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## **Me, Myself, and Ikea: Qualifying the Role of Implicit Egotism in Brand Judgment**

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This research demonstrates that consumers like brand names better when they start with a personal pronoun (e.g., iTunes and MySpace), particularly when the consumer's self needs affirmation. Moreover, we show that this attraction effect can turn into an avoidance effect when the valence of people's self-evaluations is taken into account.

### **[to cite]:**

Jacob H. Wiebenga and Bob M. Fennis (2012) , "Me, Myself, and Ikea: Qualifying the Role of Implicit Egotism in Brand Judgment", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 40, eds. Zeynep Gürhan-Canli, Cele Otnes, and Rui (Juliet) Zhu, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 733-734.

### **[url]:**

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# Me, Myself, and Ikea: Qualifying the Role of Implicit Egotism in Brand Judgment

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We frequently like occupations, partners, cities, streets, birthdays, and a host of other objects, events and entities because, essentially, we like ourselves (Pelham et al. 2005). This intriguing phenomenon is known as ‘implicit egotism’ – the unconscious attraction to things that are linked to the self (Pelham et al. 2002). Although abundant research in numerous contexts has shown its pervasive existence (Jones et al. 2004; Pelham et al. 2002), research in the consumer sphere is surprisingly scarce (but see Brendl et al. 2005). 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 (BOIP 2012). The present research extends previous findings and examines whether and when such self-referencing brand names affect brand judgment, and under which conditions the self-referencing effect might turn from positive into negative.

To understand the possible impact of pronouns in brand names, we draw from work on the disproportionate liking of people for things that are associated with the self (Greenwald and Banaji 1995). Most notably in this regard is the finding that people even like their own names to such an extent that they like the letters that comprise it over other letters in the alphabet (Nuttin 1985). Recent research has found that this so-called ‘name letter effect’ extends to the liking of people, places, and products with similar name letters (Brendl et al. 2005; Pelham et al. 2005). The underlying rationale is that name letters produce a link between the self and the target which subsequently leads to a transfer of self-evaluations to the self-associated target (Gawronski et al. 2007).

It is striking to note that most studies have limited themselves to examining the effects of implicit egotism by assessing name letters as proxies for self-referencing. We, however, posit that self-associations can also be created by more generic self-referencing stimuli. More in particular, we propose that also first person pronouns like ‘I’ and ‘my’ may function as persuasion cues in eliciting a bias toward the self-associated target. Hence, we expect that brands featuring self-referencing pronouns in their name will be liked better than brand names without such pronouns.

Implicit egotism is thought to be a self-enhancement mechanism which enables people to preserve their positive self-view (Pelham et al. 2002). Research on self-enhancement has shown that people often respond to self-threat in ways to reaffirm their sense of self-worth (Tesser 2000). One way in which people compensate for this threat is by enhancing the value of external targets that are associated with the self (Jones et al. 2002). We posit that if pronouns in brand names create a self-target association, these brands might also function as a source for self-affirmation. More specifically, we propose that the positive effect of self-referencing brands on brand name liking will be more pronounced under conditions of self-threat, i.e., when the need for self-affirmation is high.

To date, research on implicit egotism has found that the bias resulting from the self-target association is generally positive because the ‘default’ evaluation of the self is mildly positive (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Yamaguchi et al. 2007). Hence, self-referencing stimuli are assumed to enhance the favorability of practically anything even when the self-associated target itself is undesirable (Nelson and Simmons 2007). But what if people’s self-evaluations are not positive but negative? If the self-referencing effect hinges on the

valence of people’s self-evaluations, and if the positive bias is the result of a transfer of positive self-evaluations to the target, then, by implication, also negative self-evaluations can spill over to the target resulting in a negative bias. It follows that attraction can turn into avoidance or at least an unfavorably valenced brand judgment when consumers’ self-evaluations are negative. We tested these notions in three studies.

Study 1 showed that, while controlling for brand familiarity, existing brand names with a generic self-referencing pronoun (e.g., iPhone, iDeal) were evaluated more positive than non-self-referencing brand names (e.g., X-Box, X-Travel) or brand names without any prefix (e.g., Blackberry, Paradigit). Interestingly, this study also showed that references to the self that are less specific than ‘I’ (i.e., brand names starting with ‘you’ or ‘u’) did not yield the implicit egotism effect.

Study 2 ruled out the alternative account that the previous effects were driven by other, existing brand name associations than with the self. More in particular, in Study 2 we used fictitious instead of existing brand names and were able to replicate the effects found in Study 1 while using ‘I’ and ‘my’ as self-referencing stimuli. Moreover, we tested whether the self-referencing effect was more pronounced when the self-concept was threatened. As hypothesized, we found that the preference for generic self-referencing (vs. non-self-referencing) brand names only increased after self-threat but not when the self was affirmed.

Study 3 sought to provide converging evidence for our notions, and to directly test the role of negative self-evaluations in implicit egotism while using a consumer sample representative of the population. That is, Study 3 tested the hypothesis that under conditions of negative self-evaluations the attraction effect turns into an avoidance effect. As expected, results showed reduced (instead of increased) liking of generic self-referencing brand names when consumers’ self-evaluations were negative. In contrast, we found that positive self-evaluations led to increased liking of brands that referred to the self.

The present findings extend previous research on implicit egotism by taking into account the valence of the consumer’s self-evaluations. Moreover, the present work showed that implicit egotism is not limited to such incidental instances where (brand) names and name letters match, but extends to more generic references to the self, and particularly when the consumer is in need of self-affirmation. Simply referring to the consumer’s self by using personal pronouns in brand names may therefore influence a host of consumption decisions and hence account for the stunning marketing success of such brands as iPod, Ikea and MySpace.

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