



Me, myself, and Ikea: Qualifying generic self-referencing effects in brand judgment



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ABSTRACT

The present research extends previous work on the latent tendency to be attracted to objects, events and entities that are associated with the self by demonstrating when and how generic self-referencing brand names influence brand judgment. In five studies we hypothesize and find that using pronouns in brand names that refer to the consumer's self (i.e., 'I' or 'my' as in 'iTunes' or 'MySpace') produces an attraction effect and promotes favorable brand responses. The strength of the effect hinges on the extent to which the consumer's self-view is positive. In addition, we test a logical extension of the effect and show that attraction turns into avoidance when consumers' acute self-view is negative, particularly for products for which the association with the consumer's self is more salient, i.e., self-expressive products.

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1. Introduction

We frequently like occupations, partners, cities, streets, birthdays, and a host of other objects, events and entities because, essentially, we like ourselves (Nuttin, 1985; Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005). This intriguing phenomenon is known as 'implicit egotism'—the latent attraction to things that are linked to the self (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). Although abundant research in numerous contexts has shown its pervasive existence (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Knewton & Sias, 2010; Nelson & Simmons, 2007; Nuttin, 1985; Pelham, Carvallo, DeHart, & Jones, 2003; Pelham et al., 2002), research in the consumer sphere is surprisingly scarce and has mainly focused on name letter branding (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005; but see Perkins & Forehand, 2012). This is all the more surprising given that recent trends indicate that the use of personal pronouns in branding such as 'I' and 'my' (e.g., iTunes and MySpace) shows a marked surge in recent years, even up

to the point that the number of registered self-referencing trademarks has tripled over the past decade (BOIP, 2014). The present research will address this void and extends previous findings on implicit egotism and name letter branding by examining whether and when more generic references to the self as integral components of brand names (i.e., brand names starting with I, or My) affect brand judgment, under which conditions this generic self-referencing effect is most pronounced, and when the self-referencing effect might turn from positive to negative.

In particular, we build on work on the name letter effect and implicit consumer cognition—which suggests that the attraction effect of objects directly associated with the self (i.e., by sharing initials with the owner) is the result of people's default self-view being positive (Baumeister, 1989; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Pelham et al., 2002)—and propose that more generic references to the self in brand names may similarly produce an attraction effect and thus promote favorable brand responses. More specifically, and aligning with previous research, we examine the notion that the extent to which consumers feel attracted to more generic self-referencing brand names is dependent on the valence of both their chronic and temporary self-view. Additionally, we extend this work and test a logical implication of this reasoning by examining whether the implicit attraction to generic self-referencing brand names may turn into avoidance when consumers' self-view is negative, rather than positive. Finally, we examine an extension particularly germane to the marketing and consumer field by arguing that the impact of consumers' self-view valence on generic self-referencing brand judgment is particularly pronounced for products that have a more salient link with the consumer's self and may express that property and thus

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are deemed to be particularly self-relevant, i.e., for self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive products.

2. Generic self-referencing

The rationale behind the present work is hardly new and essentially dates back to William James (1890) who already proposed that people project their self-liking on external objects and hence show a disproportionate liking for objects and events that are associated with the self, something he referred to as the product of 'self-love' (p. 306). During the past decades a growing body of research has tested and refined this idea (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Becker, 2007; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Notably, the effect also holds for objects that share letters with people's own name, as people prefer their name letters to other letters in the alphabet (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1985). More recent research has found that this so-called 'name letter effect' extends to the liking of people, places, and professions with similar name letters, and that it influences important life decisions including where people choose to live and what to do for a living (Jones et al., 2004; Pelham et al., 2002). Although some of the findings are not uncontested—particularly those from correlational field studies (Gallucci, 2003; Simonsohn, 2011)—they do suggest a robust effect of self-associations on choices and judgment (see Knewton & Sias, 2010).

Strikingly, research on this self-referencing effect in the marketing and consumer behavior spheres has lagged behind. In a seminal study examining consumer responses, though, Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated that consumers also evaluate brand names more positively when they resemble their own name. They exposed participants to Japanese snacks with brand names that either or not included the first three letters of their first name followed by the word stem '-oki', and found that participants preferred brand names that shared the first three letters with the first three letters in their own name to brands that did not.

It is interesting to note that most studies have been limited to examining effects of implicit egotism by assessing *name letters* as proxies for self-referencing (e.g., Knewton & Sias, 2010). Such letters—by definition—can only serve as self-referencing cues for consumers whose first or last names start with them, but they are irrelevant for others. This leaves open the straightforward question of whether these effects remain limited to such incidental similarities as between the target's name letters and the first few letters of a brand name or whether more *generic* self-referencing cues in brand names, such as brand names starting with 'I' or 'my', may serve a similar function. On the one hand, it can be argued that more generic references to the self are less self-relevant than specific individual name letters, in which case one might expect self-referencing effects to be less pronounced or even absent. On the other hand, there are reasons to assume that the name letter effect may well extend to more generic references to the self. Support for this assumption comes from work by Perkins and Forehand (2012), who showed that the pairing of previously neutrally valenced products with self-concept terms (i.e., I, self, me, my, and mine) in a categorization task (i.e., an adapted Implicit Association Test) leads to more positive evaluations of those products, mainly as a function of their mere association with these self-concept terms. While this work constitutes an important step going beyond the demonstration of mere name letter effects, it also has several features that affect its theoretical and practical relevance for the marketing and consumer behavior fields. More in particular, the studies used fictitious products or full product categories and only examined the role of implicit (rather than including also explicit) self-esteem. Of more importance, this research relied heavily on a sequential priming paradigm in which the association of the self with these fictitious products was forged via a process of repeatedly, but incidentally, pairing self-relevant words with the focal product. This may limit the relevance of the results for business practice since the typical self-product association (to the extent that it exists) will likely be singular and integral rather than

repeated and incidental and so, the Perkins and Forehand (2012) paradigm, while theoretically well-established, may constitute the exception rather than the rule when it comes to understanding *actual* self-referencing effects in brand judgment. Finally, and possibly most important, to examine the moderating role of self-esteem, the authors only focused on the distinction between neutral vs. positive self-esteem, but did not take into account the possibility of negative self-esteem modulating any self-referencing effect.

Hence, one of the key contributions of the present work is that it builds on, extends, and is distinct from this previous research in that we include a test of *both* fictitious *and* actually existing products and brands, and include the moderating role of *both* explicit *and* implicit self-esteem. In addition, we will examine the effects of more generic references to the self, as *intrinsic* components of certain brands, and, contributing to its relevance to the marketing and consumer behavior field, assess whether such intrinsic references to the self actually affect brand judgment even when exposure to such brand names is subtle and singular, rather than systematic and repeated. Finally, we contribute to the literature by also systematically examining the possibility of *negative* self-esteem to affect brand judgment, a void in the literature that is still in need of an answer. The next section further elaborates on our notions.

3. Qualifying the self-referencing effect

Work in implicit consumer cognition strongly suggests that the self-referencing effect may unfold as a function of *associative self-anchoring*, in which the association of an object (e.g., a brand or product) with the self produces a transfer of pre-existing self-associations to the object (see Gawronski et al., 2007; Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996; Otten, 2003). The process that drives this associative transfer can be understood as akin to evaluative conditioning, in which the pairing of an initially neutral or even valenced object (the product or brand, acting as conditioned stimulus, CS) with the self (acting as the unconditioned stimulus, UCS) may influence evaluations of the CS through a transfer of affect from the self (the UCS) to the CS (rather than vice versa). This requires arguing that the self can indeed function as a UCS. A wealth of research indicates that it can. More in particular, Greenwald and Banaji (1995) and others (e.g., Gawronski et al., 2007; Symons & Johnson, 1997; Walter & Traselli, 2003; Zhang & Chan, 2009; Perugini, Richetin & Zogmaister, 2012) have argued and shown that the self possesses both the necessary and sufficient attributes to take on this role—the (actual) self is a well-developed mental construct, it is highly accessible, has a clear valence, and has the capability to produce evaluative changes even in cases of an "accidental" association with a neutral object. Consequently, it follows that if the self is implicitly or explicitly activated by a self-relevant stimulus and if this activated sense of self is saliently associated with a neutral object, then the valence associated with the self should spill over and affect evaluations of the neutral object. By extension, if the self is activated by a self-referencing prefix in a brand or product name, the associated valence should spill over and affect evaluations of the brand or product associated with it, thus producing a generic self-referencing effect. These notions are tested in the present work.

Importantly, the typical findings in implicit egotism research rest on the assumption that the self's valence is by 'default' positive (Baumeister, 1989; Schmitt & Allik, 2005), and hence that these positive self-evaluations spill over to any target that can be associated with the self (Gawronski et al., 2007; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). But what if the consumer's self-view is not positive but negative? In principle, there are two possible scenarios. First, if the self-referencing effect hinges on the assumption of a positive self-view and that it is this property that makes consumers seek out and expose themselves to objects and events that reflect the self, then the impact of generic self-referencing on brand judgment should manifest itself only for consumers with a favorable self-view, but not for consumers with an unfavorable self-view. Hence, this scenario only allows for the existence of

an attraction effect. However, other than that the population distribution of (chronic) self-esteem is positively skewed (Baumeister, 1989; Schmitt & Allik, 2005) and hence, that it may be a challenge to identify cases with truly negative self-esteem, there appears no firm theoretical ground for this position.

The alternative seems more straightforward and conceptually more parsimonious, albeit empirically harder to detect. That is, if the self-referencing effect in brand judgment truly constitutes a reflection of the self's valence—as is the basic rationale underlying implicit egotism effects (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Pelham et al., 2002)—such that the brand judgment bias is the result of a transfer of any valence to the target, then, by implication, not only positive but also negative self-evaluations should spill over to the target resulting in a negative bias. Thus, in case of self-referencing brand names, it follows that the effect may reverse and attraction may turn into avoidance or at least an unfavorable brand evaluation when the consumer's self-view is negative. This effect will be absent for non-self-referencing brands since these brands do not induce a self-brand association.

Interestingly, to the authors' knowledge, this effect has yet to be documented. Hence another key contribution of the present research is to systematically track it down and to examine whether and, if so, under what conditions a negative pendant to the notion of implicit egotism in brand judgment exists. A direct implication of the observation that the positively skewed distribution of chronic self-esteem adversely affects the likelihood of observing this avoidance effect, is that it requires creating conditions that are optimal for such an effect to 'flourish'. More in particular, we will zoom-in on two such factors that may satisfy these conditions, and we will assess their role in a sequential, cumulative order.

First, given the positive skewness of chronic self-esteem in the population, it stands to reason to expect that shifting attention from chronic to *acute* differences in self-esteem may be consequential since the latter is situationally induced and hence, less dependent on pre-existing population distributions. Hence, this may produce a reversal of the attraction effect when such acute self-esteem is negative. Studies 3 and 4 will test this possibility. Second, we will examine whether the type of product matters as a moderating condition. That is, some types of products (such as fashion items or jewelry) are not just acquired for the quality of their physical attributes, but are also acquired and used because they are saliently associated with their owner and thus are considered to be expressive of the consumer's self (Fennis & Stroebe, 2016). Moreover, such self-expressive products have not only been shown to be more reflective of the consumer's self than non-self-expressive products, but they do something else as well — they also (by definition) have the potential to express that property to others when such products are displayed (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011). While this may be unproblematic (or even desirable) for consumers high in self-esteem, it may be problematic for low self-esteem consumers for whom the prospect of actually communicating their negative self-view may be particularly aversive. As a consequence, such self-expressive products may be more suited to 'pick up' an avoidance effect as a function of negative self-esteem if it exists. Study 4 was explicitly designed to test this possibility.

Reconciling the present with past research, it follows that if the classic name letter effect extends to more generic references to the self, then we expect the generic self-referencing effect to be more pronounced when (chronic and acute) self-esteem is positive rather than negative in cases of non-self-expressive products (yielding an ordinal interaction, replicating earlier findings, e.g., Gawronski et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2004; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001; Perkins & Forehand, 2012). In contrast, if acute self-esteem and self-expressive products are indeed more sensitive to capture an avoidance effect, we expect a reversal of the sign of the effect from positive to negative mainly or only as a function of acute self-esteem threat in cases of self-expressive products (yielding a disordinal, crossover interaction showing an attraction effect for positive and, importantly, an avoidance effect for negative self-esteem).

4. Contributions

In sum, the present research aims to qualify the notion of implicit egotism in brand judgment by establishing the impact of generic references to the self in brand names on brand evaluation, and examines when it is more or less pronounced and what conditions affect the direction of the effect. In so doing, our research contributes to the literature in various ways. First, our research extends work on implicit egotism (Jones et al., 2004; Pelham et al., 2002) by assessing the robustness of the self-referencing effect in a less explored theatre of operations of egotism related phenomena, i.e., that of consumer behavior. Second, this research is the first to examine the possibility that egotism effects do not depend on incidental similarities between a brand name and name letters (Brendl et al., 2005), or on incidental associations between the self and a product (category; Perkins & Forehand, 2012), but extend to more generic references to self, as intrinsic components of brands and products, and more specifically to personal pronouns in brand names. Third, our work adds to the burgeoning field exploring the role of the consumer's self as an important driver in consumer behavior (Oyserman, 2009; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012), more in particular by examining its consequences for self-associated brand attraction and avoidance. In so doing, this work highlights the role of the self in brand judgment and decision making, a factor that all too often has been taken for granted (Pelham et al., 2005). Please note that from our elaboration on the theory and process underlying the proposed effects, it follows directly that we refer to the *actual*, rather than *ideal* self (see Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). More specifically, it is plausible and parsimonious to propose that mere exposure by personal pronouns in brand names without any additional qualifications will – *ceteris paribus* – activate a sense of self that reflects one's actual self-view. In addition, this proposition is also supported by a direct implication of the self-anchoring account. That is, our account holds that it is the valence of the self that will spill over to affect the evaluation of the product or brand associated with it, rather than vice versa. This effectively rules out the ideal self as a 'rival candidate', because activation of an ideal self would require a reversed spillover, i.e., one where the valence of a product or brand affects evaluations of the self in the direction of an ideal standard. Finally, we focus on the moderating role of implicit and explicit self-esteem, not only when its valence is positive but also when it is negative which may be a likely attribute of the actual self, but is difficult to conceive as an attribute of an ideal self (after all, consumers will not be very likely to cultivate a negative ideal self).

5. Present research

Next, we present five studies (one cross-sectional, correlational study and four experiments) that accomplish several key objectives. First, we aim to directly test the role of the valence of the consumer's self in driving generic self-referencing brand judgment for both existing (pre-study) and new, fictitious (Studies 1–4) brands. Second, we aim to test the notion that if the strength of the attraction effect of generic self-referencing brands hinges on the valence of the self, then, by implication, the effect will depend on the extent to which (explicit and implicit) chronic (pre-study, Studies 1 and 2) and temporary (Studies 3 and 4) self-esteem is positive and will reverse to the extent that it is negative (Studies 3 and 4). Third, we explore this moderating role of self-esteem both for brands of products that serve a self-expressive function, and those that do not (Study 4).

6. Pre-study

This study provides a first investigation of the hypothesized relationship between self-view valence and the evaluation of existing generic self-referencing brand names. More in particular, and since all brand names from Apple contain the self-referencing prefix 'I' (e.g., iPod, iPhone, iPad), in this field study we examined the relationship between

consumers' self-esteem and the number of self-associated Apple products they possess.

6.1. Method

One hundred eighty-two United States residents, enrolled through Amazon's MTurk, participated in this part of a larger study (for age $M = 35.58$, $SD = 11.75$; 54% male). First, participants filled out the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) to measure the valence of their self-view. They indicated their agreement with each of five positively worded (e.g., "I take a positive view of myself") and five negatively worded items (e.g., "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure") on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). After reverse coding the five negatively stated items, a total self-esteem score was formed by averaging the scores of all 10 items with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$; $M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.27$). After some filler questions, unrelated to this study, we asked participants to indicate the number of Apple products they possessed ($M = 1.34$, $SD = 1.46$). We excluded one participant who indicated to own >25 Apple products and hence would distort the results obtained. Finally, participants answered demographic questions and were thanked for their participation.

6.2. Results

A correlation analysis revealed that self-esteem and the number of Apple products participants owned were positively related ($r(181) = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$).⁴ In addition, a binary logistic regression on ownership using chronic self-esteem as independent variable indicated that participants' self-view was a significant predictor of whether or not they possessed Apple products ($b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.13$, $Wald = 7.30$, $p < 0.01$). These results indicate that people with higher self-esteem are more likely to own self-referencing brands. Moreover, and in line with the previous reasoning, the mean of self-esteem suggests that the valence of people's 'default' self-view is indeed positive. More specifically, only 14 participants (i.e., 8% of the total sample) scored below the self-esteem scale's midpoint indicating that the sample contained only a limited number of people with a chronic negative self-esteem.

7. Study 1

The results of the pre-study provide initial evidence of a relationship between self-view valence and the evaluation of self-referencing brand names. Of course, its cross-sectional nature and the status of the brand used allows for confounding variables to affect the results and for alternate explanations of the key finding. Hence in Study 1, we moved to a more controlled experimental setting and measured consumers' evaluation of fictitious, rather than existing brands. More specifically, we examined the role of consumers' explicit self-esteem in the impact on brand judgment of brand names, starting with or without a generic personal pronoun as prefix. If the generic self-referencing effect is a function of consumers' self-view it follows that the evaluation of these self-referencing brands should be dependent on the extent to which their chronic self-esteem is positive. We tested our propositions on a representative panel of consumers of different ages, ethnicity, and educational backgrounds.

⁴ A log transformation on the number of Apple products to reduce skewness produced similar results ($r(181) = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$).

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants and design

In this experiment a design was used with type of prefix (self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) as a within subjects factor, and self-esteem as a continuous, individual difference variable. Sixty-two consumers, randomly drawn from an online consumer panel, voluntarily participated and completed the study (for age $M = 32.45$; $SD = 14.20$; 65% female).

7.1.2. Procedure

This study was part of a larger set of studies undertaken by different research teams on customer relationship management tools. First, similar to the previous study, participants filled out the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale as a measure of chronic self-esteem (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). In line with the pre-study, the scale mean ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 0.52$, on a 7-point scale) indicates a positively skewed distribution of chronic self-esteem scores.

Next, in an ostensibly unrelated task, participants were requested to evaluate a series of brand names as potential labels for a service. Participants were told that they would not get any additional information about the service to ensure that our evaluation measure assessed their judgment of the brand name and not the service. Next, they were randomly exposed to two fictitious brands of services (i.e., Beauty and Personality), and these brand names were randomly presented with a self-referencing (i.e., My) or non-self-referencing prefix (i.e., X). For our use of personal pronouns to activate a sense of self (i.e., My or I) both in the present and in our subsequent studies, we relied on an extensive literature that has established that such pronouns are indeed reliable markers of (sometimes narcissistic) self-focus and so are well-suited to capture the implicit egotism effects that are focal in the present work (see for example Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Carey et al., 2015; Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011).

We measured brand judgment by asking participants to indicate how they evaluated the brand names (e.g., MyBeauty or XBeauty) on a seven-point scale (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive). After this final task, participants answered demographic questions, were probed for confusion or suspicion about the experimental procedures (no participant indicated any suspicion or confusion), were debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

7.2. Results and discussion

We used a mixed-model ANOVA, with brand evaluation as the dependent variable, type of prefix as a within-subjects factor, and self-esteem (standardized, cf. Aiken & West, 1991; Hayes, 2013) as a continuous factor. This analysis yielded a significant main effect of prefix ($F(1, 60) = 21.49$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that self-referencing brand names were evaluated more positively ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.13$) than non-self-referencing brand names ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.12$). More importantly, the expected prefix by self-esteem interaction proved to be significant ($F(1, 60) = 6.70$, $p = 0.01$).⁵ Comparisons of the predicted means for high self-esteem (evaluated at +1 SD from the mean, Aiken & West, 1991) and lower self-esteem (evaluated at -1 SD from the mean) participants, showed that high self-esteem participants evaluated self-referencing brand names more positively ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.57$) than non-self-referencing brand names ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.60$; $F(1, 60) = 26.04$, $p < 0.001$). For lower self-esteem participants, findings indicated that the attraction effect for self-referencing brand names

⁵ We report the results of a mixed-model ANOVA to simplify presentation, although a regression analysis using difference scores produced the exact same pattern of results.

attenuated as brand evaluation did not significantly differ for self-referencing ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.57$) and non-self-referencing brands ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.60$; $F(1, 60) = 2.04$, *n.s.*)⁶. Hence, the self-referencing effect of self-associated brand names was only observed for high self-esteem participants.

In line with the pre-study, the results indicate that brand judgment is a function of generic self-referencing pronouns in brand names. Importantly, the results also show that the effect is qualified by self-esteem such that it is mainly observed among high self-esteem participants, and less among their lower self-esteem counterparts. This study also rules out the possibility that the generic self-referencing effect is simply a function of being familiar with personal pronouns in brand names, i.e., a fluency effect (Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002; Zajonc, 1968), in which case the self's valence should not have played a role in accounting for the brand judgment bias.

The findings indicate an ordinal modulation by self-esteem, which is in line with other research that typically found a similar pattern when focusing on chronic self-esteem (Gawronski et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2004; Koole et al., 2001). Indeed, the sample mean and distribution of the scale strongly suggests that, similar to the pre-study, chronic self-esteem is by default positive, thus obscuring a potential reversal of the effect for truly negative self-esteem.

8. Study 2

The findings of Study 1 demonstrate that a positively valenced self-view induces favorable brand evaluation of generic self-referencing brand names. Study 2 sought to further establish the role of chronic self-esteem by testing whether the effects are unique to explicit chronic self-esteem or also extend to the implicit realm (e.g., McDonald, 1998), i.e., to implicit self-esteem. Moreover, by administering the self-esteem measure implicitly we can rule out the alternative explanation that the findings of Study 1 were attributable to demand characteristics (Orme, 1962) or a consistency bias.

8.1. Method

8.1.1. Participants and design

Forty undergraduate students completed this part of a larger study in return for course credit or a small fee. One participant did not complete the full study and was therefore excluded from the analyses. The final sample consisted of 39 participants (for age $M = 19.79$; $SD = 0.98$; 36% female). In this study, a design was used with type of prefix (self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) as a between subjects factor, and implicit self-esteem as a continuous, individual difference variable.

8.1.2. Procedure

At the beginning of the experiment, all participants signed an informed consent form. Following previous research (Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007; Vargas, Sekaquaptewa, & von Hippel, 2007; Zweigenhaft, 1977), we used their signatures on the informed consent form as a measure of implicit self-esteem. More specifically, we measured the size of one's signature by drawing the smallest possible rectangle around it and calculated the surface area in cm^2 . Larger surface

areas thus indicated more positive implicit self-esteem ($M = 7.59 \text{ cm}^2$, $SD = 5.85 \text{ cm}^2$).

After signing the informed consent form, participants were led into separate cubicles and were asked to evaluate fictitious brand names. Similar to Study 1, they were exposed to two brands (i.e., Bottle and Bin), and these brand names were randomly presented with either a self-referencing (i.e., My) or non-self-referencing prefix (i.e., X; see Appendix A). Brand evaluation was measured by asking "Do you like this brand name?" (1 = no, not at all, 7 = yes, very much) and "How appealing is this brand name to you?" (1 = not appealing at all, 7 = very appealing). Scores were averaged ($r(39) = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$) with higher scores indicating higher brand name evaluation. To control for name letter liking, participants evaluated each letter of the alphabet (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive) and indicated the initials of their name. After this final task, participants answered demographic questions, were debriefed, compensated, and thanked for their participation.

8.2. Results and discussion

A regression analysis with type of prefix (effect coded, Aiken & West, 1991), self-esteem (standardized) and their interaction as predictors and brand name evaluation as the criterion did not show main effects of either type of prefix or self-esteem ($t_s < 1$). However, the prefix by self-esteem interaction proved to be significant ($\beta = 0.41$, $t(35) = 2.26$, $p = 0.03$). Replicating the results of Study 1, simple effects analyses revealed that high self-esteem participants (i.e., at +1SD from the mean) evaluated self-referencing brand names more positively than non-self-referencing brand names ($\beta = 0.53$, $t(35) = 2.05$, $p = 0.05$). For participants with lower self-esteem (i.e., at -1SD from the mean), findings indicated that brand evaluation did not differ significantly between self-referencing and non-self-referencing brands ($\beta = -0.31$, $t(35) = 1.35$, *n.s.*).

We also controlled for the effect of name letter liking by adding the evaluation of the initials consumers shared with the prefixes (i.e., m, y, and x) to the regression model. This did not affect the results, indicating that the qualified effect of generic self-referencing brand names held, even when accounting for name letter liking.

Together, these findings build on the results of Study 1 in two ways. First, we replicated and extended our main findings. That is, Study 2 confirmed the moderating role of self-view valence, and showed that high self-esteem results in increased evaluation of generic self-referencing brands. This effect was attenuated for lower self-esteem consumers. Second, and in line with our hypothesis, we found that the effect of chronic self-esteem on self-referencing brand evaluation does not remain limited to explicit self-esteem but extends to implicit self-esteem. As such, Studies 1 and 2 stress the important role of the valence of both explicit and implicit chronic self-esteem in the impact of generic self-referencing pronouns in brand names on brand judgment.

9. Study 3

The purpose of the present experiment was twofold. First, we aimed to find converging evidence for our notions by zooming in on *acute* rather than chronic fluctuations in the self's valence to test whether an acute rather than chronic favorable or unfavorable self-evaluation affects the strength of the generic self-referencing effect. Second, we wanted to examine the direction of the effect and assess whether the hypothesized attraction effect of self-referencing brand names for consumers whose view of the self is positive turns into an *avoidance* effect for consumers whose self-view is temporarily impaired. As highlighted earlier, one reason why we did not find this cross-over effect may lay in the assumption that people's chronic self-view is by 'default' positive (Baumeister, 1989; Schmitt & Allik, 2005), an observation that is supported by our data that clearly indicate a positivity bias in the means and distributions of our self-esteem measures. More specifically, in the pre-study and Study 1 combined a mere 14 out of a total of 243 participants (6%) scored

⁶ In line with our hypotheses, additional simple effects analyses revealed that for self-referencing brand names the effect of self-esteem was significant and in the predicted direction ($\beta = 0.26$, $t(60) = 2.08$, $p = 0.04$), indicating a positive relationship between self-esteem and the evaluation of self-referencing brand names. No effect of self-esteem was observed for non-self-referencing brand names ($t < 1$), such that self-esteem did not affect brand evaluation of non-self-referencing brands. This pattern of results was consistent across all studies (i.e., in Study 2, $\beta_{\text{self-referencing}} = 0.40$, $t(35) = 2.21$, $p = 0.03$, $\beta_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = -0.41$, $t(35) = 1.34$, *n.s.*; in Study 3, $F_{\text{self-referencing}}(1, 214) = 4.27$, $p = 0.04$, $F_{\text{non-self-referencing}}(1, 214) = 1.53$, *n.s.*; in Study 4, $F_{\text{self-referencing}}(1, 227) = 17.30$, $p < 0.001$, $F_{\text{non-self-referencing}} < 1$; in Study 4 for non-self-expressive products, $F_{\text{self-referencing}}(1, 103) = 5.25$, $p = 0.02$, $F_{\text{non-self-referencing}} < 1$; in Study 4 for self-expressive products, $F_{\text{self-referencing}}(1, 124) = 19.61$, $p < 0.001$, $F_{\text{non-self-referencing}} < 1$).

anywhere below the self-esteem scale's midpoint. If people have the tendency to evaluate the self positively, and if the generic self-referencing effect is a function of people's self-view spilling over to a self-associated target via associative self-anchoring, then it follows that chronic self-esteem will only produce a negative effect of self-referencing brand names on brand judgment for values that are generally beyond the typical range of values observed in our and previous research (see Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, for an overview). Indeed, further inspection of the data of Study 2 shows that only beyond two standard deviations below the standardized implicit self-esteem score, the avoidance effect for low self-esteem individuals starts to emerge and tends to become (marginally) significant such that self-referencing brand names are evaluated more negatively than non-self-referencing brand names ($\beta = -0.73$, $t(35) = 1.89$, $p = 0.07$).

Thus, as stated earlier, one way to move forward and to examine the existence of an actual crossover effect is to shift attention from chronic to acute self-esteem, since the latter is situationally induced and so independent of pre-existing population distributions. Furthermore, in this study, we used 'A' as a non-self-referencing prefix in order to assess whether the effects found in the previous studies can be accounted for by the presence of the prefix 'X' (but see footnote 3). Finally, in the present study we extended our examination of the effect of self-referencing brand names to explore whether the bias in brand judgment remains limited to brand name evaluation, as we assessed in Studies 1 and 2, or spills over to affect product related consumer responses, i.e., willingness-to-buy.

9.1. Method

9.1.1. Participants and design

This study used a 2 (type of prefix: self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) \times 2 (self-view manipulation: self-threat vs. self-affirmation) between-subjects factorial design in which 225 students participated in exchange for partial course credit or monetary compensation. We excluded three participants who did not adhere to the experimental instructions and four participants for not completing the full study. The analyses reported below use the remaining 218 responses (for age $M = 21.25$, $SD = 2.32$; 51% female).

9.1.2. Procedure

Participants were told that they would be completing various unrelated tasks and that they would start with a test assessing aspects of their cognitive processing. They were then presented with the Remote Associates Test (RAT; Mednick, 1968), which is a commonly used method to manipulate people's self-esteem by providing positive or negative bogus feedback on their performance (Allen & Sherman, 2011; Collange, Fiske, & Sanitioso, 2009; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). Participants were given a list with three words (e.g., cracker–fly–fighter) and asked to find the fourth word that linked all the other words together (e.g., fire). Based on normative data (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1984), five easy and five difficult items were chosen to ensure that participants would have an ambivalent feeling about their task performance. The items were presented in random order. Participants learned that they had to finish the task within 10 min and that they would receive performance feedback upon test completion. After finishing the RAT, participants read additional information about the test, which explained that past research had demonstrated that scores on the RAT predict professional success, health, and social skills. This information was followed by bogus feedback ostensibly based on well-validated norms. In the self-threat condition, participants learned that with a total of 46 points they had scored in the 10th percentile and hence had performed poorly. Conversely, in the self-affirmation condition, participants read that they had scored 146 points, which was in the 90th percentile, and hence had performed very well.

Next, participants were asked to evaluate two fictitious brand names. They were exposed to the same fictitious brands as used in

Study 2 (i.e., Bottle and Bin), together with a picture of the product. The brand names were randomly presented with either a self-referencing (i.e., My) or non-self-referencing prefix (i.e., A). We measured willingness to buy the product on a seven-point scale (1 = not willing at all, 7 = very willing). After this task, participants answered a one item mood measure (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive) and demographic questions. Subsequently, participants were thoroughly debriefed, compensated, and thanked for their participation.

9.2. Results and discussion

A 2 (type of prefix) \times 2 (self-view manipulation) ANOVA with willingness-to-buy as dependent variable did not produce main effects of type of prefix and self-view manipulation ($F_s < 1$). Moreover, including mood as a covariate in the ANOVA did not change any of the results. Because we did not find unintended effects of mood in this and the next experiment, this variable will not be discussed further. Importantly, the analysis did reveal a significant type of prefix by self-view manipulation interaction ($F(1, 214) = 5.46$, $p = 0.02$). To explicate the interaction, simple main effect analyses were conducted which indicated that self-affirmation resulted in an attraction effect of self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names, such that participants evaluated self-referencing brands more positively compared to non-self-referencing brands after their positive self-view was affirmed ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = 3.39$, $SD = 1.17$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = 2.87$, $SD = 1.20$; $F(1, 214) = 4.74$, $p = 0.03$). The move from chronic to acute self-esteem did not produce the anticipated crossover effect, since results revealed that under conditions of acute self-threat evaluations of self-referencing and non-self-referencing brands did not differ ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = 2.91$, $SD = 1.34$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = 3.17$, $SD = 1.24$ ($F(1, 214) = 1.25$, n.s.)).

The results of Study 3 extend our findings in two ways. First, by showing that not only chronic self-esteem but also acute fluctuations in the self's valence modulate the effect of personal pronouns in brand names on brand judgment, these findings underscore the fundamental role of consumers' self-esteem in accounting for the generic self-referencing effect. Second, we replicated the basic finding that people with a favorable self-view evaluate self-referencing brand names more positively than non-self-referencing brand names.

In contrast, when a positive acute self-view was impaired the self-referencing effect attenuated, but did not reverse into an avoidance effect. This suggests that while focusing on acute self-esteem might (or might not) be a necessary condition to witness the crossover, it appears not to be a sufficient one. Hence, the next and final study adds to the present one by not only focusing on acute self-esteem, but also taking into account the type of product (i.e., self-expressive vs. non-self-expressive), based on the logic that self-expressive products (compared to their non-self-expressive counterparts) not only yield a more salient reflection of the consumer's self, but may also communicate that property to others, which might be a particularly aversive prospect for low-self-esteem consumers, thus possibly prompting an avoidance effect.

10. Study 4

The final study tests the notion that if the avoidance effect of self-associated, generic self-referencing brands under conditions of acute self-threat exists, then it may be particularly pronounced for self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive products. More specifically, reconciling this position with the present findings up to this point, we aim to replicate the basic pattern found so far for non-self-expressive products – an ordinal interaction where the self-referencing attraction effect is only observed for consumers higher, but not lower, in self-esteem. However, for self-expressive products, the theoretically plausible crossover interaction should

be observed, i.e., while the self-referencing effect remains positive under conditions of positive self-esteem, it should reverse under conditions of acute negative self-esteem (following self-threat), such that generic self-referencing brands are evaluated more negatively than non-self-referencing brands. This would constitute direct support for the notion that the attraction effect can turn into an avoidance effect under low self-esteem conditions.

Moreover, in Study 4 we extended our examination of self-related cues to another personal pronoun, i.e., 'I', to rule out the possibility that the generic self-referencing effect is a function of the specific prefix 'my', which may have promoted a sense of ownership (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990). Finally, in extension of brand name evaluation and willingness-to-buy, we examined whether the judgment bias of self-referencing brands also spills over to yet another type of consumer response, i.e., willingness-to-pay.

10.1. Method

10.1.1. Participants and design

Two hundred fifty-one U.S. residents, recruited through Amazon's MTurk, participated in the 2 (type of prefix: self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) \times 2 (type of product: self-expressive vs. non-self-expressive) \times 2 (self-view manipulation: self-threat vs. self-affirmation) between-subjects factorial design in exchange for a small fee. After excluding two participants who did not complete the full study and 14 participants who failed to satisfy an instructional manipulation check (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009), the final sample consisted of 235 participants (for age $M = 35.94$; $SD = 12.62$; 46% female).

10.1.2. Procedure

Similar to Study 3, participants first completed the RAT after which they randomly received positive or negative bogus feedback about their performance. Next, based on the results of a pretest (see below), participants were either asked to rate four brand names of self-expressive products (i.e., a watch and a cell-phone) or of non-self-expressive products (i.e., a dinner plate and socks). Pictures of these products appeared one by one on the computer screen (see Appendix B). The brand names were randomly presented in combination with either self-referencing (i.e., I and My) or non-self-referencing prefixes (i.e., A and X). Participants were asked the amount they were willing to pay for each individual product (in USD). Scores were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) with higher scores indicating higher willingness-to-pay. After this final task, participants were asked demographic questions, thoroughly debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

10.2. Pretest

To ascertain that the products described above as self-expressive and non-self-expressive were viewed as such by participants, a pretest was conducted among thirty-seven participants from the same population as in the main study. One participant did not complete the full study and was therefore excluded from the analyses (for age $M = 37.67$; $SD = 12.79$; 50% female). Participants were asked to complete an adapted version of the Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003) as a measure of self-expressiveness of the products. They indicated their agreement with each of seven items (e.g., "Product X reflects who I am") on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely well). Responses were averaged with higher scores indicating higher self-expressiveness (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$). A paired samples t -test indicated that the self-expressive products were indeed rated as more reflective of the self ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.50$) than the non-self-expressive products ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.09$, $t(35) = 6.10$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern held for each individual pair of self-expressive versus non-self-expressive products (e.g., watch vs. dinner plate). Mean

differences were non-significant for all congruent pairs of products (e.g., watch vs. cell phone).⁷

10.3. Results and discussion

Willingness-to-pay was submitted to a 2 (type of prefix) \times 2 (type of product) \times 2 (self-view manipulation) ANOVA. The analysis revealed a main effect of self-view manipulation ($F(1, 227) = 11.19$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that participants were willing to pay more when their positive self-view was affirmed ($M = \$43.48$, $SD = \$53.19$) compared to when it was threatened ($M = \$32.67$, $SD = \$43.00$). Furthermore, the main effect of type of product proved significant ($F(1, 227) = 210.54$, $p < 0.001$), such that participants were willing to pay more for self-expressive products ($M = \$66.49$, $SD = \$49.53$) than for non-self-expressive products ($M = \$3.33$, $SD = \$1.95$). The main effect of type of prefix was not significant ($F < 1$).

More importantly, the type of prefix by self-view manipulation interaction proved significant ($F(1, 227) = 8.01$, $p < 0.01$). To explicate the interaction, simple main effect analyses were conducted which revealed that participants were not only willing to pay more for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names after self-affirmation ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = \49.99 , $SD = \$60.94$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = \38.63 , $SD = \$46.51$; $F(1, 227) = 6.24$, $p = 0.04$), which parallels the findings of Studies 1–3, but also that participants were (marginally) less willing to pay for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names when their self-view was threatened ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = \26.88 , $SD = \$35.60$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = \38.02 , $SD = \$48.51$; $F(1, 227) = 3.57$, $p = 0.06$), which is in line with the expected avoidance effect.

Finally, the expected three-way interaction of type of prefix, type of product, and self-view manipulation was significant and qualified the previous two-way interaction ($F(1, 227) = 6.96$, $p < 0.01$, see Fig. 1). To probe the interaction, separate ANOVAs were performed for non-self-expressive and self-expressive products. The results in the non-self-expressive products condition paralleled our previous findings and revealed an ordinal prefix by self-view manipulation interaction ($F(1, 103) = 5.55$, $p = 0.02$), indicating that self-affirmation resulted in a higher willingness-to-pay for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = \4.07 , $SD = \$2.17$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = \3.00 , $SD = \$1.80$; $F(1, 103) = 4.15$, $p = 0.04$). For non-self-expressive products, willingness-to-pay for products with self-referencing and non-self-referencing brand names after self-threat did not differ ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = \2.80 , $SD = \$1.44$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = \3.49 , $SD = \$2.13$; $F(1, 103) = 1.68$, n.s.).

Critically, the self-expressive products condition revealed the expected crossover interaction of type of prefix and self-view manipulation ($F(1, 124) = 8.87$, $p < 0.01$). Results indicated that while self-affirmation resulted in a higher willingness-to-pay for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = \97.90 , $SD = \$55.30$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = \71.02 , $SD = \$43.78$; $F(1, 124) = 4.53$, $p = 0.04$), the effect reversed under self-threat conditions. That is, in line with the expected avoidance effect, self-threat resulted in lower willingness to pay for self-expressive products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = \42.92 , $SD = \$38.37$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = \65.83 , $SD = \$50.15$; $F(1, 124) = 4.37$, $p = 0.04$).

⁷ The products used in Studies 2 and 3 were included in this study to test our notion that they were perceived as non-self-expressive by the participants. Participants answered the same seven items measuring self-expressiveness of the products as used in the pretest (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$). Paired samples t -tests indicated that the mean difference in self-expressiveness for each individual pair of self-expressive (i.e., watch and cell phone) versus non-self-expressive products (i.e., bottle and bin) was indeed significant ($t_s > 4.13$, $p < 0.001$), and that the mean difference was non-significant for each pair of non-self-expressive products (i.e., bottle vs. bin vs. socks vs. dinner plate; $t_s < 1.87$, n.s.).

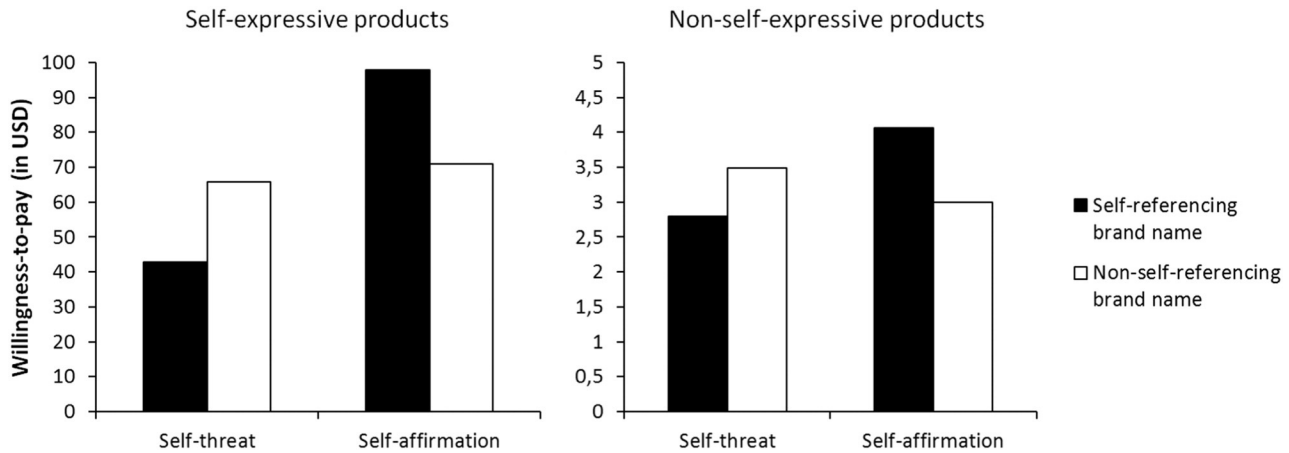


Fig. 1. Willingness-to-pay as a function of type of prefix, type of product and self-view manipulation (Study 4).

The results of Study 4 extend our findings in several ways. First, we replicated the basic finding that people with a favorable self-view (following self-affirmation), evaluate self-referencing brands more positively than non-self-referencing brands. Second, and more importantly, we found that the bias in the evaluation of self-referencing brands leads to negative brand judgment when consumers' self-view was acutely threatened, particularly for self-expressive products. Importantly, and similar to the results of Studies 1–3, this avoidance effect was attenuated for self-referencing brands of non-self-expressive products. These results demonstrate that self-expressiveness of the product is an important factor modulating the qualified effects of personal pronouns in brand names on brand judgment, and suggest that while consumers may be attracted to products that saliently reflect and communicate a positive self-view, they tend to avoid these same products when they 'shine a light' on a more negative self-view.

11. General discussion

The present research extends previous research by examining whether generic references to the self as intrinsic components of brand names influence brand judgment, and systematically explores the conditions that qualify such a generic self-referencing effect. Building on previous research on the name letter effect and implicit egotism (Nuttin, 1985; Pelham et al., 2002), we hypothesized that more generic references to the consumer's self in brand names, and more specifically first person pronouns such as 'I' and 'my', would similarly induce self-associations and affect brand judgment through a process of associative self-anchoring (Gawronski et al., 2007). Given the assumption that the self-referencing effect has a self-evaluative basis, we expected the bias in brand judgment to reflect the valence of consumers' self-view, such that consumers with a favorable self-view would consider self-referencing brand names more attractive and, conversely, that consumers with a negative self-view should show the opposite and would consider these self-referencing brand names as less attractive, thus reflecting an avoidance orientation. While the former effect was postulated to be likely observed for both chronic and acute higher levels of (explicit and implicit) self-esteem, the latter effect was deemed more plausible when conditions actively fostered its detection, i.e., when zooming-in on acute low self-esteem, and when consumers rated brands of self-expressive (rather than non-self-expressive) products.

The findings of a series of five studies were in line with our predictions and were robust across various methodological and conceptual variations. More in particular, we found the predicted qualified effect of generic self-referencing in brand names both in cross-sectional as

well as in experimental studies, both in the lab and in the field, when considering both chronic and acute consumer self-esteem, when self-esteem was assessed both explicitly and implicitly, across a total of 735 respondents using both existing and fictitious brand names, using both 'I' and 'my' as a self-referencing prefix, for a student sample and more heterogeneous samples of European and American consumers, across multiple product categories and services, and across different indices of brand judgment, i.e., number of self-associated products participants possessed, brand name evaluation, willingness-to-buy, and willingness-to-pay.

More specifically, the pre-study revealed that consumers with a positive self-view were more likely to possess (a greater number of) products with a self-referencing brand name. In Study 1 we moved to a more controlled setting and found that consumers with a more positive self-view evaluated fictitious brand names that referred to the self more positively, whereas self-view valence was inconsequential for the evaluation of non-self-referencing brand names. These results provide evidence that the 'default' generic self-referencing effect is indeed a product of 'self-love' (James, 1890), rather than just the 'self' or familiarity with pronouns in brand names. The finding that the effect of consumers' self-view on brand judgment is a product of their self-evaluations was replicated in Studies 2–4 using both explicit and implicit measures of chronic self-esteem and by manipulating the favorability of the consumer's acute self-view. Moreover, study 4 emphasized the important role of the self-expressiveness of the product in affecting in brand judgment, and showed that the positive bias in the evaluation of self-referencing brands can turn into a negative bias when the consumer's self-view was acutely threatened.

Our findings contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, we extend work on the egotism effect by considering its manifestation in a marketing and consumer context, where it until now received only scant attention. Second, we demonstrate that implicit egotism is not limited to arbitrary situations where (brand) names and name letters match (Brendl et al., 2005; Nuttin, 1985; Pelham et al., 2002), or incidental associations between the self and a product (category; Perkins & Forehand, 2012), but generalizes to more generic self-cues such as 'I' and 'my', as intrinsic, yet subtle, components of brand names. In so doing, this research not only contributes to the literature on implicit egotism but also to the branding literature by providing the first evidence that personal pronouns in brand names affect brand name evaluation. Third, this work adds to a deeper understanding of the role of the self's valence in egotism-related phenomena. More specifically, our findings indicate that the self-referencing brand judgment bias is not the same for all people, but that the attraction effect is particularly observed among consumers with a chronic and acute favorable self-

view, whereas an avoidance effect is mainly likely for consumers whose self-view is acutely threatened when considering self-expressive products. By showing that referring to the consumer's self in brand names can be both beneficial and harmful, but that the effect is dependent on the self's valence and on product attributes, this work highlights the importance of understanding the dynamic role of the self in marketing and consumer behavior (Oyserman, 2009; Reed et al., 2012), and more specifically in branding (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). Fourth, our work provides a fuller understanding of the self-referencing effect as a self-maintenance or self-regulation mechanism (cf. Carver, 2004; Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). Although it is well established in marketing and consumer research that people use brands and products to reflect or maintain a positive self-view (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988), and that people are motivated to protect their self-view when threatened (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), the present research puts both well-known observations together and shows that consumers feel attracted to generic self-referencing brands when they can function in a self-affirming way and that consumers avoid generic self-referencing brands when they reflect negatively and saliently on themselves. Fifth, this work introduces self-expressiveness of the target brand as an important determinant for the strength and direction of the self-referencing effect when self-esteem is negative, a factor previously neglected. The finding that the self-referencing effect is particularly pronounced for self-associated targets with a self-expressive function contributes to the ongoing discussion about the generalizability of egotism effects to various spheres of judgment and decision making in daily life (Gallucci, 2003; Pelham et al., 2002; Pelham et al., 2005; Simonsohn, 2011). To summarize, these contributions align with recommendations by Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007, see also Janiszewski, Labroo & Rucker, 2016) who propose that the quality of a contribution increases when research moves from (1) a replication of a prior empirical finding –which we address by replicating the basic notion that references to the self may spill over to unrelated objects to (2) a test of a previously tested hypothesis in a different domain –which we address by demonstrating the impact of more generic references to self, as intrinsic components of brands and products on consumer evaluation and judgment to (3) providing evidence for a new mediator or moderator of an existing relationship –which we address by demonstrating the moderating role of product self-expressiveness to (4) assessing a new relationship between constructs – which we address by demonstrating an avoidance effect in addition to an attraction effect for consumers with acute threatened self-esteem exposed to self-expressive products.

Our findings provide several directions for future research. First, although the 'classic' egotism effects by Pelham and colleagues (Jones et al., 2004; Pelham et al., 2002; Pelham et al., 2005) have been demonstrated in involving, personally relevant contexts (e.g., important life decisions), the evaluation task in our research can be considered relatively non-involving to our participants. On the one hand that makes good sense, since one can argue that the effect is assumed to be more impulsive and associative, rather than propositional and reflective (Strack & Deutsch, 2004; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) and hence will surface particularly under these conditions. Indeed, although consumers were exposed only briefly to self-referencing brand names, their judgment was immediately influenced. Moreover, these findings were observed absent of usage or ownership (Beggan, 1992; Kahneman et al., 1990), nor after repeated pairing of the self with the brand (Perkins & Forehand, 2012). On the other hand, systematic research on the role of personal relevance is currently lacking and hence, future research might profitably explore whether the underlying psychological processes differ across differentially involving personal circumstances. For example, one might argue that references to the self might increase one's experienced personal relevance, or product involvement (see Kressmann et al., 2006). While an elevated level of such involvement need not affect the *direction* of a self-referencing effect (increased involvement is not positive or negative per se, see Chaiken & Trope, 1999), it may well affect its *process*, such that in the "tug-of-war"

between more implicit and impulsive processes on the one hand, and more explicit and reflective processes on the other (Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009) that may drive such effects, the balance might well shift in the direction of the latter –a notion that must await future research.

Furthermore, future studies might assess whether the self-referencing effect is culture-specific. That is, whether the phenomenon is mainly observed in Western, individualistic cultures where holding and expressing self-centered motives and cognitions is deemed acceptable, or also extends to Eastern cultures where people may be more restrained in expressing a positive self-view, and where the self is expressed through collective identities, i.e., in 'we' instead of 'I' terms (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Moreover, moving beyond cultural differences, one might speculate about the motivational consequences of using plural pronouns such as 'our' or 'we' as a prefix in brand names. Possibly, such pronouns might trigger more *social* consumer motivations, such as a 'belongingness' mindset and its concurrent goals, or an affiliation motive. If so, such effects may similarly be modulated by chronic or acute differences in consumer self-esteem as previous research suggests (see Dommer, Swaminathan, & Ahluwalia, 2013).

Our research contributes to business practice by showing that simply referring to the consumer's self by using such pronouns as self-cues in brand names may influence a host of consumption decisions. In so doing, and given that people's default self-view is usually positive, the current findings point to a branding strategy that may increase overall brand ratings. In addition, our findings indicate conditions that play a key role in determining when this brand naming strategy is likely to be particularly successful, as for instance when the marketplace setting is self-affirming (Lee, Kim, & Vohs, 2011; White & Argo, 2009).

12. Conclusion

We began this article by noting that the use of personal pronouns in branding has surged in the last decade. Whether this brand naming strategy is based on marketers' intuition or not, the present findings suggest that there is more to it than meets the eye. Seemingly trivial, generic self-cues in brand names can mobilize self-referencing effects, leading 'self-loving' consumers to evaluate pronoun containing brands more positively (and their low self-esteem counterparts to do the opposite). As such, the present findings not only underscore the fundamental role of the self in brand judgment, but also provide a provocative alternative account for the stunning marketing success of such global brands as iPhone and MySpace.

Appendix A



Fig. A1. Stimuli used in Studies 2 and 3.



Fig. B1. Self-expressive products used in Study 4.



Fig. B2. Non-self-expressive products used in Study 4.

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