Self-Image Motives: Further Thoughts and Reflections

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The commentaries provided by Kruger, Galek, and Burrus and Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, and Hart spark some speculations concerning future questions to study. The belief harmonization approach may provide an explanation, for example, for why people tend to be more dissatisfied with complex rather than simple decisions. In addition, if individual differences in self-esteem and related constructs matter, then the impact of self-image motives on consumer behavior, from a historical perspective, may be increasing.

It is, of course, a relief to read the commentaries provided by Kruger, Galek, and Burrus (2007) as well as Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, and Hart (2007)—and not only because they appear, for the most part, to be congenial to the notion that self-image motives play a significant role in consumer behavior. The real relief is that the original review (Dunning, 2007) appears to have sparked serious observations and speculations from these scholars, who suggest that the impact of self on consumer decision making might be complicated, nuanced, yet pervasive—that is, a worthwhile topic for empirical study. Reading over their commentaries sparked a number of speculations in reaction, and I hope other readers had similar experiences. To the extent that reading over the commentaries sparked further reactions, it suggests that examining the impact of self-motives on consumer behavior may be a fruitful and multifaceted area for research.

NOTES ON KRUGER ET AL.

The Kruger et al. (2007) commentary suggests that the impact of self-image motives may fail to arise in all circumstances and, in fact, may reverse under certain conditions, with people claiming that their decisions reflect more poorly on themselves than other people would assert. Their observations suggest some interesting notions for further investigation. For example, Kruger et al. observe that people often find themselves more dissatisfied with their decisions the more complex the circumstances surrounding those decisions. Indeed, faced with complex decisions, people more frequently avoid making any decision whatsoever (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz & Ward, 2004).

Consider this observation from a belief harmonization perspective. Often, one important parameter that raises the complexity of a decision is the number of options that a person decides among (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). People may find it relatively easy to decide among 3 options, but try 300. Perhaps this occurs because choosing from a larger set of options involves constructing a rather large, unwieldy web of beliefs to be considered. George Miller (1956) once famously noted that people could only hold seven items in memory, plus or minus two. I can imagine, when one is creating a belief harmonization web, that the number of beliefs that must be kept in mind, and the number of links connecting those beliefs, grows at a rate far greater than the number of items being considered. If that is the case, then it is likely that people find it difficult, if not impossible, to construct a web of beliefs that feels comprehensive and that they can “harmonize” with any sense of confidence; or, perhaps, with such a complex web, people find it impossible to harmonize their cognitions without some dissonant belief popping up and confounding the harmony that seemed to be well on the way to arriving; or, in coming to a decision, people may suspect that some important considerations have been left out, and thus are left with some uncertainty whether they have come to the decision that will stand up to scrutiny in the long run.

In their commentary, Kruger et al. (2007) also note situations in which people tend to denigrate rather than justify their decisions. This reaction, in particular, arises when people face a Hobson’s choice between two aversive options (Burrus, Kruger, & Kressel, 2007; see also Botti & Iyengar, 2004). Here is where the importance of situational nuance may matter. Dissonance researchers classically noted that people come to approve of, or at least not frown on, their decisions if those decisions were freely chosen (Linder,
Cooper, & Jones, 1967). If the decision felt forced, people did not engage in dissonance reduction activity. Perhaps this is an important nuance surrounding the experiments that Kruger et al. describe in which people disparage rather than excuse the decisions they make. Participants in the study may have felt little choice about the fact that they had to make a choice. This observation, however, is pure speculation; but given that people must frequently make decisions between two options they would rather not have, it may be a speculation well worth exploring.

NOTES ON SEDIKIDES ET AL.

Sedikides et al. (2007) concur with the assertion that self-image motives may influence consumer decision making, and suggest that the most important individual difference guiding self-motivated behavior is the person’s level of narcissism (Raskin & Hall, 1981). They may be right. However, a survey of individual difference variables suggests that other personality traits may matter as well. Beyond self-esteem and narcissism, people differ in how certain or clear their self-concepts are (Campbell et al., 1996). People also differ in how contingent their self-esteem is on recent events. Some people have bedrock self-esteem, for better or for worse, that stays relatively the same no matter what happens to them; whereas the other people have a sense of self-worth that is buffeted around by whatever recent triumph or tragedy they have encountered (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

One can imagine that this clarity in self-worth matters in consumer decision making, although the exact direction of that influence is unclear. On the one hand, people may harmonize their consumer decisions with their self-images only when those images are ones strongly and confidently held. However, on the other hand, it may be people who are unclear about their self-worth who let self-image motives influence their decisions. After all, if making a purchase allows people to manufacture an action that could arguably reflect well on the self, then it is those with a need to bolster an uncertain sense of self who may be more likely to do so. If people are unclear about themselves, and wish to reduce that lack of clarity in a positive direction, making a purchase might be a very convenient way to symbolize a positive self-image.

There is, however, another way in which the observations found in Sedikides et al. (2007) might prove important. Indeed, their proposals, as well as those contained in my original review (Duning, 2007), might suggest that the impact of self-image motives in consumer behavior might be on the rise. A century ago, households faced conditions that made worrying about self-image somewhat of a luxury. Households then were much more preoccupied with gaining the essentials necessary for subsistence such as food, clothing, and shelter. However, now, people do not have to devote so much of their budget to merely surviving. In 1919, households on average spent 36% of their income on food. In 1998, that figure was 18%. In the same period, expenditures on clothing fell from 24% to 8%. To be sure, some essentials have become more expensive in that housing costs in the same period have increased from 21% to 41%, but in the main, people—at least in affluent countries—have much more money to spend on goods that have little to do with subsistence living (Johnson, Rogers, & Tan, 2001). Perhaps self-image concerns constitute an increasingly important set of alternative goals that motivate people into the showroom or to log onto the online store.

With this in mind, it is also intriguing to note that people, from a historical perspective, have more of a self-image to maintain. If concerns over subsistence are on the decline, this is not a trend joined by self-image. From 1968 to 1994, self-esteem scores of college students in the United States, as measured by the Rosenberg (1965) scale, rose over ½ SD—a trend that explained more variance in self-esteem than typically accounted for by family environments. Self-esteem among elementary school children showed similar increases (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). In addition, such enhancements in self-image have also been shown with the personality variable favored by Sedikides et al. (2007). Levels of narcissism among college students over the past 25 years have steadily increased. In 1982, only 37% of college students had scores on a standard inventory of narcissism that were clearly above average. In 2006, that percentage had grown to 67% (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2007).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sum, one could assert that self-image motives might play an increasingly significant role in the marketplace than they have in the past. People have more money burning in their pocket and more of a laudatory sense of self that must be respected. Perhaps people apply more of that money toward shoring up that respect.

However, this speculation leads to a last significant question to be answered. At first blush, the influence of self-image motives on consumer behavior may seem to be a negative one, if not for the individual than at least for society. If people are making decisions, for example, to extol a level of narcissism that previous generations seemed quite happy to do without, one could imagine that the purchasing decisions made by younger generations would be wasteful in that the benefit of such purchases would seem aimed more at reinforcing a person’s vanity rather than producing some other good that would better society.

However, on the other hand, one should remember that much social good is potentially prompted by personal vanity. Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson, and Miller (1992) provided a demonstration of this phenomenon. They asked college students about their environmental attitudes, and students quite vainly described just how pro-environmental
they were. However, when asked just how long it took them to take a shower, students conceded that they tended to take long, maybe wasteful showers. However, after this “hypocrisy” had been pointed out to them, students began taking much shorter showers, thus saving significant amounts of water.

In short, if positive self-images sit in a complex web of beliefs, some of those beliefs might contain information about the behaviors that people have. To have a harmonious web, people may very well be constrained to behave in ways to match the claims of a better nature they tend to make. To the extent that people in general claim such self-beliefs, society might be better off to make sure to hold them to those beliefs.

REFERENCES


Twenge, J. M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Campbell, W. K., & Bushman, B. J. (2007). *Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory*. Unpublished manuscript.