Design for pro-social orientation:
The influence of product design on one's self-construal

Jihye Kim, Richard Gonzalez, & Carolyn Yoon

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

Introduction

Can the design of an object provide subtle cues that influence pro-social behavior? Can the design of a coffee mug enhance interdependent behavior at the family breakfast table? Can the design of a plate increase the amount of donation at a charity banquet?

Prior priming research in marketing and psychology has demonstrated that the mere presence of environmental artifacts can activate associations and mental representations, as well as influence subsequent behaviors in line with these mental representations. This research has focused on psychological meanings of the target objects, but limited attention has been paid to the role played by the object's design features. Formal product features reflect meanings that designers intend to communicate (Krippendorff, 1989); thus particular design features communicate specific constructs and associations to consumers.

Based on these insights, the present research attempts to explore the possibility that the design of a product serves as a source of unconscious influence on one's pro-social orientation, particularly the interdependence of self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), which is known as a precursor to pro-social behavior (Ashton-James, Baaren, Chartrand, Decety, & Karremans, 2007).

Experiment

We hypothesized that perceiving "connected objects", objects that work together to complete a form or function (see Fig. 1 for examples), would communicate the concept of "we" and thereby facilitate interdependent self-construal. Two hundreds and thirteen participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental or control condition. In the experimental condition, participants were exposed to images of "connected" products, whereas in the control condition participants were exposed to images of "non-connected" products. After exposure to the images, participants completed a modified Twenty Statement Test (TST; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) in which they completed 10 statements that begin with "I am". The results showed that participants in the experimental condition expressed more interdependent descriptions (M=0.87, SD=1.22) than control condition (M=0.55, SD=1.01), t(202)=2.09, p< .05 (Welch's t-test), demonstrating that the specific design characteristic of objects (i.e., "connectedness") influences one's self-concept, and we expect that this influence would go beyond the self-concept and have downstream behavioral consequences.
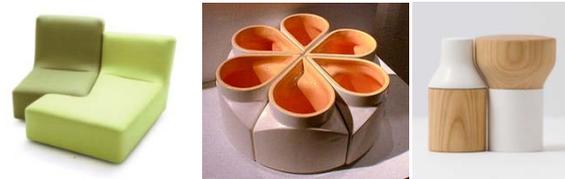

Fig. 1: Examples of "connected" objects

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