

# SELF-ENDORSED ADVERTISEMENTS: WHEN THE SELF PERSUADES THE SELF

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Imagine turning on the television and seeing an advertisement for a soft drink. A model eagerly sips the soft drink and looks directly at the camera. The model is you. "This is your favorite drink. Pick up some more of this when you shop for groceries tomorrow," yourself in the advertisement tells your physical self. You know for a fact that you have never starred in an advertisement, but the model has all your distinct features, including your physique and mannerisms. This is your virtual doppelgänger and someone else is controlling it. When an entity that looks exactly like you tries to persuade you, can you say no?

The phenomenon of the virtual self persuading the physical self to purchase goods or services has been referred to as *self-endorsing* (Ahn and Bailenson 2011). Despite limited formal research on the effects of self-endorsing, many manufacturers and service providers have already begun to invest in its potential power to sway individuals. Facebook has been using users' photographs and names unbeknownst to them to promote a variety of goods and services to their networked friends, and LinkedIn's advertisement campaign has used users' photographs and names to promote a job position for a specific company (Huffington Post 2013). More recently, Disney has announced that it will take orders for princess dolls with the consumer's head superimposed on a Disney figurine's body (Huffington Post 2012).

As Sheth and Solomon argue, this stretches Belk's (1998) original conceptualization of the extended self to a point where it becomes unclear whether an entity that shares one's physical features can still be considered as the self when it is being controlled by a stranger. Surprisingly, research suggests that even the slightest connection between the physical and the virtual self leads to greater

persuasiveness. People preferred the brand more when they saw themselves (compared to an unfamiliar other) in an online advertisement endorsing the brand, and also preferred the brand more when their assigned representation in a virtual world wore a shirt with the brand name on it (compared to the brand worn by a representation assigned to another individual) (Ahn and Bailenson 2011). In fact, another study showed that the mere physical proximity of the self's name and photograph to an online advertisement increases brand preference (Perkins and Forehand 2012).

The underlying mechanism that drives this preference is the self-referencing effect (Kuiper and Rogers 1979), which refers to a psychological process wherein if new information is associated with the self at the time of encoding, it is learned faster, remembered longer, and preferred over information that is not associated with the self (Ahn and Bailenson 2011; Martin, Lee, and Yang 2004). The self-concept is such a well practiced and elaborately organized mental schema that when the new information is processed through this elaborate but familiar schematic structure (triggered by association of the new information with the self), that information then gains a comparable stature in the mind. Following this logic, upon seeing a LinkedIn advertisement displaying the self's photograph, the company name featured in the advertisement would become immediately associated with the self and lead to personal involvement with the message, and ultimately, persuasion (Ahn and Phua 2013).

Because much of the footprints that individuals leave in the digital space such as LinkedIn and Facebook are considered public information (North 2012), self-endorsed advertisements may be easily created by anyone with affordable or free software. As Sheth and Solomon also point out, these digital modifications were only accessible to a small number of highly trained specialists in the past, but modern-day technology has rendered these techniques surprisingly accessible. Considering its ease of creation relative to its persuasive strength, self-endorsing offers a simple, practical, and innovative means to break through the clutter of persuasive messages that surround an indi-

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vidual on a daily basis. Along with commercial advertising, self-endorsing may be a powerful motivator of behavioral modification when presented in the context of public service announcements (Ahn, forthcoming).

Because of its relative ease of creation and resultant persuasive power, there are important ethical questions yet to be addressed on incorporating the extended self within advertising contexts through self-endorsing. Virtual doppelgängers presented in self-endorsed messages trigger self-referencing effects because certain physical similarities are registered in the mind as the self, but is it just a stranger masquerading in the guise of the self? When the familiarity and the positivity biases we hold regarding ourselves (Baumeister 1998; Chambers and Windschitl 2004) make it difficult for us to negate anything that is said by our virtual doppelgängers, is this communication tactic on the borderline of manipulation rather than persuasion? Furthermore, not only does the use of virtual doppelgängers in self-endorsed messages blur the distinction between the virtual and the physical selves; it also blurs the distinction between the sender and the receiver of the message. When an individual is receiving a message sent by a representation of the self, when does he or she stop being the sender and start becoming the receiver?

These, and many others, are fascinating questions that may change the traditional paradigm of persuasive communication. Virtual doppelgängers in self-endorsed messages may not be the self as we know it, but even a bleak and blurred rendition of the self seems to be better at swaying the self than a complete other.

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