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Narcissistic Consumers' Response to Self-focused Appeal Online

Advertising: Evidence from Chinese Gen Y

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Abstract: Although self-focused appeal has become popular for online advertising in China and most of such advertisements focus on Gen Y, researches on the effect and mechanism of such advertisements are sparse. To fill the gap, the presented study focuses on one typical individual psychological trait of Gen Y, i.e., narcissism, and aims to provide a conceptual framework which captures the moderating influence of product types, advertising types and different self (i.e., actual versus ideal self) in the relationship between consumers' narcissistic trait and advertising persuasiveness. Two studies will be conducted to test the framework and relevant hypotheses, and the experimental design method will be adopted by these two studies; the findings are expected to contribute to the consumer behavior and advertising literature regarding to narcissistic consumers and the effect of self-focused appeal.

Keywords: narcissism, self-focused appeal, advertising, gen Y

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, a series of “I” and “My” style online advertisement has become much more popular in China mainland. “I speak for myself”, “My Zone, My rule”, “I want my taste”, “I am what I am” Most of the leading actor/actress is Generation-Y. Obviously, it's a kind of self-focused appeal, and the target audience is Generation-Y. But popularity is not equal to effectiveness. The previous researches have demonstrated that Gen Y are most ethnically diverse group ^[1], certainly with different personalities and traits in individual level. Additionally, due to the culture differences, Chinese gen Y may show many differences with western gen Y, according to Gallup, they are “open to western ideas and products, yet still proudly supportive of their own culture”. So are they influenced by these self-focused ads equally? Or what kinds of Chinese Gen Y are easier to be persuaded? Furthermore, which factors will moderate the persuade process? Answer these questions can provide companies with insights into how to target the objective consumers, so as to enhance the ad effectiveness.

To address these questions, we focus on an individual psychological trait, named “narcissistic trait”. As an inflated and grandiose self-concept ^[2], narcissism is originally regarded as a pathological syndrome by psychoanalysts ^[3], and it was codified into a personality disorder ^[4], and finally revamped as a normally distributed personally trait in recent years ^[5]. A meta-analysis shows that narcissism in Gen Y college students is higher than in previous generations ^[6], and in another research, Chinese college students are found to be highest in narcissism compared to Japanese and American college students ^[7]. So if the self-focused ad appeal really works to Chinese Gen Y, the individual “narcissistic trait” maybe the possible reason. According to the ad-self-congruency effect ^[8-10], ad messages congruent with consumers' self-referent thoughts and imagine could increase their positive emotions and lead to more favorable ad attitudes. As narcissists have been demonstrated to display self-focus rather than other focuses ^[11,12], we predict that narcissistic consumers would be more favorable for self-focused ads than their non-narcissistic counterpart. While they would less favor other-focused ads over non-narcissistic consumers. Furthermore, we also investigate how product types moderate the ads effect on narcissistic and non-narcissistic consumers.

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Our study aims to contribute to the current understanding of narcissistic consumers and advertising simultaneously. Compared to the long history of narcissism research in psychology, relative studies are sparse in marketing field. To date, we merely know that narcissistic consumers prefer symbolic to utilitarian products, strive to purchase prestigious products and thus usually wasting long time on internet searching for the latest and greatest good^[13]. That is to say, their favorite products which can positively distinguish them^[5]. As for advertising, no existing literatures documented the ad effectiveness on narcissistic consumers. Thus, our study bridge the gap by examining the effectiveness of the opposed ads appeal (self-focus VS other-focus) on Gen Y consumers with different level of narcissistic trait.

2.THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Narcissism and the self

Narcissism has a brief but rich history of psychological investigation^[14]. The main body of the previous researches regarding to narcissism as a personality disorder, customer's with characteristics who like to believe they are special and unique, they require excessive admiration, lack of empathy, need for admiration, and a pattern of grandiosity^[4]. While in Personality/social psychology, "normal" or "subclinical" narcissists have gained much attention in recent years, which means their characteristics are not totally consistent with the traditional view of narcissism, the main feature of them is self-centered, self-aggrandizing, dominant, and manipulative interpersonal orientation^[15]. Meanwhile, as normal personality, narcissists also have many positive aspects. Such as their optimistic nature with less socially anxious and depressed, their higher self-esteem status^[16], short-term likeability^[17], short-term successes in competitive tasks^[18] and so on. In this study, "narcissists" refer to normal narcissists in the whole text.

Throughout these numerous characteristics, narcissists' self-views occupy the core position. In an correlation study between narcissism, self-construal and cognitive-perceptual style, Konrath, Bushman, and Grove (2009)^[19] demonstrated that the personality trait of narcissist is characterized by high self-focus and low other-focus, this combination state was called as "social atomization". It means that they think very highly of themselves but are less apt than non-narcissists to be concerned with relational intimacy^[20]. More specifically, narcissists usually glorify the self^[15], overestimate their intelligence and attractiveness^[21], think they are more creative than others^[22], exaggerate their talents and accomplishments^[4], and have high competence and leadership abilities^[23]. As the most popular used to assess normal narcissism, items of Narcissistic Personality Inventory^[24] profiled the characteristics of narcissists, such as "I like to be the center of attention", "I am better than others", "I am preoccupied with how extraordinary and special I am".

In the related vein, the positive relationship between narcissisms and self-esteems have been well documented^[11,12,15,25]. Even high self-esteem is an important trait of narcissist, they do not simply behave as high self-esteem individuals^[20]. The main difference between narcissism and self-esteem is communion traits, narcissists think themselves better than the average on agency traits but sub average on communion traits, while high self-esteem individuals consider themselves better than average on both agency and communal traits^[20]. In other words, the self-esteem of narcissists is based on self-competence rather than self-liking^[15].

2.2 Narcissism and others

Even narcissists shows high self-focus and low other-focus tendency, their unstable self-esteem highly depends on their social interactions^[15]. Specifically, due to their distinguished characteristics like seek attention, show off and boast, they need to use close others for self-enhancement purposes, so called "the others exist for me"^[20]. Admiration from others is more important to narcissists, they seem to display a very strong need for approval^[26], and their daily life seems to be occupied by obtaining, even creating positive feedback from others, so that they can respond with more intense emotions^[27]. However, they show little empathy or concern for

others^[28], the only value of others seems to help bolster the narcissistic self^[27]. This contradictory performance, e.g. self-absorbed but yet overly sensitive to feedback from others, is so called as narcissist paradox. That is to say, narcissists have extremely positive but fragile self-views.

Interestingly, not all “others” are despised by narcissists, like celebrities or high-status people. Because they seek status in social settings^[29], associating with high-status others is a good way to maintain their grandiose self-concept externally^[20]. So they have strong tendency to status-seeking and glory-seeking behavior, and they are attracted to individuals with high social status^[30], like to identify with high-status persons by joining or striving to exclusive clubs, restaurants, hotels, or guest lists, and more susceptible to advertising by celebrities than common mortals^[13]. These others seem more like the image of their ideal self.

2.3 Self-focused versus other-focused appeal

Emotional appeal have been used more and more frequently by marketers in their advertising campaigns in recent years, because audiences’ affective reactions is the determinate factor to ad’s persuasiveness^[31]. As an important dimension of emotional appeal, self-focused versus other-focus refers to the extent to which the emotions follow from and also foster and reinforce an independent or an interdependent self-view^[32]. Just as its word implies, when an individual experiencing self-focused emotions, the focus is something all about himself (herself), such as pride, happiness, frustration, anger etc., it tends to be associated with an individual’s internal state or attributes, and coincide with his (her) awareness, experience and expression; on the contrary, other-focused emotions are the situations when an individual see himself (herself) in relation to others in a social context, like family, friends, social class, reference group, etc., the typical other-focused emotions are empathy, peacefulness, indebtedness and shame, and they tend to coincide with the need for unity and harmony^[33].

2.4 Ad effectiveness of self/other- focused appeals on narcissists

Self-focused versus other-focused is an important distinction between individualism and collectivism^[34]. For traditional Chinese, collectivism is the central culture and people usually being interdependent and pursuing in-group goals^[35]. Even for Chinese gen X and gen Y, which have been demonstrated to be bicultural; collectivism still play an important role in their social life. That is to say, these bicultural consumers will be oriented by the two opposed culture dimension simultaneously. Thus, when ad for a product is for shared use, e.g. the products for in-group members use together, other-focused appeal should be more useful to persuade common consumers of Gen Y, because the matchup between ad appeal and product use condition will increase ad effectiveness significantly, even for culturally incongruent advertising appeals^[36].

Highly self-focus is the core features of narcissism and individualistic self-construal^[19]. However, behaviors of narcissists are far more than individualist. They are self-enhancing on power and dominance^[37], think themselves are uniqueness from others and their act follow their own feelings and attributes^[19], they don’t concern with relational intimacy^[28], and they are unable to take another person’s perspective^[38]. So even face to products for shared use, the only thing they think perhaps still themselves rather than others (e.g. family members, friends). In other words, narcissists’ collectivistic self-construal is not distinguished than individualistic self-construal. Therefore, according to the ad-self congruity effect, i.e. the higher match between the value-expressive attributes of the product in ad and the consumers’ self-concept, the better effectiveness of the ad appeal^[31,39,40]. We infer that narcissists would prefer self-focused appeal rather than other-focused appeal, no matter the use situation of the product. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1: The effectiveness of self-focused versus other-focused ad appeal on narcissists will be moderated by product types.

H1a: For shared use products, narcissists are more persuaded by self-focused appeal than other-focused appeal, while non-narcissists are easier to be persuaded by other-focused appeal than self-focused appeal.

As products for personal use, this means that the product is decided to be purchased and used for individuals alone. The previous researchers have found that cultural congruency effect is diminished when ad appeal for personal-use products^[41]. That is to say, self-focused appeal for personal-use product will favorite by all common consumers due to the matchup between ad appeal and product use condition.

H1b: For personal use products, both narcissists and non-narcissists are more persuaded by self-focused appeal than other-focused appeal.

2.5 Actual-self versus ideal-self appeal

Actual-self and ideal-self are two kinds of self-concept, the former one is the way a person perceives himself/herself, while the latter refers to how a person would like to perceive himself/herself^[10]. The match between product or brand image in ads with perceivers' actual or ideal self-concept is important for ad persuasiveness because it could trigger individual's two distinct self-concept motives, e.g. self-esteem and self-congruency^[10], the self-esteem motive leads to a person's act to enhance self-concept and the self-consistency motive denotes individuals to behave consistently with their view of themselves^[42]. Focused on this topic, earlier researchers argued that actual-self and ideal-self appeals are equally impact on consumers' brand preferences^[43,44]. While Hong and Zinkhan (1995)^[9] found that consumers would generate more positive brand attitudes when brand images in ads are congruent with their ideal-self, compared to brand images congruent with ad perceivers' actual-self concepts, because the ideal self is easier to evoke the perceivers' positive affect. This might be the reason why celebrity endorsement is well worked; celebrity endorsers could activate a person's ideal self and motive him/her to be related to it^[10,43]. In recent years, researchers demonstrated that either ideal-self congruity or actual-self congruity has stronger effects depends on usage of products; for instance, ideal-self congruity is more effectible than actual-self congruity for publicly, visibly or conspicuously consumed products, compared to private used products^[42,46]. Publicly and privately consumed products was distinguished by the social visibility of the products' usage^[47], this distinction also been widely used by other researches, wherein publicly consumed products refers to the products that are more conspicuous and visible to others, while privately consumed products refers to the products that are not seen during consumption^[30,48,49]. So we also adopt this distinction in the present research to discuss the ad effectiveness on narcissists in different product types.

2.6 Ad effectiveness of actual/ideal- self appeals on narcissists

Assessed by using NPI (Narcissistic Personal Inventory), earlier researchers have found that narcissists likely to report congruence between their actual and ideal self-concept^[12,50]. Considering the congruency between actual and self-concept is the evidence of mental health, Raskin and Terry (1988)^[23] argued that narcissist's ideal self-representations is somewhat pathological. In other words, their self-concepts are described as failure to differentiate between real and ideal selves^[50]. Along with this logic above, actual-self and ideal-self appeals should equally work on narcissists basicly. However, due to their different view of self and others, product type seems important to narcissists when face to different ad appeals. Specifically, because the high social visibility, publicly consumed product, especially conspicuous products like luxuries, can perfectly transfer the meaning of high status, superiority etc. for narcissists to get attention and admiration from others; it's the ideal status of the narcissists' self. So when ad for publicly consumed product using ideal-self appeal, they will feel congruency between the appeal and their inner aspiration. Or, this image in ad is what they think they really are, e.g. it's also congruency with their actual-self. Anyway, they like this kind of self-focused appeal ad. So we get this hypothesis:

H2: The effectiveness of self-focus ad appeal (actual self-focused vs. ideal self-focused) on narcissists will be moderated by product types.

H2a: When appeal for a product for public use, narcissists is equally persuaded by actual self-focused and ideal self-focused ad appeal.

On the contrary, when appeal for a product for private use, which is a kind of product no others can see and thus not very suitable to appeal for others' attention and admiration directly. Maybe the most adopted ideal self-image in such ad is celebrity endorsements, like the underwear's ad of H&M, just showed the image about "David Beckham chase one running car only wear underwear". Or, showing attraction to others by using the product (such as perfume, shampoo etc.). Under this circumstance, it can't transfer the ideal self to narcissists perfectly due to the shortage of approval or admiration by others. While if using actual-self appeal, especially for some ad image and words expression with self-confidence or pride of self, narcissists maybe feel congruence between the ad image and their own self-image, thus show up greater likelihood of ad persuasion. Given that, we propose the hypotheses below:

H3a: When appeal for a product for private use, narcissists are more persuaded by actual self-focused appeal than ideal self-focused appeal.

Regarding non-narcissists, generally speaking, they would generate more positive attitudes toward the ad brand when they feel congruent between ad image and their ideal-self-image rather than actual-self ad congruent situation^[9]. Because ideal self is usually as the reference point with which actual self is compared, if a gap existed between them, people will strive to reach the ideal self, and this self-discrepancy is always existed in general^[51]. So, we infer that people with low narcissistic trait will preference ideal-self ad appeal whatever types of ad products. So we propose that:

H3b: For non-narcissists, ideal self-focused are more easily persuaded than actual self-focused appeal for both privacy consume product and publicly consume product.

3. METHODOLOGY AND CONCLUSION

All the hypotheses will be examined in three studies by using experimental design method, the experiments will be conducted before March, the data analysis job will be finished before May and the findings will be presented at the 2016 WHICEB Conference.

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