the other hand, self-verification denotes individuals’ tendency to seek out feedback that
confirms their self-views (Swann, 1987) and is rooted in people's need for the world to be predictable and controllable (Swann, 1990).

The two self-goals play important roles in consumer behavior. Significant findings by Escalas and Bettman (2003) showed how these two self-goals influence the types of reference groups that consumers choose when they form their attitudes toward various brands. They found that individuals with high self-enhancement goals are more influenced by aspirational groups while individuals with high self-verification goals are more influenced by membership groups. Their studies are used as a framework to develop the hypotheses of the current study.

Reference Groups in Consumer Behavior

Denoted as “a person or group of people that significantly influences an individual’s behavior,” a reference group plays an important role in consumer behavior by lending its associations and meanings to brands and products (Bearden & Etzel, 1982, p. 184). Reference groups can be categorized into membership groups, aspirational groups, or dissipative groups, and they influence consumer attitudes in numerous ways (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). This paper focuses on the membership group, a group to which individuals belong, and the aspirational group, a group to which individuals wish to belong. Consumers use brands that are associated with their membership groups to fit in the group and signal their ties (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). For example, a member in a dance company may signal his or her membership group identity by wearing a New Era fitted hat or Vans which are commonly-used brands by dancers.

Unlike membership groups, which require a sense of belonging and interactions with other members, aspirational groups require little or no interaction. Nonetheless, aspirational groups can heavily influence people's brand preferences when they match people's ideal selves (Cocanougher & Bruce, 1971). Celebrities are often used as aspirational group members when endorsing brands. Reference groups can also include, but are not limited to, people who are wealthy, successful, or intelligent. People often use brands that are associated with aspirational groups to forge the ties with the groups and thus project a favorable self-image (Choi & Rifon, 2012). For example, a person who aspires to portray himself as more masculine may choose to drink Jack Daniels instead of other brands because of its association with masculinity. The power of each reference group may depend on moderating factors, such as whether the product is consumed publicly or privately and whether the product is functional or symbolic (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

The associations between a brand and a reference group can be real or fabricated. Therefore, marketers can forge an association and reinforce it by presenting the brand in ways that are consistent with the reference group. Using the reference group's images to advertise the brand is one of the many ways to create and reinforce the brand identity borrowed from the group. The present study presents print advertisements with reference group images to show how these can create certain brand associations.

Self-Brand Connection

The self-brand congruency theory combines all of the aforementioned elements—the working self-concept, self-goals, and reference groups—to explain how consumers form connections to brands. This widely-accepted theory states that consumers are more likely to prefer products that match their self-concepts, whether the self-concepts in question are actual or ideal (Chang, 2002; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). Since brands borrow their identities from reference groups, the psychological connection between individuals and their membership group or aspirational group plays a key role in this process (White & Dahl, 2006). The desire to identify with the membership or aspirational group is heavily reflected on people's consumption behavior. Previous studies have found that individuals create stronger self-brand connections to brands that are consistent with their reference group image and even consider the act of consuming symbols an essential part of membership group bonding (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). To fulfill the ideal self by associating themselves with aspirational groups, individuals also seek values such as prestige or exclusivity in brands and transfer their associations to their self-concepts (Solomon, 1983).

Priming Effects

Because the self-concept is malleable, situational cues can elicit certain aspects of the self and influence individuals' purchase behaviors (Chang, 2010). Various factors such as context, group salience (Lessig & Park, 1978), self-goals (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), degree of independence (Chang, 2010), and public self-consciousness (Miller & Cox, 1982) have been found to affect the
self-brand congruency. Some researchers have applied this concept to consumer research and studied how activating an aspect of the self influences consumer behavior (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Chang, 2010; Forehand & Deshpandé, 2001). For example, Chang (2010) primed either independent or interdependent self-concept using magazine articles that came before the print advertisement and found that people primed with independent self-concept preferred a larger product assortment range. Other studies have found that advertising can prime certain product attributions to influence consumers’ judgments of the products (Yi, 1990).

However, while much is currently known about the self-brand congruency, there has been little empirical research into what would happen if a certain kind of self-goal were purposely activated by priming cues. The present study attempts to fill this gap by investigating how activation of self-goals will impact consumers’ attitudes toward brands and advertisements that are associated with reference groups.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review and theoretical development, the following hypotheses were formulated.

Hypothesis 1: People whose self-enhancement goals are activated will have more positive attitudes toward a brand/advertisement associated with an aspirational group while people whose self-verification goals are activated will have more positive attitudes toward a brand/advertisement associated with a membership group.

Hypothesis 2: The extent to which individuals feel like they belong or wish to belong to a group will influence their attitudes toward the brand/advertisement associated with the reference group.

The present study is not only based on the premise that the study will extend Escalas and Bettman’s (2003) previous findings, but also on the premise that understanding whether self-goals can be primed to influence consumers’ attitudes will help us learn about the extent to which the self-concept is malleable and contribute to the consumer psychology literature.

2. Method

Participants

The study was conducted via online survey using Qualtrics software sponsored by Princeton University’s Survey Research Center. A random sample of 848 undergraduate students from Princeton University was invited to participate via email. They could access the survey through a unique link included, and each link created an ID and ensured that no participants took the survey more than one time. Of the 383 responses received, 213 responses were fully completed and used for analysis. Participation was voluntary, and there was no compensation.

The participant sample included 86 Caucasians (40.4%), 11 Hispanics (5.2%), 38 African Americans (17.8%), 66 Asians (31.0%), and 12 others (5.6%). They comprised 80 male participants (37.6%) and 133 female participants (62.4%). In terms of class year, participants included 58 freshmen (27.2%), 61 sophomores (28.6%), 36 juniors (16.9%), and 58 seniors (27.2%).

A generic tablet was chosen as the stimulus product after careful consideration. As a commonly used product among the participant population, a tablet can be used privately or publicly and have both symbolic and functional values. Therefore, it was assumed that using a tablet for the study could minimize potential confounding variables. The tablet image used in the advertisements was not of an easily recognizable brand. Additionally, Chang’s studies (2010) which also included priming aspects of self-concepts used printers, a private good, in product types.

I chose Princeton students to represent the membership group and rich or successful people to represent the aspirational group. Each reference group had two different images to increase external validity. For the membership group, the generalizability and degree of membership were important factors to consider. Because Princeton University students generally tend to have a strong school pride, it was predicted that most students would feel a strong sense of belonging to the Princeton community. One of the pictures, which will be referred to as the “study image,” featured two Princeton students lying down on the grass on campus studying (Figure 1). The other picture, which will be referred to as the “sports image,” included a group of Princeton students displaying school spirit at a football game (Figure 2). To enhance the advertisement’s associations with the membership groups, the tagline, “Princeton students’ new go-to tablet. Join the community,” was included.

For the aspirational group, the generalizability and degree of aspiration to belong to the group were im-
portant factors to consider. Previous studies have shown that most college undergraduates have affluent and successful images among their ideal selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It could be inferred that Princeton students who tend to be ambitious and success-driven also fit the category. Therefore, using wealthy and successful people to represent the aspirational group without indicating any specific profession seemed appropriate. Specifically, one picture, which will be referred to as the “rich image,” included a group of well-dressed, attractive people at a luxurious beach house (Figure 3). The other picture, which will be referred to as the “success image,” consisted of a group of businesspeople in suits at a firm (Figure 4). To enhance the advertisement’s associations with the aspirational groups, the tagline, “Strive for extraordinary,” was included. For the control group, a print advertisement featured the brand without a reference group (Figure 5).

All advertisements included a general product description, but it was intentionally presented in a small size font for membership group and aspirational group advertisements to make participants focus on the reference groups and the taglines. Only the control group used the product description as the focus component of the advertisement.

Procedure

Participants first filled out a consent form in which they were informed that the study was “regarding self-goals and consumer behavior.” The purpose of the first task was to prime participants with either self-enhancement or self-verification goals. Participants were randomly assigned to either self-enhancement or self-verification prime condition and were instructed to read a short paragraph about a fictitious Princeton student named Robert. In the self-enhancement prime condition, Robert was described as a typical self-enhancer in domains that students can relate to such as academics, extracurricular activities, and close relationships. For example, the paragraph stated that he “preferred professors who gave him positive feedback even when he knew his work could be improved,” “avoided situations in which people could criticize his skills as a dancer,” and “loved spending time with his girlfriend who always gave him a lot of compliments.” The full prime story can be viewed in Appendix A.

In the self-verification prime condition, Robert was described as a self-verifier in the same domains. For example, he “preferred professors who gave him constructive criticism than those who only said positive things,” “liked it better when people confirmed his view about his skills as a dancer,” and “loved spending time with his girlfriend who knew him well intuitively” (Appendix A). The stories were carefully constructed in order to ascertain that neither of the conditions made Robert seem unlikeable or incompetent. The domains and the name of the character were kept constant for both stories to avoid confounding variables.

After reading the story, participants were given the following instruction: “Reflect on your life and write about moments when you thought or behaved like Robert did.” For each condition, a short description of self-enhancement goals (“trying to present yourself in the most positive light, seeking positive evaluations, etc.”) or self-verification goals (“preferring others to see you as you see yourself, seeking to confirm your self-view, etc.”) was included to lead participants to respond in accordance with the definition of each self-goal (Appendix A). This step was intended to make participants empathize with Robert by making similar experiences in their lives salient and thus enhance the priming effect.

Participants in the control group (n = 56) skipped the prime task. The control group was included in the study in order to set a reference point to which the results from the membership group advertisement condition and the aspirational group advertisement condition results could be compared.

In the next task, participants were told that they will see a print advertisement of a new tablet and were instructed to examine the advertisement and the brand carefully (Appendix A). Regardless of which self-goal prime condition, participants were randomly assigned to either membership group advertisement or aspirational group advertisement featuring the new tablet. After the exposure to the brand advertised in one of the conditions, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked participants to indicate their attitudes toward the brand on the dimensions of “good,” “likable,” “pleasant,” “positive,” and “high quality,” adopted from Holbrook and Batra (1987). Their attitudes toward the advertisement were measured on the dimensions of “interesting,” “good,” “likable,” “favorable,” and “pleasant,” adopted from MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986). The ratings were on Likert scales of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The brand and ad attitudes scale items can be viewed in Appendix B.

In addition to their attitudes about the brand and
the advertisement, participants also rated the relevance of the reference groups in the advertisement to themselves. Participants who saw one of the membership group advertisements were presented with the statements that read, “I associate with people in the ad,” and “I enjoy being a Princeton student” (Appendix C). Participants who saw one of the aspirational group advertisements were presented with the statements that read, “I aspire to be like people in the ad,” and “People in the ad look like successful people.” Again, participants rated how much they agreed with the statements on Likert scales of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These questions were designed to account for variability in participants’ ratings of the brand and the advertisement. If the hypothesis by Escalas and Bettman (2003) holds true, then it is reasonable to assume that responses can vary depending on how much participants actually viewed Princeton students as their membership group and rich or successful people as their aspirational group. Therefore, these measures provided an additional way to analyze the validity of the results.

The questionnaire then asked participants about their purchase intent for the brand. Given that participants were unfamiliar with the fictitious brand and were exposed to the advertisement only once for a brief moment, it was decided that the purchase intent question should be more conditional. Therefore, the purchase intent question for the three dimensions asked, “What are your chances of buying the product the next time you need to purchase a tablet?” They then rated their purchase intent on Likert scales of 1 to 7 with three dimensions, which were “likely” to “unlikely,” “possible” to “impossible,” and “probable” to “improbable.” The modified purchase intent question and the measures were adapted from the work by Yi (2010). The purchase intent question is included in Appendix D.

After answering the questions about the brand and the advertisements, participants were asked to read two statements about self-goals and indicate where they stand. This measure aimed to examine whether there was a correlation between the prime paragraph participants read and self-goals they reported and if not, to understand participants’ predominant self-motivations. On one end of the seven-point Likert scale, the statement read, “It is important that people see me in the best possible light” to represent self-enhancement goals. The other end read, “It is important for me to have accurate information about my strengths and weaknesses” to represent self-ver-
ification goals. The two scale items were borrowed from Escalas and Bettman’s (2003) experiment, but instead of having two separate scales, it was presented as a continuum in order to make people choose one or the other. The self-goals scale is presented in Appendix E.

Participants in the control group, who were not exposed to a prime condition, saw the version of the print advertisement that purposely did not include any reference group but featured the product by itself with the same product description. After viewing the advertisement, participants in the group rated their attitudes toward the brand, advertisement, and purchase intent in the same way as in the other conditions. They also indicated their predominant self-goals in the same way.

Lastly, all participants answered a few demographics questions about gender, race, and class year and were fully debriefed. Participants were asked whether they formulated any hypothesis while taking the survey. Of the few who attempted to guess the hypothesis, none of the participants guessed it correctly.

3. Results

Manipulation Checks

When participants were exposed to either the membership group advertisement or the aspirational group advertisement, the advertisement they saw included one of the two images chosen for the reference group. The images were varied for each reference group in order to increase external validity, and thus two aspects of the reference group advertisements needed to be checked: 1) Did participants identify with people in the two images of each reference group to a similar degree? 2) Did participants perceive the people in the advertisements as representative of their membership group and aspirational group? A one-way test ANOVA was used to check the two variables.

Membership Group Ads. For participants exposed to the membership group advertisement, either the study image or the sports image was included in the advertisement. Between the two images, there was a significant preference for the study image over the sports image regardless of the prime condition. Regarding ad attitudes, the results indicate that the advertisement using the study image was perceived as more pleasant, F(2, 130) = 4.36, p < .05. Brand attitudes toward the study image were rated more positively than the sports image for items which indicated
that the tablet in the study image was perceived as marginally more likable, $F(2, 130) = 2.62, p < .1$, pleasant, $F(2, 130) = 5.18, p < .01$, and high quality, $F(2, 130) = 7.95, p = .001$. Other items on brand and ad attitudes were not significantly different, but as shown in Table 1, the study image generally had higher scores than the sports image. Although the preference toward the study image was surprising at first, it may be the case that the sports image did not depict a context in which people will use a tablet. Although the degree of membership participants felt for each group was not significantly different, it may also be the case that the sports image represented a more specific type of students who whom not all participants identify with. On the other hand, people in the study image could have appealed to more participants because people in the image were in a situation where using a tablet could be appropriate and were more general and relatable to all Princeton students.

For the membership group advertisement, the measures used in the study to check the degree were the two statements on seven-point Likert scales: “I associate with the people in the ad” and “I enjoy being a Princeton student.” The mean score was 3.72 (SD = 1.54) for the first statement and 5.75 (SD = 1.19) for the second statement, indicating that participants generally enjoyed being Princeton students. As shown in Table 2, no significant difference was found between the two images in terms of how much participants associated with the people in the group or enjoyed being Princeton students. The mean for the first statement could be due to several possible reasons. Because the images used for the membership group advertisement could not represent the entire student body at Princeton, other salient factors such as race or student types could have affected the degree of membership. One participant commented that she did not associate with the group because most of the people in the group were Caucasian while she was African American.

Aspirational Group Ads. For participants exposed to the aspirational group advertisement, either the rich image or the success image was included in the advertisement. Between the two images, there was a significant preference for the success image over the rich image. Participants rated the brand in the success image as more likable, $F(2, 130) = 2.776, p < .1$, positive, $F(2, 130) = 3.412, p < .05$, and high quality, $F(2, 130) = 8.662, p < .001$. They also indicated that it was more likely, $F(2, 130) = 6.682, p < .005$, and probable $F(2, 130) = 4.295, p < .05$, that they will purchase the tablet in the success image than rich image (Table 1). Participants reported that they perceived the rich image advertisement as more interesting, $F(2, 130) = 3.355, p < .05$, showing that interesting advertisements do not necessarily lead to more positive evaluations.

The measures used to check the degree of aspiration were the following statements on seven-point Likert scales: “I aspire to be like people in the ad” and “People in the ad look like successful people.” The mean score for the first statement was 3.65 (SD = 1.45) and 5.21 for the second statement (SD = 1.24). Without doubt, people in the success image (M = 5.55, SD = .942) were perceived as more successful, $F(1, 64) = 9.17, p < .005$, than people in the rich image (M = 4.65, SD = 1.47). There was no significant difference in how much participants wished to belong to the group in each image.

Table 1. Comparison of images within ads using membership groups (MG) and aspirational groups (AG)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Attitude Good</th>
<th>Likable</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>High Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.79 (1.31)</td>
<td>3.65 (1.45)</td>
<td>3.17 (1.35)</td>
<td>3.17 (1.35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Table 2. Attitudes towards membership group ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Membership</th>
<th>Degree of Membership Enjoyment</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.82 (1.14)</td>
<td>5.68 (1.25)</td>
<td>5.75 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 3. Attitudes towards aspirational group ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Aspiration</th>
<th>Rich</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.65 (1.47)</td>
<td>4.92 (1.45)</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>5.21 (1.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Success</th>
<th>Rich</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.68 (1.39)</td>
<td>3.19 (1.15)</td>
<td>.298</td>
<td>3.68 (1.39)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.
Effects of Priming on Brand and Ad Attitudes

Participants’ attitudes toward the brand and the advertisements as a function of the self-enhancement and self-verification primes are presented in Table 4. I predicted that primed self-enhancement goals would make individuals prefer the aspirational group advertisement while primed self-verification goals would make individuals prefer the membership group advertisement. The data that are presented in Table 4 show only limited support for my hypothesis. Participants in the self-verification prime condition rated the membership group advertisement marginally more positive than they rated aspirational group advertisement, $F(1, 132) = 3.108$, $p < .1$. There were no significant differences on any of the other dependent measures comparing self-enhancement and self-verification groups.

Table 4. Brand and Ad Attitudes as a Function of Primes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Attitude</th>
<th>Low Aspirational</th>
<th>High Aspirational</th>
<th>Low Membership</th>
<th>High Membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeable</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plausible</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Effects of Self-Goals on Brand and Ad Attitudes

In the absence of statistically significant differences on product preferences as a function of my priming manipulation, I reanalyzed the data as a function of people’s expressed degree of self-verification and self-enhancement. In the study, participants had been asked to indicate where they stand regarding self-goals. The seven-point scale had the self-enhancement statement on one end and the self-verification statement on the other end (Appendix E). It should be noted that the indication for self-goals occurred after participants had been exposed to one of the two primes and advertisements, and therefore the reported self-goals could have been affected by the prime conditions. For the purpose of this analysis, only participants whose score reflected a strong tendency for self-enhancement goals (1 and 2) or self-verification goals (6 and 7) were included. Participants were dichotomized as self-enhancers or self-verifiers accordingly.

The results of participants’ preferences for the advertisements grouped by their standing on the self-enhancement/self-verification individual difference measures are shown in Table 5. In several dimensions, self-enhancers rated the aspirational group advertisement higher than self-verifiers did, and self-verifiers rated the membership group advertisement higher than self-enhancers did. As expected, self-enhancers found the brand in the aspirational group advertisement better, $F(1, 70) = 3.96$, $p = .05$, more likable, $F(1, 70) = 6.63$, $p < .05$, and higher quality, $F(1, 70) = 4.06$, $p < .05$. They also found the aspirational group advertisement as marginally more interesting, $F(1, 70) = 3.00$, $p < .1$, and reported that it was more likely, $F(1, 70) = 4.65$, $p < .05$, and possible, $F(1, 70) = 5.823$, $p < .05$, for them to purchase the brand in the aspirational group advertisement.

Similarly, self-verifiers perceived the brand in the membership group advertisement as marginally more likable, $F(1, 70) = 3.825$, $p < .1$, and the membership group advertisement as marginally more favorable, $F(1, 70) = 3.789$, $p < .1$. It was also more possible for self-verifiers to purchase the brand in the membership group advertisement than self-verifiers, $F(1, 70) = 4.90$, $p < .05$. The results from two scale items, “likable” and “possible,” are shown in Figure 6 to represent the general findings. The results from this analysis partially support the original hypothesis because the self-goals reported by participants are a combination of preexisting self-motivations and priming.

Degree of Aspiration and Membership Association

Adopting Escalas and Bettman’s hypothesis (2003), I expected that the degree to which participants saw themselves belonging to the membership group or the degree to which they aspired to belong to the aspirational group would affect their preferences for the advertisement and the brand associated with the reference group. I dichotomized participants who rated the degree of aspiration 5, 6, or 7 as high aspiring and those who rated the degree of aspiration 1, 2, or 3 as low aspiring. For the aspirational group advertisement, ten out of thirteen scale items showed a significant difference and confirmed the hypothesis; high aspiring participants evaluated the brand and the advertisement more positively than low as-
piring participants did (Table 6.). In addition, high aspiring participants perceived the people in the advertisement as more successful, \( F(1, 51) = 27.32, p < .001 \). The degree of aspiration was also positively correlated to the degree of self-enhancement goals \( F(1, 24) = 8.754, p < .05 \).

For the membership group advertisement, I operationalized participants who rated the degree of membership 5, 6, or 7 as high membership and those who rated the degree of membership 1, 2, or 3 as low membership. The results are shown in Table 6. Every measure showed a significant difference and confirmed the hypothesis, indicating that the stronger the sense of belonging participants felt to the group, the more positive they evaluated the brand and the advertisement. Furthermore, participants rated that it was more likely, \( F(1, 50) = 8.632, p < .005 \), possible, \( F(1, 50) = 2.945, p < .05 \), and probable \( F(1, 50) = 10.69, p < .005 \), that they will purchase the product when they felt a greater sense of belonging to the group. The relationship between the sense of belonging participants felt and how much they enjoyed being Princeton students was also positively correlated, \( F(1, 50) = 6.017, p < .05 \).

Figure 6. Brand attitude (likable) and purchase intent (possible) as a function of self-goal reports.

### 4. Discussion

#### Summary of Results

The initial analysis found that the first hypothesis was partially supported since participants who were self-verification primed rated the membership group advertisement as more positive. However, participants who were self-enhancement primed did not show a significant priming effect. In addition, a strong relationship was observed between participants’ reported self-goals and brand/ad attitudes, revealing that participants who reported to self-enhance preferred the aspirational group advertisement while participants who reported to self-verify preferred the membership group advertisement. Overall, in addition to confirming previous findings that showed that individuals’ self-motivations affect their product preferences (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), the results in the present study extend upon them by suggesting the possibility of priming self-motivations.

The study also replicated another finding from previous research and proved that the extent to which participants felt like they belonged or wished to belong to a group affected their brand/ad attitudes (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). In another words, the more participants wished to belong to the aspirational group in the advertisement, the more they preferred the brand and the advertisement. Similarly, the more participants felt they belonged to the membership group in the advertisement, the more they preferred the brand and the advertisement. The findings support the argument that individuals use brands associated with their positive reference groups to form their self-concepts related to the actual self or the ideal self (Reed, 2004; Wright & Sirgy, 1992).

#### Implications

The results from the present study have numerous implications for both marketers and researchers. For marketers, the extended knowledge about the relationship between self-goals and reference groups as the means to form self-brand connections provides useful insight in designing effective marketing programs. Depending on whether a brand is associated with a membership group.
or an aspirational group, marketers can strategically position the brand in situations where either self-enhancement goals or self-verification goals are salient. For example, affinity marketing, which incentivizes organizations to endorse a brand or a product to their members, can be effective for brands that are associated with membership groups (Fock, Chan, & Yan, 2011). In a similar manner, a brand associated with aspirational groups can benefit from engaging in product placement at events such as museum galas where people are likely to focus on self-enhancing.

Although more research is necessary to confirm the strength of the priming, advertisers may also benefit from eliciting self-enhancement goals or self-verification goals within the advertisement. As previous research shows, numerous advertising components such as the tagline and content surrounding the advertisement in a magazine can affect consumers’ attitudes toward an advertisement or a brand (Snyder & DeBono, 1985). Therefore, using a tagline that is conducive to self-enhancement or publishing a self-improvement content page before presenting the advertisement for a luxury brand may help shape consumers’ attitudes toward the brand and the advertisement. It should be noted that a single advertisement will not help change the predominant brand identity that already exists, but by consistently associating a brand with a reference group and the appropriate self-goal, the brand can increase its brand equity.

Table 6. Brand and Ad Attitudes as a Function of Degree Aspiration and Membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Attitude</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Favorable</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Pleasurable</th>
<th>High Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study Image</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Image</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

These findings also contribute to the self-concept literature. Many researchers have debated whether people have a rigid preference for self-enhancement or self-verification and whether the two self-goals contradict or can compromise each other. This thesis provides further support for the argument that the working self-concept arises from a set of self-conceptions and can change depending on the context and situational cues individuals face. However, as the results showed, it is the combination of both predominant self-concept and environmental factors that come into play to shape one’s working self-concept. The strength of priming may influence how malleable a self-concept can be, and this topic still needs more investigation.

Limitations and Future Research

This research should be interpreted with a several limitations in mind. First, since Princeton University is an elite Ivy League school, it could be argued that the membership group already fulfills the role of aspirational group. While it is true that many Princeton students may pride themselves on attending one of the top universities, I argue that it no longer acts as an aspirational group once students are admitted. In addition, because they have already acquired membership in Princeton, future career aspirations become more apparent and important to students. Nonetheless, there was a significant difference in participants’ preferences between images used within the same reference group (study image vs. sports image; rich image vs. successful image), and future studies could benefit from conducting a pretest to find images that represent participants’ membership group and aspirational group more accurately.

Second, it is possible that participants’ general attitudes toward the brand were low due to lack of exposure to the brand in the past. A few participants commented it was unlikely that they would purchase the new brand of tablet because they only buy tablets from well-established brands such as Samsung or Apple. Even though a fabricated brand was used to facilitate manipulations, brand image or brand loyalty for existing brands could have been too strong for the brief exposure of a new brand to persuade them to switch. Future studies could enhance the validity of the findings by choosing another product to replicate the study.

Third, granted that the indication of self-goals in the study partially confirmed the hypothesis, it is unclear to what extent priming affected participants’ report because the question about self-goals was asked after they had been exposed to the prime and the advertisement. As of now, it can only be assumed that the indication resulted from a combination of priming and preexisting self-goals, but it is possible that stronger cues could
prime people’s salient self-goals and directly influence their brand / ad attitudes. Future research should examine whether primes can only enhance individuals’ preexisting self-goals or can make them focus on one self-goal over another regardless of their predisposed tendencies. Studying this topic would also contribute to the literature of self-concept by providing evidence for great extent of malleability.

References


