

# When are automatic social comparisons not automatic? The effect of cognitive systems on user imagery-based self-concept activation<sup>☆</sup>

Mark R. Forehand<sup>a,\*</sup>, Andrew Perkins<sup>b,1</sup>, Americus Reed II<sup>c,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Washington, Foster School of Business, Seattle, WA 98195-3200, USA

<sup>b</sup> Rice University, Houston, TX 77005-1892, USA

<sup>c</sup> Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6340, USA

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## Abstract

Following the tenets of the selective accessibility model of assimilation and contrast, three studies observed implicit consumer self-concept assimilation (contrast) to age-based imagery when the discrepancy between the self-concept and advertisement imagery was moderate (extreme). However, these responses were not fully automatic as only consumers who processed user imagery reflectively demonstrated increased accessibility of similarity/dissimilarity information. Impulsive processing of the user imagery instead increased the accessibility of consumer's pre-existing dominant self-age association. A final experiment revealed that these changes in the active-self mediated response to subsequently advertised products. Taken together, these results support a two-systems model of cognition and suggest that assimilation/contrast responses to advertising and subsequent behavior are influenced by the consumer's processing strategy.

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Self-identification with a social group has been found to influence a wide variety of consumer behaviors including spokesperson, sponsorship and advertising response (Brasel & Gips, 2011; Deshpande & Stayman, 1994; Dimofte, Forehand, & Deshpande, 2004; Forehand & Deshpande, 2001; Grier & Deshpande, 2001), food consumption (O'Guinn & Meyer, 1984; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983; Wooten, 1995; Wooten & Reed II, 2000), media usage (Saegert, Hoover, & Hilger, 1985), information processing tendencies (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Meyers-Levy & Sternthal, 1991; Wheeler, Petty, & Bizer, 2005), preferences for global versus local products (Zhang & Khare 2009) and charitable giving (Reed II, Aquino, & Levy, 2007; Shang, Reed II, & Croson, 2008). Unsurprisingly, marketers often try to get their products to

appeal to consumers by presenting an appealing identity in their advertising imagery and content. For example, the Axe brand consistently depicts its users as young, attractive men whom equally attractive women find irresistible. When a consumer views such an advertisement featuring young, virile actors, marketers hope that the consumer will identify with those actors, or at least aspire to be like them. Because youth is valued in society, it is thought that identification with youth should strengthen the consumer's *self-youth* social identity and lead to positive feelings toward the self and the brands or products that are associated with youth.

Social identities such as the youth-identity previously described develop over time when they are repeatedly activated and reinforced by cues in the external environment (Reed II & Forehand, 2010). Although the power of these cues to shape identification is generally accepted, the likely effect of any given cue is less straight-forward (Sela & Shiv, 2009). Previous research on *assimilation/contrast effects* in consumer behavior suggests that social identity dimensions that are highlighted in marketing stimuli may reinforce a consumer's social identity by either

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [forehand@u.washington.edu](mailto:forehand@u.washington.edu) (M.R. Forehand), [aperkins@rice.edu](mailto:aperkins@rice.edu) (A. Perkins), [amreed@wharton.upenn.edu](mailto:amreed@wharton.upenn.edu) (A. Reed II).

<sup>1</sup> Contribution was equal and authors are listed alphabetically.

strengthening (an assimilation effect) or weakening (a contrast effect) identity-relevant characteristics within the self-concept. In the current context, a consumer exposed to youthful imagery might attend to similarities between himself and the imagery and thereby increase his personal sense of youth. Alternatively, the consumer might classify these actors as clear “others” (Berger & Heath, 2007) and this categorization could weaken his self-association with youth.

A generally accepted model of these identification effects argues that primes activate a *relative* subset of multi-dimensional associations (see Wheeler & Sleeth-Kneppler, 2011) and self-related information. The resulting “active-self-concept” may then alter subsequent perceptions and behaviors (DeMarree, Wheeler, & Petty, 2005; Markus & Kunda, 1986; Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007). This activation of sub-components of the self-concept can occur at both conscious (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992) and unconscious levels (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; DeJong, 1979), and can affect behavior (Wheeler et al., 2007). Supporting this contention, Smeesters and Mandel (2006) observed that changes in consumer body-image self-esteem after exposure to models in the media are shaped by assimilation and contrast processes and that the underlying basis of this influence is self-knowledge activation. This conception of the active self also bears on models of assimilation and contrast that argue that assimilation (contrast) occurs when standard-consistent (inconsistent) information becomes more accessible (Mussweiler, 2003). In the current context, Mussweiler’s selective accessibility model would predict that comparison to extremely discrepant user imagery should increase the accessibility of dissimilarity information while comparison to moderately discrepant user imagery is more likely to increase the accessibility of similarity information. Although shifts in accessibility can occur automatically (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004; Stapel & Blanton, 2004), we propose that the likelihood of an assimilation/contrast response to user imagery will increase to the degree that the consumer reflectively processes the user imagery, a result that would support recently developed two-systems model of social cognition (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Hafner & Trampe, 2009; Strack & Deutch, 2005).

This research makes several important contributions to our understanding of assimilation and contrast generally and to consumer response to user imagery specifically. First, by incorporating recent theorizing on two-systems models of social cognition, this project identifies an important moderator of traditional models of assimilation and contrast (Mussweiler, 2003). Previous research has observed that assimilation and contrast responses can occur automatically (Bargh, 1989; Dijksterhuis et al., 1998; Stapel & Blanton, 2004), even in response to subliminal presentation of social information (Mussweiler et al., 2004). Although such automatic effects are clearly possible, we argue that the degree to which social comparison elicits similarity/dissimilarity information depends on whether consumers engage in reflective or impulsive social comparison. Second, the present experiments demonstrate the proposed influence of social comparison on implicit self-activation through the use of Implicit Association Tests (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) that allow a more precise

assessment of self-activation than other direct or indirect measures. When prior research on assimilation and contrast has used indirect measures of accessibility, they have typically used lexical decision tasks (see Mussweiler & Strack, 1999 for a review). Although such tasks do measure accessibility indirectly, they have traditionally been used to measure general accessibility of a concept as opposed to the strength of association of that concept with the self. Given that implicit self-concept activation is generally presumed to underlie many assimilation and contrast responses, the IAT’s attention to precise self-activation and association of the primed concept with the self is quite useful for assessing the underlying process. Finally, this project demonstrates that user-imagery-based shifts in implicit self-conception also influence subsequent judgments of identity-related products.

## Conceptual development

### *Assimilation and contrast*

Advertising user imagery is capable of producing either an assimilation or a contrast response within a viewing consumer’s self-concept, whether that information is the relatively subtle use of identity-possessing actors or the blatant and explicit targeting of specific identity groups (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000). The direction and extent of this influence is determined by a wide range of variables including the momentary salience and activation of the self (Stapel & Koomen, 2001a; Stapel & Van der Zee, 2006), whether the context is presented as an abstract composite/stereotype or a specified and known exemplar (Bargh, 1989; Dijksterhuis et al. 1998; Stapel & Suls, 2004), the appropriateness of the context as a comparison standard (Forehand & Perkins, 2005; Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987; Martin, Seta, & Crelia, 1990; Schwarz & Bless, 1992), and the distinctiveness or extremity of activated information (Stapel, Koomen, & Velthuisen, 1998).

The selective accessibility model (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler & Strack, 1999) attempts to parsimoniously explain these many moderators of assimilation and contrast by arguing that any factor that activates context-consistent information will produce assimilation while any factor that activates context-inconsistent information will produce contrast. Supporting this contention, the magnitude of comparison effects is often influenced by the amount of available target knowledge (Chapman & Johnson, 1999). For example, individuals who compare themselves to others outside their identity categories differentially activate dissimilarity information (compared to those who compare within an identity category), promoting a contrast response (Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002). Similarly, individuals who engage in global (local) processing of a context demonstrate assimilation (contrast) and this processing effect is partially mediated by the accessibility of judgment-consistent knowledge (Forster, Liberman, & Kuschel, 2008). The selective accessibility model is also supported by evidence that assimilation is more common when evaluators possess an activated social self-construal (“we”) as opposed to a personal self-construal (“I”), presumably because a social self-construal facilitates activation of context-consistent information (Stapel & Koomen, 2001a).

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