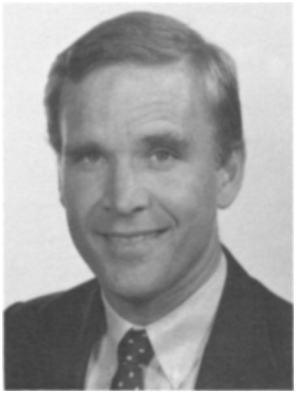
SELF-ESTEEM ADVERTISING



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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem advertising is a type of advertising which attempts to alter consumers' attitudes and behavior toward products by stimulating positive feelings toward themselves. For example, one of the oldest sales pitches in the world begins with, "You look lovely today, madame." This paper draws on psychiatry, sociology and social psychology to describe "self-esteem" and how consumers' feelings of self-esteem might be leveraged to effect buying behavior. Ideas are cast as hypotheses, and implications for research are suggested. The main hypothesis is that advertising which has positive effects on consumers' attitudes toward themselves has positive effects on their attitudes toward brands.

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INTRODUCTION

Advertising which uses consumers' feelings of self-esteem as its leverage point has been around for a long time. Food advertisements, for example, have long communicated to the housewife that she will be loved by her family — and thereby feel good about herself — if she serves certain brands of food. Lately, however, appeals to consumer feelings of self-worth and self-confidence have become much more direct. Copy in these ads focuses less on how great the product is and more on how great "you" (the consumer) are:

"*You've* come a long way, baby" (Virginia Slims cigarettes)

"*You're* not getting older, *you're* getting better" (Clairol Shampoo)

"*You* work hard, *you* need Right Guard" (deodorant)

"*You* know where *you're* going" (up the economic ladder — Michelob)

"This Bud's for all *you* do"

"*You're* feeling good about *yourself* and *you're* drinking Diet Pepsi — and it shows"

"*You* can't pinch an inch" (of fat — Kellogg Cereal)

"*You* deserve a break today" (McDonald's)

"*You* feel confident, *you* feel Sure" (deodorant)

"Orange *you* smart for drinking orange juice"

"*You've* got what it takes: Salem Spirit" (cigarettes)

"*You're* the achiever generation" (coffee)

"*You're* coming on strong, *you're* the Pepsi generation"

"Aren't *you* glad *you'll* be at your best today" (Dial Soap)

"Perks; *you've* earned them" (Republic Airlines)

These copy lines might be very effective for four reasons. First, the marketing approach is based on identifying, stimulating, and satisfying consumer needs. Self-esteem is one of the strongest psychogenic needs (19). Self-esteem is one of the strongest psychogenic needs (19). Brandon (3) calls it the most decisive factor in man's motivation, McDougall (27:9) calls it the "master sentiment," and it is near the top of Maslow's (26) well-known hierarchy of needs. Put simply, each of us is strongly driven to feel good about him or herself. Second, self-esteem ads capitalize on the trend toward increased consciousness of self as noted by Yankelovich (35) and SRI's Values and Lifestyles program (18:389). Both the Yankelovich and SRI social tracking services describe a shift away from traditional values of commitment to family, community, and place of work — and an increasing trend toward self-oriented values: self-fulfillment and self-achievement. Third, in an early study, Janis (22) found that people who are low in self-esteem are more susceptible to persuasion. Low self-esteem people might be highly susceptible to self-esteem appeals. Fourth, Plummer (28) claims that in order to be effective, advertising should provide the viewer with some reward for watching the commercial. What better reward is there than being personally stroked?

The purpose of this article is to examine the role of self-esteem in advertising and propose some fruitful avenues for investigation. We draw on literature

from psychiatry, social psychology, and sociology to define self-esteem and then describe three different ways self-esteem ads might work. We also review the special cases of advertising to low self-esteem individuals and shifts in self-esteem during the course of an individual's life span. Major ideas are cast as hypotheses and plans for testing these hypotheses are discussed.

DEFINITIONS OF SELF-ESTEEM

Researchers who study self-esteem (4, 17, 30) differ in how broadly they define it. All share a fundamental assumption, namely that each individual views him or herself as an object and has attitudes toward him or herself which include behavioral components (e.g., I stop myself from eating too much), cognitive components (I believe I am a great athlete and a great scholar), as well as affective components (I like myself).

Coopersmith (4), however, emphasizes the global nature of self-esteem, describing it as a general feeling of approval or disapproval toward oneself. In contrast, many researchers (8, 24, 30) emphasize how differentiated the self-concept is, and study individuals' efforts to bring consistency and harmony to the separate beliefs about self.

While some (4, 11) feel that self-esteem is mainly an unconscious dimension, most of the researchers who define it as a multi-dimensional concept believe it is not only conscious but also measurable by standard survey techniques. For example, one common measure of self-esteem uses an adjective checklist. This measure, by Gough and Heilbrun (15) asks respondents to go through a list of 300 adjectives and check those that apply to themselves. Self-esteem is measured alternately as the number and/or ratio of favorable adjectives ("strong," "resourceful," "confident") to unfavorable ones ("immature," "cowardly," "dull"). While measures of this type have face validity, it is not always clear that they have construct validity.

One of the most thorough analyses of self-esteem as a multi-faceted concept is by Brandon (3). Brandon defines it mainly in terms of two sub-dimensions: self-confidence ("I can do this job," "I can do anything") and self-worth ("I am important to this operation," "I am loved"). The two are closely intertwined, of course, as institutions accord the most worth to those who are the most capable. Keeping them separate might be useful for studying advertising appeals. Some ads stress self-confidence: "You can do it. Yes you can" (VISA) — while others stress self-worth: "I use L'Oreal because I'm worth it."

Other definitions of self-esteem emphasize its relativity. James (21) defined it simply as follows:

$$\text{self-esteem} = \frac{\text{success}}{\text{pretensions}}$$

Similarly, Rosenberg (32) defines it in terms of "actual" versus "ideal" points on dimensions such as academic success, career success, and popularity.

Interestingly, this is what many consumer behavior researchers have done. Landon (23) and Ross (33) asked respondents to rate themselves in terms of how they 1) currently see themselves on these types of dimensions (actual self) and 2) would like to see themselves (ideal self). They also rated products and brands on these dimensions so that self-ratings could be compared to product and brand ratings. Supposedly, large discrepancies between actual and ideal self-ratings on certain dimensions predict high preference for brands which are rated favorably on those dimensions. For example, I rate myself low on intelligence (actual self), high on how intelligent I would like to be (ideal self), and I rate Volvo automobiles high as "intelligent" cars. I should, therefore, be attracted to Volvos.

These types of studies, however, have achieved mixed success. The problem might be that they omitted a key element which Rosenberg feels describes self-esteem; namely, the personal importance assigned to each dimension. Rosenberg considers not only actual and ideal self-ratings on dimensions but also perceived importance of dimensions. I might rate myself low on intelligence and high on how intelligent I would like to be but this discrepancy will not affect my preference of "intelligent" cars unless I consider intelligence to be very important to me personally. If I did, Rosenberg would say that my self-esteem — at least in terms of this dimension — is low.

While these notions of self-esteem provide useful starting points, they do not describe self-esteem as we intend it here. Based on psychiatric and sociological studies, these notions tend to refer to self-esteem as a relatively enduring phenomenon, for example, chronic low self-esteem as a reflection of poor emotional health. Also, most tend to describe self-esteem in terms of separate dimensions, for example, Brandon's (3) view of self-esteem as consisting of self-confidence and self-worth.

In contrast, in this paper we refer to self-esteem as an *episodic, low-level, global positive or negative feeling toward oneself which occurs due to the activation of consciousness of some personal attribute which is a source of pride or discomfort to the individual.* The type of self-esteem we refer to is the momentary twinge of pride or discomfort the individual feels when he or she is made aware of something special (good or bad) about him or her. Several current TV commercials for women's hair and beauty products, for example, are in French

(with English subtitles). To most Americans, this gives these products a special exotic image. However, to Americans who speak French, it might give a special feeling of pride and uniqueness which comes from their ability to understand a different language. This feeling might not be enduring, nor is it expected to be very strong. It might, however, be sufficient to generate awareness of the product as well as positive feelings toward it. In contrast, to a mid-level executive who was recently passed up for a big promotion, an advertisement showing a big promotion party might be a source of pain and therefore be "screened out."

There are several different ways that advertising might affect receivers' evaluations of themselves and, by association, brand names. These are described in the next section. Since the purpose of advertising is to affect positive attitudes toward brands they focus on using positive evaluations of self.

HOW SELF-ESTEEM ADVERTISING MIGHT WORK

Based on theories of self-esteem and how it is altered, there appear to be three different ways that self-esteem appeals in advertising might work:

- challenge/trigger receiver self-esteem then show conditional linkage to product;
- show someone else's success (or self-esteem) to cause general good feelings toward oneself and the product;
- flatter the viewer.

Each is discussed individually below.

Challenge/Trigger Receiver Self-Esteem Then Show Conditional Linkage to Product

The message in most advertising is simple: "*If* you use our product, *then* you will feel good about yourself." The U.S. Army, for example, implies that the recruit will feel great about him or herself if he or she signs up: "Be All That You Can Be." Another example is the New York State lottery game: "If you play (and win), you will feel great about yourself."

The objective of this type of advertisement is to convince viewers that using the product will lead to high self-esteem. For segments that have high needs to achieve, needs to lose weight, needs to look younger, etc. this might not be difficult. Advertising for MBA programs, diet programs and youth creams might be very successful given these segments' higher needs to believe in products which might help achieve their desired self-concepts.

An interesting strategy lately is to develop copy which reverses the product-self-esteem linkage. Rather than say, "*If* you use our product, *then* you will feel good about yourself," several current campaigns challenge the viewer and say, "*If* you feel good about yourself, *then* you should use our product." General Foods, for example, introduced a very successful instant drink, Crystal Lite, with the slogan, "I believe in Crystal Lite 'cause I believe in me.'" Another way to put this is that the advertising activates the target's evaluation of self and says, "if you believe in yourself, you should drink Crystal Lite." L'Oreal Shampoo uses a similar slogan: "It costs more, but I'm worth it." The implied message here is, "if you think you are worth more (don't we all?) you should use it."

Which of these appeals is more effective in terms of motivating purchase behavior:

- "If you use our product you will feel good about yourself," or
- "If you feel good about yourself, you should use our product"?

Cognitive dissonance theorists would say the latter (9). Most people have high self-esteem (16). Therefore, the second appeal might call to mind two cognitions which conflict or are "dissonant": 1) I feel good about myself and 2) I do not use the product. A way to resolve this dissonance is to change the second cognition or buy the product.

The Marines have effectively used the second appeal for many years. Their advertising says, "If you have what it takes (to be one of the few, the proud, the Marines), you should join us." In other words, their advertising challenges the target's sense of self, and says if they have "what it takes" (physical and mental toughness), they should join.

Show Someone Else's Success to Cause General Good Feelings Toward Oneself and the Product.

A recent VISA commercial shows a middle-aged woman returning to college where she competes with younger students for grades. The commercial shows her initial apprehension and then successful completion of her first assignment, all accompanied by a hard-driving soundtrack which says, "You can do it, yes you can and we'd like to help." People watching this commercial say it makes them "feel good inside." It might also produce favorable attitudes toward VISA.

How this type of ad might work is not clear. It has at least four features which would favor a positive emotional response. First, it shows the woman's family members' joy at her achievement. Aaker and Bruzzone (1) have found that family members in ads tend to produce "warm" reactions among viewers. Second, the woman's achievement is easy to

identify with. She doesn't discover a cure for cancer; she gets a passing grade on a paper. Self-esteem is closely tied to reasonable self-expectations. Getting a passing grade is something many people could expect of themselves. Third, the ad represents core American achievement values. Where a Soviet consumer might feel good about a story of a person whose work reflects the glory of the Soviet state, the American consumer might be expected to enjoy stories of an individual's personal success and achievement.

Finally, ads of this type seem to rely on a type of emotional contagion. For example, a key goal in motivation seminars for sales representatives is to generate strong feelings of self-confidence in individual sales reps. To do this, they usually have a speaker who started out as a sales rep ("just like them") but became very successful because of his or her faith in him or herself and the product. Based on a number of elements — the emotionality of the presentation, the example set by the speaker, the speaker's rejoinders that "You can achieve any goal you set" — the representatives come out of the meeting full of self-confidence as well as confidence in the product and the company. In short, they have a halotype perception of everything.

The VISA ad might work the same way. The viewer watching the ad sees a reflection of him or herself in the ad's spokesperson and shares the self-satisfactions and self-rewards with that spokesperson. The effect is a general positive feeling toward everything: the product, the source, oneself and so on. Bumper stickers that say, "Smile, God loves you." may have the same effect. So might Coca-Cola's commercial, "I'd-like-to-teach-the-world-to-sing," which features hundreds of young people from different countries singing about harmony, understanding and, of course, Coke.

Flatter the Viewer

It is often said that flattery gets you nowhere, but confidence-building techniques are used in many disciplines to change people's behavior. Management scientists (7) claim that managers can get more work out of subordinates by positive reinforcement such as giving praise and recognition. Psychotherapists (10) attempt to turn psychiatric patients into healthy, functioning members of society by helping them discover the meaning and importance of their lives. According to Dichter (6:74), "We continuously have to prove ourselves as children in school, as grown-ups, as lovers, as mothers, as cooks, as money earners. We are never quite sure of ourselves. Subtle flattery gives us more self-assurance; it is a temporary award which induces us to go on to the next step."

Similarly, many advertisers consciously or unconsciously attempt to give consumers a pat on the back in their advertising:

"*You've* come a long way, baby." (Virginia Slims)

You work hard, *you* need Right Guard." (deodorant)

"*You* can't pinch an inch" (of fat, Kellogg cereal)

"This Bud's for all *you* do." (beer)

These ads might work in two ways. First, they might generate positive attitudes toward the source of the message, and, by association, the product. In an informal survey, ten middle-aged women were asked which company used the slogan "You're not getting older, you're getting better." Eight replied "Clairol." The recognition and esteem which is implied in this slogan for older women might be sufficient to generate positive feelings toward the company *and* product. Where some advertisers use a popular spokesperson in their ads in an effort to transfer consumers' positive feelings from the spokesperson to the product (see balance theory of Lutz (25)), this type of advertising compliments viewers in order to draw positive reactions to the message source which are then generalized to the product. Second, tobacco, alcohol, sweets, coffee, ice cream and other food products are examples of products that are often consumed as ways of rewarding oneself for doing something special. Vantage cigarettes, for example, are promoted with the slogan "Vantage, the taste of success." The effect here, in other words seems to be to augment the pleasant psychological state that accompanies self-achievement with a warm, pleasant pharmacological state: added sugar in bloodstream, added nicotine, added caffeine, alcohol, etc. (Interestingly, these products are also consumed — sometimes heavily — under conditions of very low self-esteem: being fired from job, depression, divorce, etc.) This advertising says to the viewer, "Here is your reward for the good things you do." Budweiser advertising, for example, says, "This Bud's for all you do."

How to flatter a target audience is widely discussed in the research literature. Some of the guidelines are as follows:

1) *Flattery or praise must be credible, focused, and concern an issue which represents a unique goal or source of pride to the target individual.*

   Management consultants instruct managers not to say things like "good work" to their subordinates but rather "good work on how you interpreted the data on project X." Dichter (25) suggests that in order to flatter someone, one should know what that person's dreams and goals are (to stay young, look virile, not

have gray hair, etc.). Noticing these things in the person and mentioning them is a good way to have a positive effect. Obviously, it would be very difficult for an advertiser to identify issues that are key sources of pride and self-esteem across a large number of people. However, Virginia Slim's slogan, "You've come a long way, baby" has high credibility, validity, and concerns an issue — achievement — which is valued by a large number of females. The slogan, "You're not getting older, you're getting better" also has broad appeal. The slogan, "You deserve a break today" may be too general to leverage anyone's self-esteem.

2) *Use self/other comparisons to heighten the target individual's self-esteem.*

In a well-known study, Gergen and Morse (13) tested self-esteem of job-applicants before and after their job interviews. Half of the respondents sat in waiting rooms prior to their interviews with confederates called "Mr. Clean" applicants. These were applicants who were dressed neatly, read technical journals, and generally looked highly qualified for the job. The other half waited in rooms with "Mr. Dirty" applicants whose clothes, demeanor and attitude meant they were obviously unqualified for the job. Results showed a decrease in self-esteem among respondents sitting with "Mr. Clean" applicants, and an increase in self-esteem among respondents sitting with "Mr. Dirty" applicants.

The long-running Dial soap campaign is a good example of leveraging self-esteem through self/other comparisons.

According to Dichter (5:168) toilet training and the whole cleanliness ethic which is pressed on young children causes them to consider their own body odors repulsive. Thus, a child "is strongly impelled in later life to protect his or her self-image (and self-esteem) by denying that he or she personally has a strong or possibly offensive body odor."

Thus, when the sensitive topic of body odor comes up, one way to support and work with the viewer's self-esteem is to talk about other people's body odor. As Dichter says, "We readily accept the idea that *others* may have objectionable body odors." Hence the success of the campaign, "Aren't you glad you use Dial; Don't you wish everyone did?" The net effect here is to tap one's self-esteem — and generate positive attitudes toward a product — by forcing a comparison between self and others in the area of body odor.

3) *Use memory scanning techniques.*

Gergen and Gibbs (12) generated striking increases in self-esteem among a sample of women by asking them to develop speeches for potential employers. In order to develop the speeches, they had to think of accomplishments and self-attributes which would enable them to present positive images of themselves. One way to do this is to try to remember instances in which one was "intelligent," "strong-principled," "hard-working," and the like. In short, a favorable attribute is mentioned, and respondents scan their memories for confirming evidence of having it. This leads to higher overall feelings of self-esteem. AMF, the manufacturer of sporting goods, uses this ploy in a television advertisement which asks middle-aged, male viewers to remember their successes as high school and college athletes. To many men, these are fond memories and important sources of self-esteem. Calling them up might trigger positive feelings toward oneself and AMF.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF ADVERTISING TO LOW SELF-ESTEEM VIEWERS

Many years ago, Ernest Dichter (6) was asked to help a shoe company motivate its salesmen to sell more shoes. The solution was to train them intensively about feet and feet problems, in short, to make them see themselves as "feet experts." This overcame their negative feelings about stooping down and handling customers' feet, and shoe sales increased.

On the same note, a government social services bureau fielded an advertising campaign which was aimed at preventing pregnancies among unwed, black, teenage females. The campaign was aimed at these females' self-esteem, claiming that "you are valuable — you deserve a better life." The increasing movement of many blacks up the economic ladder might be due not only to civil rights legislation but also the "Black is Beautiful" and other black-pride themes of the late 1960s.

The fact that people with low self-esteem are more open and more susceptible to external influences has been demonstrated in a number of studies (2, 22, 34). Most of these studies focus on respondents' beliefs. Typically, self-esteem and beliefs about something are measured, a counter-vailing argument is introduced, and then the earlier beliefs are re-measured. Our focus, however, is on global feelings of approach or avoidance toward a product.

These studies have, however, yielded some interesting findings. Low self-esteem males seem to be particularly susceptible (22). Low self-esteem females

are susceptible but only in specific purchase situations, for example, buying a product they know little about.

Purposefully or not, many advertisers have developed advertising which attempts to manipulate the self-esteem of groups whose esteem might be lower than average. Some of these groups as well as the copy which was developed for them are as follows:

Group	Copy
Older women	"*You're* not getting older, *you're* getting better" (Clairol Shampoo)
Blue-collar workers	"It — (a life which includes good friends, hunting trips, outdoors, freshly cooked game, and cold beer) — doesn't get any better than this." (Old Milwaukee beer)
People who are trying to lose weight	"*You're* feeling good about *yourself* and *you're* drinking Diet Pepsi — and it shows"

SELF-ESTEEM AND THE INDIVIDUAL'S LIFE SPAN

According to Gergen (14), each individual develops a mode of self-evaluation varying from extremely positive (which might label him or her an "egotist") to extremely negative (inferiority complex) during the first six years of life. Gergen further suggests that the level of self-evaluation remains essentially unchanged throughout life.

However, Robinson and Shaver (31) suggest that there are numerous sharp fluctuations on a day-to-day basis due to situational effects such as job successes and interactions with peers. Also, Horrocks and Jackson (20) note significant changes in self-esteem as one moves through major life stages.

Thus, from birth through age 10, the child has relatively few problems with self-esteem, mainly accepting the evaluations of him or herself as put forth by parents and other significant others. Adolescence, however, presents many problems, as there are serious challenges to self-esteem based on perceptions of one's competence in sports, social settings, academics, sexual attractiveness, and expected career paths. Adults, having experienced the realities of jobs, marriage, sociation, etc. are more realistic and less critical in their self-assessments. Later, however, self-esteem takes another downturn, as menopause, retirement and increasing physical disabilities become problems for which the aging person must work out coping behavior.

What all this means, of course, is that advertisers who want to use self-esteem appeals should consider the ages and life situations of their targets. The huge increase, for example, that is expected in the 60-plus age group in the next 20 years suggests opportunities for advertising which enhances these people's feeling of self-worth. Telephone advertising might show younger adults calling their parents for their wisdom and counsel. Investment-planning advertising might salute the career achievements of retirees.

SUMMARY OF KEY HYPOTHESES

The underlying hypothesis of this paper is that advertising which stimulates positive feelings among consumers toward themselves generates positive feelings toward brands. When an advertiser says his ad "pushes the button" it may be because it causes the viewer to feel good about him or herself.

This suggests several possibilities regarding "self-esteem" advertising. An individual ad may seem to generate positive feelings toward self only, self and brand, or brand only. Even in the last case — positive attitudes toward brand only — self-esteem might still play a role as the ad might affect a viewer's sense of self on an unconscious level.

Five hypotheses summarize advertising effects on viewer self-esteem. These hypotheses, along with sample copy lines, are as follows:

- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self if it challenges the viewer's evaluation of self.
  Example: "Are you man enough to join the Marines?"
- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self to the extent that it generates a warm, sentimental feeling toward the world in general.
  Example: Pepsi ads with puppies.
- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self to the extent that it directly flatters the viewer.
  Example: "You're not getting older, you're getting better."
- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self to the extent that it disparages other people.
  Example: "Aren't you glad you use Dial; don't you wish everybody did?"
- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self if it asks viewers to scan their memories for examples of past successes.
  Example: "Remember your successes in school sports?" (AMF sporting goods).

Measuring the incremental self-esteem these types of ads produce might be difficult. Self-administered

paper and pencil tests of self-esteem measure subcomponents of self-esteem that might not apply; for example, self-confidence. Also, the alterations in self-esteem might be too small to pick up in pre/post measures using these tests. It is said, however that one "glows with pride" when he or she is flattered. This "glow" feeling might be measurable via GSR testing or some other arousal test such as a pupillometer. At minimum, initial testing in this area might use protocol measures in which consumers describe their feelings in detail while they watch the test advertising. Investigators would note the number and strength of references to self in these protocols. Ideally, the protocols should also reflect how the ad works, for example, "it made me feel warm toward everything." This method has been used before (29) although the researchers were not focusing on feelings toward the self.

The following hypotheses summarize how positive feelings toward *self* might be linked to positive feelings towards *brands:*

- An ad will produce positive feelings toward self and brand if it challenges viewer's sense of self and shows a conditional tie to brand usage.
  Example: "*If* you think you are worth more, *then* you should use L'Oreal."
- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self and brand to the extent that it generates a warm, positive feeling toward everything.
  Example: Pepsi ads with puppies.
- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self and brand if it positions the brand as a reward for some common achievement.
  Example: "This Bud's for all you do."
- An ad will generate positive feelings toward self and brand insofar as it generates positive feelings toward the source of a viewer-directed compliment and, by association, the brand.
  Example: "You're not getting older, you're getting better." (Clairol).

The main research question here is, do these types of ads cause viewers to like the brands as well as themselves, at least during the period of ad exposure? Also, are these types of ads especially effective among low self-esteem viewers, particularly occupation and age groups which are thought to have lower than average self-esteem (blue-collar workers, teens, people over 65)? Future studies might use protocol measures to assess feelings toward self and brands as viewers watch — or immediately after they watch — sample ads. Separate studies could investigate results among "low" self-esteem samples such as teens. More basic studies might investigate effects of self-esteem appeals on advertising recall, brand awareness and brand attitudes. Finally, other studies could investigate whether self-esteem ads have significant "sleeper" effects. Hopefully, an ad that generates warm feelings toward self and brand name has a lasting effect, even if the effect is not part of the respondent's day-to-day consciousness. Does seeing the brand name two weeks later in the store re-awaken positive feelings toward the brand? Toward self and brand? Self only?

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