

Research Article

# A social identity perspective on aspirational advertising: Implicit threats to collective self-esteem and strategies to overcome them

Claudiu V. Dimofte<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ronald C. Goodstein<sup>b</sup>, Anne M. Brumbaugh<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> College of Business Administration, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182, USA

<sup>b</sup> McDonough School of Business, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057, USA

<sup>c</sup> Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC 29425, USA

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## Abstract

This research explores the effects of consumers' self-comparisons with specific social identities associated with a product-based out-group that are primed by aspirational advertising. We hypothesize and find that when a consumer's relevant identity is inferior to the primed social identity, product attitudes suffer. The process accounting for this effect consists of a negative social comparison between the two that reduces the consumer's related collective self-esteem. This outcome is more (less) apparent under conditions of high comparison salience (identification with the inferior in-group). We also demonstrate two marketer strategies that alleviate this negative effect: facilitated affiliation (i.e., making desired out-group membership appear accessible) and indirect self-affirmation (i.e., improving perceptions of worth associated with other self identities). The results advance theoretical knowledge of social identity processes influencing consumer attitudes.

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It is widely acknowledged that consumers' purchases and brand relationships contribute to their social identities in ways that demonstrate the power of marketing and the value of brand equity. Phenomena such as brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) attest to the importance that consumers place on their marketplace brand and social interactions. These interactions are guided by relevant social identities that constitute facets of the consumers' self-concepts and that marketing stimuli and situations bring to bear. Among the marketing contexts wherein consumers' social identities are most clearly at play is that of aspirational

advertising, a marketing communications strategy that features products associated with social out-groups that the consumer seeks membership into. There are two basic conditions for an advertisement to entail an aspirational quality: (1) the prior association of the promoted product with a favorably perceived social group; and (2) the consumer's non-member status in that group (cf., Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

Much of the previous research on the topic employed promotional messages involving luxury goods. This is in line with the perception that "consumption of luxury is often discussed in terms of aspirations to elite status or to assert symbolic dominance over others" (Dion & Arnould, 2011, p. 2). Advertisements for luxury goods clearly entail an aspirational quality for the average consumer, who does not belong to the wealthy social class but naturally aspires to. However, non-luxury goods/services can also just as easily display an aspirational dimension: consider a casual runner seeing an advertisement for an energy drink. The purchase and

\* Corresponding author at: San Diego State University, College of Business Administration, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182, USA.

E-mail addresses: [cdimofte@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:cdimofte@mail.sdsu.edu) (C.V. Dimofte),

[goodster@georgetown.edu](mailto:goodster@georgetown.edu) (R.C. Goodstein),

[anne.brumbaugh@alumni.duke.edu](mailto:anne.brumbaugh@alumni.duke.edu) (A.M. Brumbaugh).

use or consumption of the promoted product are then offered by the marketer as a potential way for the consumer to access the desired social group (i.e., athletes). We argue that luxury aspiration advertising is just a special case of the aspirational advertising account we put forth in this research, wherein we move beyond luxury goods in order to extend both theory and managerial relevance.

In the general advertising framework, the spokespersons or actors featured in advertisements are the means by which marketers convey or suggest what the aspirational out-group is. Thus, the energy drink ad will likely employ professional athlete types as suggestive primes, making the aspirational nature of the message apparent. At the same time, the viewer's realization that membership in the desirable featured (or implied) out-group has not yet been achieved will emerge from a social comparison process whereby the relevant social identity (i.e., *myself as an athletic person*) is salient and inferior to that featured in the ad (i.e., *that is a real athlete*). This is related to recent social psychology research on women and ideal body images, which found that when idealized body images were blatantly highlighted in ads the message was received negatively and the source was denigrated (Wan, Ansons, Chattopadhyay, & Leboe, 2013). When presented subtly, however, the ads were perceived positively, despite drops in self-image. As the authors suggest, fruitful research opportunities exist in looking at individual differences in how people cope with such ads (an issue they did not investigate), specifically "in terms of self-esteem" (Wan et al., 2013, p. 45). This is one of the contributions of the current research; we argue that an unfavorable social comparison resides at the core of aspirational advertising and often produces reductions in consumers' collective self-esteem that lead to negative product attitudes. Across several studies, we support this conceptual account, demonstrate its processing mechanism, and present specific variables (consumer- and stimulus-specific) that moderate the effect.

## Conceptual background

Research has shown that consumers are quite adept at noting and articulating the social identities associated with specific products. Haire (1950) found that an instant coffee buyer was perceived to be a lazy housewife compared to a drip coffee buyer who cared about her family. Grubb and Hupp (1968) showed that the Volkswagen owner was perceived as creative, practical, and thrifty, and that the Pontiac owner was seen as adventurous, sporty, and pleasure-oriented. Importantly, research demonstrates that congruency between one's self and a product or category-related social identity leads to favorable effects for an advertised brand or product (Govers & Schoormans, 2005). This is the basic precept behind the tried and true strategy of target marketing.

The principles behind cognitive consistency theories (Festinger, 1954) provide the mechanism by which consistency between a product-related identity and the self leads to positive product evaluations. Specifically, a product has a positive association with the social identity that personifies it, and exposure to that product, often via an advertisement, activates beliefs about this identity in consumers' minds. Consumers then compare themselves to that identity to assess if they are similar and thus in the

same in-group. If similar, their in-group status creates a positive association with the respective identity, and in order to maintain cognitive consistency, consumers adopt a favorable disposition toward the product (e.g., Bolton & Reed, 2004).

What happens, however, when the comparison between this social identity and the self is unfavorable? Think of the casual jogger who compares himself to professional athletes linked with high performance running shoes or a middle-aged woman who compares herself to the young models with flawless skin closely associated with beauty products. If the perceived difference between the consumer and product-related identity is favorable (i.e., they are similar enough), the comparison yields positive product attitudes. However, if the perceived difference is unfavorable (i.e., they are dissimilar), the comparison may yield negative attitudes toward the product (Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002).

We propose that under certain conditions associated with aspirational advertising, social comparisons with an identity associated with a product (category) may actually lower product attitudes. Relative to prior research, this account advances consumer psychology knowledge in important ways. Previous work in social psychology has generally looked at the assimilation or contrast effects that occur when individuals engage in purposeful or spontaneous self-comparisons in non-commercial contexts, with direct consequences for self-evaluations (e.g., Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002). In consumer research, social comparison theory has been applied to evaluate consumer judgments of the idealized lifestyles of reference groups (Englis & Solomon, 1995), to assess consumer self-satisfaction after exposure to ads featuring idealized others (e.g., Richins, 1991), or to evaluate how non-targeted consumers may respond to advertisements aimed at out-groups (e.g., Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000). The related work of White and Argo (2009) looked at the avoidance tendencies that low self-esteem consumers have toward products associated with identities that are threatened via unrelated information primed prior to ad processing.

Our research examines a more complex theoretical account involving a triad of constructs: the self (the ad viewer), a directly salient other (the ad spokesperson), and an implied relevant other (the primed product-related social identity). Thus, we integrate Greenwald's (Greenwald et al., 2002) Unified Theory and Crocker and Luhtanen's research on collective self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) to explain the mechanisms that yield negative product attitudes following unfavorable social comparisons. Five studies demonstrate the conditions and processes that drive these effects and provide support for our theoretical account.

Within this social comparison account we introduce the *product-related social identity* construct and show that consumers are aware of and respond to it in aspirational advertising, in ways that marketers may not realize. These identities are part of the schema associated with product categories and their ads (Goodstein, 1993). We apply this psychological construct to marketing practice to suggest that when segmenting the market one needs to be concerned with segment profiles that already exist, in particular if they do not map well onto the ones marketers

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