

# Understanding the impact of self-concept on the stylistic properties of images<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Much research has shown that the stylistic properties of visual images can serve as an important source of persuasion. However, the existing literature seldom incorporates characteristics of consumers, such as self-concept, as a determining factor in the effectiveness of images' stylistic properties. In the context of exploring a specific stylistic property, camera angle, we demonstrate across three experiments that when an upward-looking camera angle is employed to depict a product, participants with an ought-self (motivated by duties and obligations) generate more favorable product evaluations than participants with an ideal-self (motivated by hopes and aspirations). The reverse is found when a downward-looking angle is utilized. We also explore the mechanism underlying these effects. That is, individuals with an ideal-self and ought-self use different control strategies (influencing versus adapting to existing realities) impacting their product evaluations.

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Recently, there has been a steady increase in the study of the stylistic properties of visual images on advertising persuasiveness. Stylistic properties refer to a variety of factors that impact the manner in which visual material is displayed, such as camera angles, visual perspectives, the orientation (e.g., vertical, diagonal) of objects displayed in a scene, as well as various other production elements (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 2005). This stream of research has demonstrated that the persuasive power of ads often resides in pictorial depictions, and visual images in ads convey semantically meaningful concepts to consumers via their stylistic properties (Messaris, 1997; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002, 2004; Scott, 1994; Scott & Batra, 2003). Consider, for example, the stylistic property of camera angle. When a product is photographed from an upward-looking angle, viewers tend to associate the product with potency and powerfulness (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy,

2005). This association may be due to viewers' experiences with those they literally "look up to." For example, young children must often look up to view an adult's face.

Although many insights have emerged from the investigation of stylistic properties, few researchers have examined characteristics of the consumers themselves, such as self-concept, as a determining factor in the persuasiveness of such elements. It seems possible that, depending on the aspect of self-concept that is accessible, consumers may interpret the same stylistic property in very different ways. In this paper, we study a particular aspect of self-concept, the ideal-self versus the ought-self, and examine its effect on people's interpretations and evaluations of the stylistic properties of images in the context of camera angles. We also explore the mechanism underlying how consumers with different self-concepts process stylistic properties.

We propose that an ideal-self versus an ought-self prompts consumers to recruit different paths to achieve control, primary vs. secondary, which in turn affects their judgments of the stylistic properties employed in the ad, and ultimately, impacts evaluations of the advertised product. Specifically, consumers with an ought-self achieve control by fitting into existing

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realities and aligning with powerful others (products, people etc; i.e., secondary control). For instance, consumers sometimes purchase a product to fit into a desirable social group (e.g., a prestigious social club). Accordingly, an upward-looking camera angle may foster more favorable product evaluations among consumers with an ought-self because such an angle confers the perception of power and potency (Kraft, 1987; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1992). On the other hand, consumers with an ideal-self achieve a sense of control by influencing existing realities in the surrounding environment to fit self (i.e., primary control). As an example, consumers buy a product to sustain their autonomy (e.g., buying a car to facilitate transportation). Thus, a downward-looking camera angle may trigger more favorable product evaluations among consumers with an ideal-self because an object presented at this angle is perceived to be less threatening and more malleable.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we review the literatures related to stylistic properties and the implications of self-concept for persuasion. We use feeling of control (primary vs. secondary) as a theoretical framework to examine how self-concept affects consumers' processing of ads employing a specific stylistic property, camera angle, and investigate how this processing ultimately affects product evaluations. Three experiments were conducted to test our hypotheses and provide robust and converging evidence for our theorizing regarding the effect of self-concept on the evaluations of products depicted from different camera angles. Study 2 reveals the mediating effect of a primary- vs. secondary-control mechanism, and study 3 manipulates control strategies and provides evidence for the impact of the proposed control mechanism on product evaluations.

## Theoretical background

### *Stylistic properties and persuasion*

Recent research suggests that the stylistic properties of an ad can serve as central arguments by conveying descriptive concepts that are diagnostic for product evaluations (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 2005; Wang & Peracchio, 2008). Thus, stylistic properties subsequently affect consumers' perceptions of the product and the effectiveness of an ad. For instance, Peracchio and Meyers-Levy (2005) found that the stylistic property of product orientation in an ad (e.g., the advertised product is displayed in a diagonal orientation) affects viewers' perceptions by communicating descriptive concepts (e.g., dynamism and activity). However, this effect appears to occur only when viewers engage in ample processing of the ad and the accessibility of the concept (e.g., dynamism) is heightened by ad copy. In addition, this research revealed that the stylistic elements of an ad can affect how consumers process other ad elements, such as ad copy. Thus, those highly motivated individuals, who tend to engage in detailed and extensive processing, use the stylistic properties of an ad as a starting point for examining the ad and forming their product evaluations.

Despite this progress, the existing research on stylistic properties seldom takes into consideration characteristics of the

consumers themselves. For example, individual differences among consumers are likely to systematically affect the perceptions of the stylistic properties of an ad. In this paper, we argue that a particular consumer characteristic, self-concept, can play a critical role in affecting how individuals perceive stylistic properties and may ultimately impact their evaluations of the advertised product.

### *Self-concept and information processing*

Self-concept, or how consumers view and understand themselves, has been found to play an intriguing role in explaining consumer behavior, ranging from the persuasiveness of ad messages, to evaluations of brand extensions, as well as perceptions of product attributes (e.g., Monga & John, 2007; Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009). This paper focuses on one aspect of self-concept, the ideal-self and the ought-self (Higgins, 1987). The ideal-self is the representation of the set of attributes that one (or someone else) believes an individual would ideally possess. It is closely related to one's hopes, wishes, and aspirations (e.g., wanting a luxury sedan, dreaming of an exotic vacation). The ought-self is the representation of the set of attributes that one (or someone else) believes an individual should possess and is closely related to one's obligations, duties, and responsibilities (e.g., taking care of aging parents, behaving professionally at work).

### *The ideal- versus the ought-self and consumers' feeling of control*

Consumers with an ideal-self versus an ought-self rely on different types of information when forming product evaluations (Pham & Avnet, 2004). We theorize that self-concept should also affect how consumers achieve a feeling of control. Control is defined as "causing an intended event" (Skinner & Chapman, 1984; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984). The intended event may involve "influencing objective or external realities or influencing the personal, psychological impact of those realities" (Weisz et al., 1984, p. 958). There are two paths to achieve control: *primary control* and *secondary control* (Chipperfield & Perry, 2006; Weisz et al., 1984). Consumers with primary control gain a sense of control by *influencing* existing realities, e.g., exerting influence over other people, objects, and circumstances. Primary control is achieved "via acts involving personal agency, dominance, or even aggression. These acts are often intended to express, enhance, or sustain individualism and personal autonomy" (Weisz et al., 1984, p. 956; also demonstrated in Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). By contrast, consumers with secondary control gain a sense of control by *accommodating* to existing realities and maximizing satisfaction or goodness of fit with things as they are. This secondary control is achieved "via acts that limit individualism and personal autonomy, but enhance perceived alignment or goodness of fit with people, objects, or circumstances in their world" (Weisz et al., 1984, p. 956; also demonstrated in Rothbaum et al., 1982). Thus, the fundamental difference between primary and secondary control is altering the

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