Self-Concept as a Mediator in Global Advertising

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I. Self-concept as a psychological variable

Self-concept, a system of thoughts and feelings about the self, plays a compelling role in human existence (Prince, 1993). The significant impact of self-concept on the cognitive and emotional, as well as on behavioral systems of individuals has been well documented in the psychological literature (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Cousins, 1989; Scherer, 1984). Two distinct components of self-concept, actual self-concept and ideal self-concept, have been identified by various researchers (Rosenberg, 1979; Dolich, 1969; Higgins, 1987; Sirgy, 1982). While actual self-concept is based on the reality of how individuals perceive themselves, ideal self-concept is based on the image that individuals ideally wish to have of themselves (Zinkhan and Hong, 1991).

Certain aspects of self-concept are found to be universal. Others, such as the precise inner structure and content of the self, are culture specific (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In cross-cultural psychological research, two separate categories of self construals have been identified: the independent self construal and the interdependent self construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989; Eid & Diener, 2001). As an example of a culture which fosters independent self construals, North American culture values independence of the self from others

and encourages the pursuit of individual dreams, self-realization, and expression of uniqueness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). On the other hand, Asian cultures are thought to promote the interconnectedness of the self with others through harmonious relationships and a sociocentric, collective spirit, thus cultivating interdependent self construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

II. Role of self-concept in advertising

There has been an increasing interest in the research on self-concept in studies of consumer behavior and advertising (Kotler, 1984; Pollay, 1986; Malhotra, 1988). The role of ideal self-concept can be especially detrimental in the field of advertising. Various studies have demonstrated that advertising effectiveness, which constitutes brand memory, brand attitude, and purchase intentions, is closely linked to the viewer's self-concept (Zinkhan & Hong, 1991). Upon viewing an advertisement, individuals go through a process of comparing their self-concept with the portrayed image of the product (Zinkhan & Hong, 1991). Researchers have outlined various self-concept/product-image models and theories to explain the process of consumer decision making (Mehta, 1999). For instance, in his self-consistency motivation theory, Sirgy (1982) claimed that consumers have preferences for products which match their own images of themselves. Thus, the lesser the discrepancies between the product image and the consumer's self-concept, the greater self-congruity will be, resulting in positive consumer behavior towards that product (Mehta, 1999). Other researchers, such as Belk (1988) have argued that preferences for products whose images match the self-concepts of the consumers are a result of self-expression (Mehta, 1999). By purchasing a product, individuals communicate symbolic meanings to others and to themselves about their own self-images (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Thus, when advertisers use symbolism to convey a certain image of their product, they should expect that the way consumers will react to the advertisement and, ultimately, to the product will depend upon whether or not the connotations of the ad will resonate with their own self-concepts (Malhotra, 1988; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Mehta, 1999).

Due to innate differences in values and behavioral norms found across cultures, culture's influence on individuals' ideal self-concepts seems inevitable. However, certain facets of these ideals are perhaps too universal and certain desires too primitive to be configured by cultural constraints. While they may diverge in their precise characteristics and attributes, some timeless ideals have found a common denominator across cultures, races, and ages. They have become unspoken truths that have defined self-concepts. The veneration of beauty and the allure of physical attractiveness are among them.

III. Beauty and the individual

The pursuit of beauty is a universal quest acknowledged by mankind for millennia. Since its personification by Aphrodite, philosophers have seen beauty as the ultimate path towards truth, while poets have associated the loss of a sense and recognition of beauty with a perishing soul. The appreciation of beauty and physical attractiveness has been recognized continuously through various psychological evaluations and social rewards by modern societies. A vast amount of research has been conducted in social psychology demonstrating physical attractiveness as a significant psychological variable, as it consistently affects our judgments in social interactions (Berscheid, 1981; Bull and Rumsey, 1988). Studies show that attractiveness is rewarded with higher levels of professional and social success (Dion et al., 1972). Furthermore, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that personality traits are inferred from physical appearances, such that positive characteristics are typically attributed to attractive people (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Bull and Rumsey, 1988).

IV. What makes us attractive?

The quest to discover what makes a face attractive began in Ancient Greece with the discovery of the Golden Proportion. The Greeks believed that the mathematical ratio of 1:1.6, which was found in different elements of Nature, was also responsible for making a human face appear attractive (Huntley, 1970). A number of studies have been conducted in the last few decades examining the

correlation between average facial configurations and attractiveness (Rubenstein et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2002; Rhodes & Tremewan, 1996). Langlois and Roggman (1990), for instance, digitally averaged pictures of ninety-six Caucasian male and female faces and asked 300 judges to rate the faces on their attractiveness. The results systematically demonstrated that the more mathematically averaged the faces were, the more attractive they were perceived to be. Thornhill & Gangestad (1993) argued that mathematically averaged faces are perceived to be attractive since their traits are aligned similarly to those of the average population (Little et al., 2002).

Even though averageness has been found to be essential for the face to be perceived attractive, it is not an exclusive characteristic. Other features that influence perception are facial symmetry (Grammer and Thornhill, 1994; Perrett et al., 1999) and youthfulness (Zebrowitz, Olson, & Hoffman, 1993). These findings attest to the fascination with beauty in societies by probing a range of studies that have tried to uncover the science of beauty and understand what contributes to attractiveness. Furthermore, they present indispensable information to the exceedingly prolific beauty industry for successfully identifying and creating products that aim at making people more attractive. The importance of the variable of youthfulness in a face, for instance, has magnified anti-aging skincare production and consumption worldwide.

V. Self-concept and perceptions of attractiveness across cultures

How do cultural ideals of individual self-concepts influence the universal appeal of beauty? The answer may lie beyond the imaginations of poets and philosophers. The ubiquitous adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder was first articulated in the third century BC when Theocritus wrote, "Beauty is not judged objectively, but according to the beholder's estimation" (Theocritus, *Idyll* in Rubenstein et al., 2002). If the old adage were true, people with different cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and self-concepts would have diverse definitions of beauty. Recent research, however, has challenged this belief, demonstrating that our preferences for beauty are based on biological heritages,

instead of being rooted in our cultural predispositions, by displaying a considerable cross-cultural convergence over perceptions of facial attractiveness (Cunningham et al., 1995; Dion, 2002).

A series of studies have been conducted examining the relationship between cultural background and perceptions of attractiveness. For instance, Thakerar and Iwakaki (1979) presented ten photographs of Greek males to a group of English female students and a group of Chinese and Indian female students studying in England. Their results demonstrated a high level of agreement on attractiveness across the different cultural groups (rho of .89) (Dion, 2002). In a more recent series of studies conducted by Cunningham et al. (1995), university students from the United States were asked to rate photographs of female beauty pageants from Asian, black, Hispanic and white backgrounds, as well as pictures of white college females. The results demonstrated a high degree of convergence between the white, Asian and Hispanic judges (mean correlation of .93) (Dion, 2002). Similarly, in another study a high level of agreement was found among Taiwanese male and female judges who were asked to rate the same set of pictures (mean correlation level of .91) (Dion, 2002). Lastly, when asked to rate the facial attractiveness levels of black college-aged women, black and white male university students demonstrated a high level of consensus (mean correlation level of .94) (Dion, 2002).

VI. Infant perception of attractiveness

Studies further demonstrate that these preferences develop as early as during infancy, signaling the innate and biological foundation for our attractiveness preferences (Langlois et al., 1990; Langlois et al., 1987; Rubenstein, Langlois, & Kalakanis, 1999). To examine the appeal of attractiveness, extensive research has been conducted in assessing infant perception of attractiveness during the past fifteen years (Kramer et al., 1995; Langlois et al., 1987; Langlois et al., 1990; Rubenstein et al., 1999; Samuels & Ewy, 1985; Samuels et al., 1994; Slater et al., 1998). In different visual preference design experiments, infants

ranging from newborns to twenty-five months were simultaneously shown pictures of attractive and unattractive faces (Rubenstein et al., 2002). Results of these studies consistently demonstrated that infants gaze at attractive faces longer than at unattractive faces, signaling a preference for attractive faces. Furthermore, a study by Langlois et al. (1990) revealed that twelve-month-old infants played twice as long with dolls with attractive faces compared with unattractive dolls.

These tendencies do not seem to be limited to visual preferences. In a study by Rubenstein (1999), twelve-month-old infants were presented with video clips of attractive and unattractive faces, while listening to audio recordings of pleasant and unpleasant voices (Rubenstein et al., 2002). Rubenstein discovered that the infants tended to look at the attractive faces while listening to the pleasant tone of voice and shift their gaze to the unattractive faces when hearing the unpleasant voice. The study concluded that the sensitivity towards positive valence associated with attractive faces among the infants illustrates the biological association of beauty with positive characteristics (Rubenstein et al., 2002).

VII. Rewards for physical attractiveness in modern societies

The associations of attractive faces with positive voices by infants is rooted in Sappho's "what is beautiful is good" proclamation and has a variety of significant psychological and sociological implications. The voluminous research in social psychology demonstrates diverse psychological judgments about an individual's traits through his or her facial appearance. Studies show that not only are attractive people inferred to have positive attributes (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), but they also have higher self-esteem (O'Grady, 1989), and are generally better adjusted (Cash & Smith, 1982). Furthermore, different studies have revealed various significant sociological outcomes of attractiveness. For instance, attractive people are perceived to have better social skills, to be more successful in their careers and in dating, to have leadership skills, to earn more money, and to receive more rewards and cooperation from strangers (for review,

see Rubenstein et al., 2002).

There are two main mechanisms which may provide explanations for the preferences and rewards for attractive faces. From an evolutionary standpoint, attractive faces may signal "good genes" and thus, give evidence of desirable qualities in a mate, such as health, fertility, intelligence and social competence (Gangestad & Buss, 1993; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993). The preference for attractive faces may also have biological explanations due to the tendencies for positive disposition towards attractive faces from infancy and cross-cultural agreements about which faces are considered attractive.

VIII. Implications for advertising in the beauty industry

Advertising in the beauty industry epitomizes a picture of a psychological crossroads between individual self-concepts and the universal quest for beauty. These advertisements can be seen as visual metaphors that carry within themselves a symbolic promise of bringing individuals closer to their ideal selves through their products. They present the world with the perfect stage where advertisers can seduce consumers by tapping into their ideal self-concepts through the titillating images of beautiful, near-perfect models and, thus, encourage consumer behavior. As a benchmark for the individual, ideal self-concept motivates the self towards its achievement, and will thus drive the individual towards its fulfillment (Zinkhan & Hong, 1991). Since the effectiveness of the advertisement will depend on the congruency between the ideal self-concepts of the viewers and the portrayed image of the product (Zinkhan & Hong, 1991; Mehta, 1999), it is the task of the advertisers to reach their audience through bridging the images of the consumers with the images of the product through the ads.

Thus, self-concept's determining impact on the regulation of individual behavior, including the experience of cognition and emotion (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001), along with the significant value given to attractiveness as a psychological cue in different cultures, has remarkable implications for the global beauty industry. Since individuals'

feelings about themselves will influence their reactions to the advertisements (Mehta, 1999), global ads for the beauty industry must take into consideration the distinctive ideal self-concepts of individuals as well as the universal and rewarding appeal of beauty. The reason why the beauty industry is considered as one of the most prolific and profitable industries in retail history lies beyond the innovative cosmetics and ever-growing number of anti-aging creams. Advertisers have certainly done their share to promote the industry by making sure to provide the canvas where the consumers' self-concepts can meet their ideals of beauty. Human nature takes care of the rest.

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⟨Summary⟩

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Self-concept has a significant impact on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional systems of individuals. Recently, there has been increasing interest in the influence of self-concept on advertising effectiveness and consumer behavior. The present paper examines the role of ideal self-concept in advertising in the global beauty industry. Research suggests that in order to enhance the effectiveness of the advertisements, the task of the advertisers is to bridge the rewarding and universal appeal of beauty with the individual ideal self-concepts of the consumers.