Chapter

Me, Myself, and MyBrand: Qualifying Generic Self-Referencing Effects in Brand Judgment

Abstract
The present research extends previous work on the latent tendency to be attracted to objects, events and entities that are associated with the self by demonstrating when and how generic self-referencing brand names influence brand judgment. In five studies the authors hypothesize and find that the impact of pronouns in brand names that refer to the consumer's self (i.e., 'I' or 'my' as in 'iTunes' or 'MySpace') similarly produce an attraction effect and promote favorable brand responses. More specifically, the authors demonstrate that the strength of this effect hinges on the extent to which consumers' chronic and temporary self-view is positive. In addition, this work tests a logical extension of this finding and shows that the attraction effect turns into avoidance when consumers' self-view is negative, rather than positive. Finally, the authors find that the bias in brand judgment is most pronounced for brands of self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive products, and hence that it serves a self-protective role when a positive self-view is impaired and a self-confirming role when a positive self-view is affirmed.

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We frequently like occupations, partners, cities, streets, birthdays, and a host of other objects, events and entities because, essentially, we like ourselves (Nuttin 1985; Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005). This intriguing phenomenon is known as ‘implicit egotism’—the latent attraction to things that are linked to the self (Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002). Although abundant research in numerous contexts has shown its pervasive existence (Jones et al. 2004; Kitayama and Karasawa 1997; Nelson and Simmons 2007; Nuttin 1985; Pelham et al. 2003; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002), research in the consumer sphere is surprisingly scarce and has mainly focused on name letter branding (Brendl et al. 2005; but see Perkins and Forehand, 2012). This is all the more surprising given that recent trends indicate that the use of personal pronouns in branding such as ‘I’ and ‘my’ (e.g., iTunes and MySpace) shows a marked surge in recent years, even up to the point that the number of registered self-referencing trademarks has tripled over the past decade (BOIP 2014). The present research extends previous findings on implicit egotism and name letter branding by examining whether and when more generic references to the self in brand names (i.e., brand names starting with I, or My) affect brand judgment, under which conditions this generic self-referencing effect is most pronounced, and when the self-referencing effect might turn from positive to negative.

In particular, we build on work on the name letter effect and implicit egotism – which suggests that the attraction effect of objects directly associated with the self (i.e., by sharing initials with the owner) is the result of people's default self-view being positive (Baumeister 1989; Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002) – and propose that more generic references to the self in brand names may similarly produce an attraction effect and thus promote favorable brand responses. More specifically, and aligning with previous research, we examine the notion that the extent to which consumers feel attracted to more generic self-referencing brand names is dependent on the valence of both their chronic and temporary self-view. Additionally, we test a logical implication of this reasoning and examine whether the implicit attraction to generic self-referencing brand names may turn into avoidance when consumers’ self-view is negative, rather than positive. Finally, we argue that the impact of consumers’ self-view valence on generic self-referencing brand judgment is particularly pronounced for products that are deemed to be particularly self-relevant, i.e., for self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive products.

4.1 | Generic Self-Referencing

The rationale behind the present work is hardly new and essentially dates back to William James (1890) who already proposed that people project their self-liking on external objects and hence show a disproportionate liking for things that are associated with the self, something he referred to as the product of ‘self-love’ (p. 306). During the past decades a growing body of research has
tested and refined this idea (Greenwald and Banaji 1995). For instance, it is shown that people like self-associated objects to such an extent that they prefer mundane objects, such as mugs or pens, as soon as they own them compared to when they do not (Beggan 1992). Notably, the effect also holds for the letters in people's own name, as people prefer their name letters to other letters in the alphabet (Kitayama and Karasawa 1997; Nuttin 1985). More recent research has found that this so-called 'name letter effect' extends to the liking of people, places, and professions with similar name letters, and that it influences important life decisions including where people choose to live and what to do for a living (Jones et al. 2004; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002). Although some of the findings are not uncontested – particularly those from correlational field studies (Gallucci 2003; Simonsohn 2011) – they do suggest a robust effect of self-associations on choices and judgment.

Strikingly, research on this self-referencing effect in the marketing and consumer behavior spheres has lagged behind. In a seminal study examining consumer responses, though, Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated that consumers evaluate brand names more positively when they resemble their own name. They exposed participants to Japanese snacks with brand names that either or not included the first three letters of their first name followed by the word stem ‘-oki’, and found that participants preferred brand names that shared the first three letters with the first three letters in their own name to brands that did not.

It is interesting to note that most studies have limited themselves to examining effects of implicit egotism by assessing name letters as proxies for self-referencing. Such letters – by definition – can only serve as self-referencing cues for consumers whose first or last names start with them, but they are irrelevant for others. This leaves open the straightforward question of whether these effects remain limited to such incidental similarities as between the target's name and name letters or whether more generic self-referencing cues in brand names, such as brand names starting with 'I' or 'my', may serve a similar function. On the one hand, it can be argued that more generic references to the self are less self-relevant than specific individual name letters, in which case one might expect self-referencing effects to be less pronounced or even absent. On the other hand, there are reasons to assume that the name letter effect may well extend to more generic references to the self. Support for this assumption comes from work by Perkins and Forehand (2012), who showed that the pairing of previously neutrally valenced objects with self-concept terms (i.e., I, self, me, my, and mine) in a categorization task (i.e., an adapted Implicit Association Task) leads to more positive evaluations of those objects, mainly as a function of its mere association with these self-concept terms. By implication, we propose that generic self-referencing words like ‘I’ and ‘my’ that constitute an integral part of both real and fictitious brand names may function similarly and thus will affect brand evaluation, compared to brand names without such self-referencing pronouns.
4.2 | Qualifying the Self-Referencing Effect

Research on implicit egotism has found that the bias resulting from a self-target association is generally positive leading people to enhance the favorability of practically anything, even when the name letter target itself is undesirable (e.g., lower grades; Nelson and Simmons 2007). Yet, these typical findings in implicit egotism research rest on the assumption that the self’s valence is by ‘default’ positive (Baumeister 1989; Schmitt and Allik 2005), and that these positive self-evaluations spill over to any target that can be associated with the self (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, and Becker 2007; Greenwald and Banaji 1995). But what if the consumer’s self-view is not positive but negative? In principle, and similar to the generic self-referencing effect, there are two possible scenarios. First, if the self-referencing effect hinges on the assumption that the self’s valence is by default positive and that, as a consequence of this property, people seek out and expose themselves to objects and events that reflect the self, then the impact of generic self-referencing on brand judgment should manifest itself only for consumers with a favorable self-view, but not for consumers with an unfavorable self-view. Stated differently, under these conditions, the association between the self and the target would translate into an ordinal interaction, where the association between the self and the target is only present when self-esteem is positive, and absent when self-esteem is negative. Hence, this option only allows for the existence of an attraction effect. However, other than that the population distribution of (chronic) self-esteem is positively skewed (Baumeister 1989; Schmitt and Allik 2005) and hence, that it may be a challenge to identify cases with truly negative self-esteem, there appears no firm theoretical ground for this position.

The alternative, though, seems more straightforward and conceptually more parsimonious, albeit empirically harder to detect. That is, if the self-referencing effect in brand judgment truly constitutes a reflection of the self’s valence – as is the basic rationale underlying implicit egotism effects (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002) – such that the brand judgment bias is the result of a transfer of any valence to the target, then, by implication, not only a positive but also negative self-evaluations should spill over to the target resulting in a negative bias. Hence, and in contrast to the previous scenario, an association between the target and the self will then produce a disordinal, crossover interaction in which the bias reverses depending on the valence of the self. Thus, in case of self-referencing brand names, it follows that the effect may boomerang and attraction may turn into avoidance or at least an unfavorable brand evaluation when the consumer’s self-view is negative. This effect will be absent for non-self-referencing brands since these brands do not induce a self-brand association.

Interestingly, to the authors’ knowledge, this effect has yet to be documented. The present research aims to systematically track it down and will thus examine whether and, if so, under what conditions a negative pendant to the notion of implicit egotism in brand judgment exists. More in particular, we explore the role of two factors that may be of influence, i.e., the type of self-esteem and the type of product.
First, given that the distribution of chronic self-esteem in the population may be positively skewed, shifting attention from chronic to acute differences in self-esteem may make a difference and may produce a reversal of the attraction effect when acute self-esteem is low. Second, we will examine whether the type of product matters as a reinforcing condition. That is, some types of products are not just acquired for the quality of their physical attributes, but are also used and displayed because they communicate something about its owner and thus are considered to be expressive of the consumer’s self (Aaker 1999; Belk 1988; Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal 2011). It stands to reason to expect that this property will modulate self-referencing effects, perhaps particularly when such effects are otherwise difficult to detect, i.e., when the self’s valence is negative, rather than positive.

Reconciling the present with past research, it follows that if acute self-esteem and self-expressive products are more sensitive to ‘pick up’ otherwise harder to detect effects, and if the classic name letter effect extends to more generic references to the self, then we expect the generic self-referencing effect to be more pronounced when (chronic and acute) self-esteem is positive rather than negative in cases of non-self-expressive products (i.e., an ordinal interaction, replicating earlier findings, e.g., Gawronski, Bodenhausen, and Becker 2007; Jones et al. 2004; Koole, Dijksterhuis, and van Knippenberg 2001), but to show a reversal of the sign of the effect from positive to negative as a function of acute self-esteem in cases of self-expressive products (i.e., a disordinal, crossover interaction showing an attraction effect for positive and, importantly, an avoidance effect for negative self-esteem).

In sum, the present research aims to qualify the notion of implicit egotism in brand judgment by establishing the impact of generic references to the self in brand names on brand evaluation, and examines when it is more or less pronounced and what conditions affect the direction of the effect. In so doing, our research contributes to the literature in four ways. First, our findings extend work on implicit egotism (Jones et al. 2004; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002) by assessing the robustness of the self-referencing effect in a less explored theatre of operations of egotism related phenomena, i.e., that of consumer behavior. Second, this research is the first to examine the possibility that egotism effects do not depend on incidental similarities between a brand name and name letters (Brendl et al., 2005) but extend to more generic references to self, and more specifically to personal pronouns in brand names. Third, our work adds to the burgeoning field exploring the role of the consumer’s self as an important driver in consumer behavior (Oyserman 2009; Reed II et al. 2012), and specifically by examining its consequences for self-associated brand attraction and avoidance. In so doing, this work highlights the role of the self in brand judgment and decision making, a factor that all too often has been taken for granted (Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005, p. 109). Fourth and finally, the present work extends work on brands as tools for self-maintenance, and hence contributes to current literature on strategies of consumer self-regulation.
4.3 | Present Research

Next, we present five studies (one cross-sectional, correlational study and four experiments) that accomplish several key objectives. First, we aim to extend previous findings on name letter preference in brand judgment to more generic references to the self, and more specifically the use of first person pronouns in brand names. More in particular, we aim to directly test the role of the valence of the consumer’s self in driving generic self-referencing brand judgment for both existing (pre-study) and new, fictitious (Studies 1-4) brands. If the strength of the attraction effect of generic self-referencing brands hinges on the valence of the self, then, by implication, the effect will depend on the extent to which chronic (pre-study, Studies 1 and 2) and temporary (Studies 3 and 4) self-esteem is positive. Second, we examine the role of consumers’ negative self-view in the evaluation of self-referencing brands, something neglected in previous research, and directly test whether the brand judgment bias changes from an attraction into an avoidance effect when the self’s valence is negative, rather than positive. Third, we explore the notion that this avoidance effect is more articulated under conditions of acute negative self-esteem (Studies 3 and 4) and for brands of products that serve a self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive function (Study 4).

4.4 | Pre-study

This study provides a first investigation of the hypothesized relationship between self-view valence and the evaluation of existing generic self-referencing brand names. More in particular, and since all brand names from Apple contain the self-referencing prefix ‘I’ (e.g., iPod, iPhone, iPad), in this field study we examined the relationship between consumers’ self-esteem and the number of self-associated Apple products they possess.

4.4.1 | Method

One hundred eighty-two United States residents, enrolled through Amazon’s MTurk, participated in this part of a larger study (mean age = 35.58, SD = 11.75; 54% male). First, participants filled out the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1989) to measure the valence of their self-view. They indicated their agreement with each of five positively worded (e.g., “I take a positive view of myself”) and five negatively worded items (e.g., “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure”) on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). After reverse coding the five negatively stated items, a total self-esteem score was formed by averaging the scores of all 10 items with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem (Cronbach’s α = .94; M = 5.24, SD = 1.27). After some filler questions, unrelated to this study, we asked participants to indicate the number of Apple products they possessed (M = 1.34, SD = 1.46). We excluded one participant who indicated to own more than 25 Apple products and hence would distort
the results obtained. Finally, participants answered demographic questions and were thanked for their participation.

4.4.2 | Results
A correlation analysis revealed that self-esteem and the number of Apple products participants owned were positively related ($r(181) = 0.22, p < .01$). In addition, a binary logistic regression on ownership using chronic self-esteem as independent variable indicated that participants’ self-view was a significant predictor of whether or not they possessed Apple products ($b = 0.34, SE = 0.13, Wald = 7.30, p < .01$). These results indicate that people with a self-esteem are more likely to possess a particular and well known self-referencing brand. Moreover, and in line with the previous reasoning, the mean of self-esteem suggests that the valence of people's 'default' self-view is indeed positive. More specifically, only 14 participants (i.e., 8% of the total sample) scored below the self-esteem scale's midpoint indicating that the sample contained only a limited number of people with a chronic negative self-esteem.

4.5 | Study 1
The results of the pre-study provide initial evidence of a relationship between self-view valence and the evaluation of self-referencing brand names. Of course, its cross-sectional nature and the status of the brand used allows for confounding variables to affect the result and for alternate explanations of the key finding. Hence in Study 1, we moved to a more controlled setting and measured consumers’ evaluation of fictitious, rather than existing brands to rule out the possibility that the effects were driven by unobserved variables associated with the existing brand name and products used in the pre-study. More specifically, we examined the role of consumers’ explicit self-esteem in the impact of brands with or without a generic personal pronoun as prefix in their name on brand judgment. If the generic self-referencing effect is a function of consumers’ self-view it follows that the evaluation of self-referencing brands should be dependent on the extent to which their chronic self-esteem is positive. We tested our propositions on a representative panel of consumers of different ages, ethnic, and educational backgrounds.

4.5.1 | Method
4.5.1.1 | Participants and design
In this experiment a design was used with type of prefix (self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) as a within subjects factor, and self-esteem as a continuous, individual difference

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9 A log transformation on the number of Apple products to reduce skewness produced similar results ($r(181) = 0.22, p < .01$).
variable. Sixty-two consumers, randomly drawn from an online consumer panel, voluntarily participated in and completed this study (mean age = 32.45; SD = 14.20; 35% male).

4.5.1.2 | Procedure
This study was part of a larger set of studies undertaken by different research teams on customer relationship management tools. First, participants filled out the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale as a measure of chronic self-esteem (Cronbach’s α = .84). In line with the pre-study, the scale mean (M = 5.13, SD = .52) indicates a positively skewed distribution of chronic self-esteem scores.

Later, in an ostensibly unrelated task, participants were requested to evaluate brand names. They learned that nowadays many retailers set up additional services next to their regular core business, and were asked to evaluate four fictitious brand names as potential labels for such a service. Participants were told that they would not get any additional information about the service to ensure that our evaluation measure assessed their judgment of the brand name and not the service. Next, they were exposed to two fictitious brands of services (i.e., Beauty and Personality), and these brand names were randomly presented with a self-referencing (i.e., My) and non-self-referencing prefix (i.e., X). We measured brand judgment by asking participants to indicate how they evaluated the brand name (e.g., MyPersonality) on a seven-point scale (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive). After this final task, participants answered demographic questions, were debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

4.5.2 | Results and Discussion
Because the design of the present study includes both a within and between subjects factor we performed a mixed-model ANOVA, with brand evaluation as the dependent variable, type of prefix as a within-subjects factor, and self-esteem (standardized, Aiken and West 1991) as a continuous factor. This analysis yielded a significant main effect of prefix (F(1, 60) = 21.49, \( p = .001 \)), indicating that self-referencing brand names were evaluated more positively (M = 3.73, SD = 1.13) than non-self-referencing brand names (M = 3.03, SD = 1.12). More importantly, the expected prefix by self-esteem interaction proved to be significant (F(1, 60) = 6.70, \( p = .01 \)). Comparisons of the predicted means for high self-esteem (one SD above the standardized self-esteem score, Aiken and West 1991) and low self-esteem (one SD below the standardized self-esteem score) participants showed that high self-esteem participants evaluated self-referencing brand names more positively (M = 4.03, SD = 1.57) than non-self-referencing brand names (M = 2.93, SD = 1.60; F(1, 60) = 26.04, \( p < .001 \)). For low self-esteem participants, findings indicated that the attraction effect for self-referencing brand names attenuated as brand evaluation did not significantly differ for self-referencing (M = 3.44, SD = 1.57) and non-self-

10 We report the results of a mixed-model ANOVA to simplify presentation, although a regression analysis using difference scores produced the exact same pattern of results.
sreferencing brands (M = 3.13, SD = 1.60; F(1, 60) = 2.04, n.s.).

Hence, the self-referencing effect of self-associated brand names was only observed for high self-esteem participants. In line with the pre-study, the results indicate that brand judgment is a function of generic self-referencing pronouns in brand names. Importantly, the results also show that the effect is qualified by self-esteem such that it is mainly observed among high self-esteem participants, and less among their lower self-esteem counterparts. Hence, chronic high self-esteem results in increased evaluation of self-referencing brands. In contrast, people with chronic low self-esteem did not evaluate generic self-referencing brands more favorably than non-self-referencing brands. As such, these results show that the effect of the consumer’s self-view on generic self-referencing brand judgment hinges on the valence of the consumer’s self or, more specifically, the extent to which chronic self-esteem is positive. This study also rules out the possibility that the generic self-referencing effect is simply a function of being familiar with personal pronouns in brand names, i.e., a fluency effect (Jones et al. 2002; Zajonc 1968), in which case the self’s valence should not have played a role in accounting for the brand judgment bias.

The findings indicate an ordinal modulation by self-esteem, which is in line with other research that typically found a similar pattern when focusing on chronic self-esteem (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, and Becker 2007; Jones et al. 2004; Koole, Dijksterhuis, and van Knippenberg 2001). Indeed, the sample mean and distribution of the scale strongly suggests that, similar to the pre-study, chronic self-esteem is by default positive, thus obscuring a potential reversal of the effect for truly negative self-esteem.

4.6 | Study 2

The findings of Study 1 demonstrate that a positively valenced self-view induces favorable brand evaluation of generic self-referencing brand names. Study 2 sought to further establish the role of chronic self-esteem in the relationship between self-referencing brands and brand judgment by testing whether the effects are unique to explicit chronic self-esteem or also extend to implicit self-esteem. Moreover, by administering the self-esteem measure implicitly we can rule out the alternative explanation that the findings of Study 1 were attributable to consistency bias or demand characteristics (Orne 1962).

In line with our hypotheses, additional simple effect analyses revealed that for self-referencing brand names the effect of self-esteem was significant and in the predicted direction (β = .26, t(60) = 2.08, p = .04), indicating a positive relationship between self-esteem and the evaluation of self-referencing brand names. No effect of self-esteem was observed for non-self-referencing brand names (t < 1), such that self-esteem did not affect brand evaluation of non-self-referencing brands. This pattern of results was consistent across all studies (i.e., in Study 2, βself-referencing = .40, t(35) = 2.21, p = .03, βnon-self-referencing = -.41, t(35) = 1.34, n.s.; in Study 3, Fself-referencing(1, 214) = 4.27, p = .04, Fnon-self-referencing < 1; in Study 4, Fself-referencing(1, 227) = 17.30, p < .001, Fnon-self-referencing < 1; in Study 4 for non-self-expressive products, Fself-referencing(1, 103) = 5.25, p = .02, Fnon-self-referencing < 1; in Study 4 for self-expressive products, Fself-referencing(1, 124) = 19.61, p < .001, Fnon-self-referencing < 1).
4.6.1 | Method
4.6.1.1 | Participants and design
Forty undergraduate students completed this part of a larger study in return for course credit or a small fee. One participant did not complete the full study and was therefore excluded from the analyses. The final sample consisted of 39 participants (mean age = 19.79; SD = .98; 64% male). In this study, a design was used with type of prefix (self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) as a between subjects factor, and implicit self-esteem as a continuous, individual difference variable.

4.6.1.2 | Procedure
At the beginning of the experiment, all participants signed an informed consent form. As a measure of implicit self-esteem, and following previous research (Rudman, Dohn, and Fairchild 2007; Vargas, Sekaquaptewa, and von Hippel 2007; Zweigenhaft 1977), we measured the size of one’s signature by drawing the smallest possible rectangle around it and calculated the surface area in cm$^2$. Larger surface areas thus indicated more positive implicit self-esteem ($M = 7.59 \text{ cm}^2$, $SD = 5.85$).

After signing the informed consent form, participants were led into separate cubicles and were asked to evaluate fictitious brand names. Similar to Study 1, they were exposed to two brands (i.e., Bottle and Bin), and these brand names were randomly presented with either a self-referencing (i.e., My) or non-self-referencing prefix (i.e., X). The brand names were presented one by one in combination with a picture of the product to induce a sense of realism (see Appendix C). Brand evaluation was measured by asking “Do you like this brand name?” (1 = no, not at all, 7 = yes, very much) and “How appealing is this brand name to you?” (1 = not appealing at all, 7 = very appealing). Scores were averaged ($r(39) = .89, p < .001$) with higher scores indicating higher brand name evaluation. To control for name letter liking, participants evaluated each letter of the alphabet (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive) and indicated the initials of their name. After this final task, participants answered demographic questions, were debriefed, compensated, and thanked for their participation.

4.6.2 | Results and Discussion
A regression analysis with type of prefix (effect coded, Aiken and West 1991), self-esteem (standardized) and their interaction as independent variables and brand name evaluation as the dependent variable did not show main effects of either type of prefix or self-esteem ($ts < 1$). However, the prefix by self-esteem interaction proved to be significant ($β = .41, t(35) = 2.26, p = .03$). Replicating the results of Study 1, simple effect analyses revealed that high self-esteem participants evaluated self-referencing brand names more positively than non-self-referencing brand names ($β = .53, t(35) = 2.05, p = .05$). For participants with low self-esteem, findings indicated that brand evaluation did not differ significantly between self-referencing and non-self-referencing brands ($β = -.31, t(35) = 1.35, \text{n.s.}$).
We also controlled for the effect of name letter liking by adding the evaluation of the initials consumers shared with the prefixes (i.e., m, y, and x) to the regression model. Results remained the same, indicating that the qualified effect of generic self-referencing brand names held, even when accounting for name letter liking.

Together, these findings build on the results of Study 1 in two ways. First, we replicated our main hypothesis. That is, Study 2 confirmed the moderating role of self-view valence, and showed that high self-esteem results in increased evaluation of generic self-referencing brands. This effect was attenuated for lower self-esteem consumers. Second, and in line with our hypothesis, we found that the effect of chronic self-esteem on self-referencing brand evaluation does not remain limited to explicit self-esteem but extends to implicit self-esteem. As such, Studies 1 and 2 stress the important role of the valence of both explicit and implicit chronic self-evaluations in the impact of generic self-referencing pronouns in brand names on brand judgment.

4.7 | Study 3

The findings of the pre-study indicate a relationship between the self’s valence and the preference for self-related brands. The experiments reported in Studies 1 and 2 show more systematically that the self, and more specifically its chronic explicit and implicit valence, plays an important role in accounting for a generic self-referencing effect. The purpose of the present experiment was twofold. First, we aimed to find converging evidence for our notions by zooming in on acute rather than chronic fluctuations in the self’s valence to test whether the temporal rather than chronic availability of favorable and unfavorable self-thoughts affects the strength of the generic self-referencing effect. Second, we wanted to examine the direction of the effect and assess whether the hypothesized attraction effect of self-referencing brand names for consumers whose view of the self is positive turns into an avoidance effect for consumers whose self-view is temporarily impaired. As highlighted earlier, one reason why we did not find this flip over effect may lay in the assumption that people’s chronic self-view is by ‘default’ positive (Baumeister 1989; Schmitt and Allik 2005), an observation that is supported by our data that clearly indicate a positivity bias in the means and distributions of our self-esteem measures. More specifically, in the pre-study and Study 1 combined only 14 out of 243 participants (6%) scored below the self-esteem scale’s midpoint. If people have the tendency to evaluate the self positively, and if the generic self-referencing effect is a function of people’s self-view spilling over to a self-associated target, it follows that chronic self-esteem will only produce a negative effect of self-referencing brand names on brand judgment for values that are generally out of scope of our and previous research. Indeed, further inspection of the data of Study 2 shows that at two standard deviations below the standardized implicit self-esteem score, the avoidance effect for low self-esteem individuals becomes marginally significant such that self-referencing
brand names are evaluated more negatively than non-self-referencing brand names ($\beta = -0.73$, $t(35) = 1.89$, $p = .07$).

Thus, one way to move forward and to examine the existence of a crossover effect would be to shift attention from chronic to acute self-esteem, since the latter is situationally induced and hence, less dependent on pre-existing population distributions. Thus, the present experiment specifically focuses on acute fluctuations in the self’s valence. Furthermore, in this study, we used ‘A’ as a non-self-referencing prefix in order to assess whether the effects found in the previous studies can be accounted for by the presence of the prefix ‘X’ (but see footnote 11). Finally, in the present study we extended our examination of the effect of self-referencing brand names to explore whether the bias in brand judgment remains limited to brand name evaluation, as we assessed in Studies 1 and 2, or spills over to affect product related consumer responses, i.e., willingness-to-buy.

4.7.1 | Method
4.7.1.1 | Participants and design
This study used a 2 (type of prefix: self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) x 2 (self-view manipulation: self-threat vs. self-affirmation) between-subjects factorial design in which 225 students participated in exchange for partial course credit or monetary compensation. We excluded three participants who did not adhere to the experimental instructions and four participants for not completing the full study. The analyses reported below use the remaining 218 responses (mean age = 21.25, SD = 2.32; 49% male).

4.7.1.2 | Procedure
Upon entering the lab, participants were seated in cubicles and were told that they would be completing various unrelated tasks and that they would start with a test assessing aspects of their cognitive processing. Participants were then presented with the Remote Associates Test (RAT; Mednick 1968), which is a commonly used method to manipulate people’s self-esteem by providing positive or negative bogus performance feedback (Allen and Sherman 2011; Collange, Fiske, and Sanitioso 2009; Heatherton and Vohs 2000). Participants were given a list with three words (e.g., cracker-fly-fighter) and asked to find the fourth word that linked all the other words together (e.g., fire). Based on normative data (McFarlin and Blascovich 1984), five easy and five difficult items were chosen to ensure that participants would have an ambivalent feeling about their task performance. The items were presented in random order. Participants learned that they had to finish the task within 10 minutes and that they would receive performance feedback upon test completion. After finishing the RAT, participants read additional information about the test which explained that past research had demonstrated that scores on the RAT predict professional success, health, and social skills. This information was followed by bogus feedback ostensibly based on well validated norms.
In the self-threat condition, participants learned that with a total of 46 points they had scored in the 10\textsuperscript{th} percentile and hence had performed poorly. Conversely, in the self-affirmation condition, participants read that they had scored 146 points, which was in the 90\textsuperscript{th} percentile, and hence had performed very well.

Next, participants were asked to evaluate two fictitious brand names. They were exposed to the same fictitious brands as used in Study 2 (i.e., Bottle and Bin), together with a picture of the product. The brand names were randomly presented with either a self-referencing (i.e., My) or non-self-referencing prefix (i.e., A). We measured willingness to buy the product on a seven-point scale (1 = not willing at all, 7 = very willing). After this task, participants answered a one-item mood measure (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive) and demographic questions. Subsequently, participants were thoroughly debriefed, compensated, and thanked for their participation.

4.7.2 Results and Discussion

A 2 (type of prefix) x 2 (self-view manipulation) ANOVA with willingness-to-buy as dependent variable did not produce main effects of type of prefix and self-view manipulation (Fs < 1). Moreover, including mood as a covariate in the ANOVA did not change any of the results. Because we did not find unintended effects of mood in this and the next experiment, this variable will not be discussed further. Importantly, the analysis did reveal a significant type of prefix by self-view manipulation interaction (F(1, 214) = 5.46, \(p = .02\)). To explicate the interaction, simple main effect analyses were conducted which indicated that self-affirmation resulted in an attraction effect of self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names, such that participants evaluated self-referencing brands more positively compared to non-self-referencing brands after their positive self-view was affirmed (M\textsubscript{self-referencing} = 3.39, SD = 1.17 vs. M\textsubscript{non-self-referencing} = 2.87, SD = 1.20; F(1, 214) = 4.74, \(p = .03\)).

The move from chronic to acute self-esteem did not produce the anticipated crossover effect, since results revealed that under conditions of acute self-threat evaluations of self-referencing and non-self-referencing brands did not differ (M\textsubscript{self-referencing} = 2.91, SD = 1.34 vs. M\textsubscript{non-self-referencing} = 3.17, SD = 1.24 (F(1, 214) = 1.25, n.s.). Hence, the type of modulation observed in this study was of an ordinal, rather than crossover nature.

The results of Study 3 extend our findings in two ways. First, by showing that not only chronic self-esteem but also acute fluctuations in the self’s valence modulate the effect of personal pronouns in brand names on brand judgment, these findings underscore the fundamental role of consumers’ self-esteem in accounting for the generic self-referencing effect. Second, we replicated the basic finding that people with a favorable self-view evaluate self-referencing brand names more positively than non-self-referencing brand names. In contrast, when a positive self-view was impaired the self-referencing effect attenuated, but did not reverse into an avoidance effect. In the process of tracking down the modulating role of self-esteem, the present study shifted attention from chronic to acute self-esteem. As the results show, this shift in itself
did not produce the theoretically predicted crossover effect. This suggests that while focusing on acute self-esteem might (or might not) be a necessary condition to witness the crossover, it is certainly not a sufficient one. Hence, the next and final study adds to the present one by not only focusing on acute self-esteem, but also taking into account the type of product (i.e., self-expressive vs. non-self-expressive).

4.8 | Study 4

Although the findings of Studies 1-3 provide strong evidence for the notion that consumers feel attracted to brands that reflect a positive self-view, they did not provide evidence for a crossover effect, i.e., that consumers show avoidance of brands that reflect a negative view of themselves. In addition to the type of self-esteem, this effect may not have emerged because the products used in the previous studies were all non-self-expressive (as a pretest reported below will demonstrate, see footnote 12). Self-expressive products on the other hand have been shown to be more reflective of the consumer’s self (Aaker 1999; Belk 1988). In that sense, the previous studies can be considered to be fairly conservative in their set-up. This is not a problem when the aim is to show how a positive self-esteem enhances self-referencing brand judgment, but it may be a problem when it comes to showing the not-so-prevalent negative pendant of this effect.

Therefore, we propose that if the avoidance effect of self-associated, generic self-referencing brands under conditions of acute self-threat exists, then it may be particularly pronounced for self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive products. More specifically, reconciling this position with the present findings up to this point, for non-self-expressive products the same pattern of results as found in the previous studies should emerge. However, for self-expressive products the theoretically plausible crossover interaction should be observed, i.e., that under conditions of acute negative self-esteem (following self-threat) generic self-referencing brands are evaluated more negatively than non-self-referencing brands.

Moreover, in Study 4 we extended our examination of self-related cues to another personal pronoun, i.e., ‘I’, to rule out the possibility that the generic self-referencing effect is a function of the specific prefix ‘my’, which may have promoted a sense of ownership (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1990). Finally, in extension of brand name evaluation and willingness-to-buy, we examined whether the judgment bias of self-referencing brands also spills over to yet another type of consumer response, i.e., willingness-to-pay.
4.8.1 | Method

4.8.1.1 | Participants and design

Two hundred fifty-one U.S. residents, recruited through Amazon's MTurk, participated in the 2 (type of prefix: self-referencing vs. non-self-referencing) x 2 (type of product: self-expressive vs. non-self-expressive) x 2 (self-view manipulation: self-threat vs. self-affirmation) between-subjects factorial design in exchange for a small fee. After excluding two participants who did not complete the full study and 14 participants who failed to satisfy an instructional manipulation check (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009), the final sample consisted of 235 participants (mean age = 35.94; SD = 12.62; 54% male).

4.8.1.2 | Procedure

Similar to Study 3, participants first completed the RAT after which they randomly received positive or negative bogus feedback about their performance.

Next, based on the results of a pretest (see below), participants were either asked to rate four brand names of self-expressive products (i.e., a watch and a cell-phone) or of non-self-expressive products (i.e., a dinner plate and socks). Pictures of these products appeared one by one on the computer screen (see Appendix D). The brand names were randomly presented in combination with either self-referencing (i.e., I and My) or non-self-referencing prefixes (i.e., A and X). Participants were asked the amount they were willing to pay for each individual product (in USD). Scores were averaged (Cronbach’s α = .85) with higher scores indicating higher willingness-to-pay. After this final task, participants were asked demographic questions, thoroughly debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

4.8.1.3 | Pretest

To ensure that the products described above as self-expressive and non-self-expressive were viewed as such by participants, a pretest was conducted among thirty-seven participants from the same population as in the main study. One participant did not complete the full study and was therefore excluded from the analyses (mean age = 37.67; SD = 12.79; 50% male). Participants were asked to fill out an adapted version of the Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas and Bettman 2003) as a measure of self-expressiveness of the products. They indicated their agreement with each of seven items (e.g., “Product X reflects who I am”) on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely well). Responses were averaged with higher scores indicating higher self-expressiveness (Cronbach’s α = .94). A paired samples t-test indicated that the self-expressive products were indeed rated as more reflective of the self (M = 3.78, SD = 1.50) than the non-self-expressive products (M = 2.64, SD = 1.09, t(35) = 6.10, p < .001). This pattern held for each individual pair of self-expressive versus non-self-expressive products.
(e.g., watch vs. dinner plate). Mean difference was non-significant for each congruent pair of products (e.g., watch vs. cell phone).

4.8.2 Results and Discussion

Willingness-to-pay was submitted to a 2 (type of prefix) x 2 (type of product) x 2 (self-view manipulation) ANOVA. The analysis revealed a main effect of self-view manipulation ($F(1, 227) = 11.19, p = .001$), indicating that participants were willing to pay more when their positive self-view was affirmed ($M = $43.48, $SD = 53.19$) compared to when it was threatened ($M = $32.67, $SD = 43.00$). Furthermore, the main effect of type of product proved significant ($F(1, 227) = 210.54, p < .001$), such that participants were willing to pay more for self-expressive products ($M = $66.49, $SD = 49.53$) than for non-self-expressive products ($M = $3.33, $SD = 1.95$). The main effect of type of prefix was not significant ($F < 1$).

More importantly, the type of prefix by self-view manipulation interaction proved significant ($F(1, 227) = 8.01, p < .01$). To explicate the interaction, simple effects analyses were conducted which revealed that participants were not only willing to pay more for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names after self-affirmation ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = $49.99, $SD = 60.94$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = $38.63, $SD = 46.51$; $F(1, 227) = 6.24, p = .04$), which parallels the findings of Studies 1-3, but also that participants were (marginally) less willing to pay for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names when their self-view was threatened ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = $26.88, $SD = 35.60$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = $38.02, $SD = 48.51$; $F(1, 227) = 3.57, p = .06$), which is in line with the expected avoidance effect.

Finally, the expected three-way interaction of type of prefix, type of product, and self-view manipulation was significant ($F(1, 227) = 6.96, p < .01$, see Figure 4.1). To probe the interaction, separate ANOVAs were performed for each type of product. The non-self-expressive products condition paralleled earlier findings and revealed an ordinal type of prefix by self-view manipulation interaction ($F(1, 103) = 5.55, p = .02$). In line with the results of Studies 1-3, findings revealed that self-affirmation resulted in a higher willingness-to-pay for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = 4.07, SD = 2.17$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = 3.00, SD = 1.80$; $F(1, 103) = 4.15, p = .04$). Willingness-to-pay for products with self-referencing and non-self-referencing brand names after self-threat did not differ ($M_{\text{self-referencing}} = 2.80, SD = 1.44$ vs. $M_{\text{non-self-referencing}} = 3.49, SD = 2.13$; $F(1, 103) = 1.68, n.s.$).

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12 The products used in Studies 2 and 3 were included in this study to test our notion that they were perceived as non-self-expressive by the participants. Participants answered the same seven items measuring self-expressiveness of the products as used in the pretest (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .96$). Paired samples t-tests indicated that the mean difference in self-expressiveness for each individual pair of self-expressive (i.e., watch and cell phone) versus non-self-expressive products (i.e., bottle and bin) was indeed significant ($ts > 4.13, p < .001$), and that the mean difference was non-significant for each pair of non-self-expressive products (i.e., bottle vs. bin vs. socks vs. dinner plate; $ts < 1.87, n.s.$).
In addition, the self-expressive products condition revealed a type of prefix by self-view manipulation interaction (F(1, 124) = 8.87, p < .01). Results indicated that self-affirmation resulted in a higher willingness-to-pay for products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names (M_{self-referencing} = $97.90, SD = 55.30 vs. M_{non-self-referencing} = $71.02, SD = 43.78; F(1, 124) = 4.53, p = .04). More importantly, and in line with the expected avoidance effect, after self-threat participants wanted to pay less for self-expressive products with self-referencing brand names compared to non-self-referencing brand names (M_{self-referencing} = $42.92, SD = 38.37 vs. M_{non-self-referencing} = $65.83, SD = 50.15; F(1, 124) = 4.53, p = .04).

Figure 4.1 | Willingness-to-pay as a function of type of prefix, type of product, and self-view manipulation (Study 4).

The results of Study 4 extend our findings in several ways. First, we replicated the basic finding that people with a favorable self-view (following self-affirmation), evaluate self-referencing brands more positively than non-self-referencing brands. Second, and more importantly, we found that the bias in the evaluation of self-referencing brands leads to negative brand judgment when consumers’ positive self-view was impaired, particularly for self-expressive products. In contrast, and similar to the results of Studies 1-3, this avoidance effect was attenuated for self-referencing brands of non-self-expressive products. These results demonstrate that self-expressiveness of the product is an important factor modulating the qualified effects of personal pronouns in brand names on brand judgment. Irrespective of the type of product, consumers feel attracted to products with a self-referencing brand name that reflects positively on themselves. However, to protect and maintain a positive view of the self, consumers tend to avoid generic self-referencing brands when their self-view is threatened, but only when the product is self-expressive. When the product is non-self-expressive brand judgment is unaffected.
4.9 | General Discussion

The present research extends previous research by examining whether more generic references to the self in brand names influence brand judgment, and systematically explores the conditions that qualify such a generic self-referencing effect. Building on previous research on the name letter effect and implicit egotism (Nuttin 1985; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002), we hypothesized that more generic references to the consumer’s self in brand names, and more specifically first person pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘my’, would similarly induce self-associations and affect brand judgment. Given the assumption that the self-referencing effect has a self-evaluative basis we expected the bias in brand judgment to reflect the valence of consumers’ self-view, such that consumers with a favorable self-view would find self-referencing brand names more appealing and, conversely, that a negative self-view would spill over to negatively affect brand evaluation. We anticipated these effects to be more pronounced for brands of self-expressive, rather than non-self-expressive products.

The findings of a series of five studies were in line with our predictions and were robust across various methodological and conceptual variations. More in particular, we found the predicted qualified effect of generic self-referencing in brand names both in cross-sectional as well as in experimental studies, both in the lab and in the field, for consumer’s chronic and acute self-esteem, when self-view valence was assessed explicitly and implicitly, across a total of 735 respondents using both existing and fictitious brand names, using both ‘I’ and ‘my’ as a self-referencing prefix, for a student sample and more heterogeneous samples of European and American consumers, across multiple product categories and services, and across different indices of brand judgment, i.e., number of self-associated products participants possessed, brand name evaluation, willingness-to-buy, and willingness-to-pay.

More specifically, the pre-study revealed that consumers with a positive self-view were more likely to possess (a greater number of) products with a self-referencing brand name. In Study 1 we moved to a more controlled setting and found that consumers with a high compared to low self-view evaluated fictitious brand names that referred to the self more positively, whereas self-view valence was inconsequential for the evaluation of non-self-referencing brand names. These results provide evidence that the generic self-referencing effect is indeed a product of ‘self-love’, rather than just the ‘self’ or familiarity with pronouns in brand names. The finding that the effect of consumers’ self-view on brand judgment is a product of their self-evaluations was replicated in Studies 2-4 using an implicit instead of explicit measure of chronic self-esteem and by manipulating the favorability of the consumer’s acute self-thoughts. Study 4 emphasized the important role the self plays in brand judgment, and showed that the positive bias in the evaluation of self-referencing brands can turn into a negative bias, particularly for self-expressive products when the consumer’s positive self-was impaired.

Our findings contribute to literature in multiple ways. First, we extend work on the egotism effect by considering its manifestation in a marketing context. Although implicit egotism
governs behavior in many spheres of human functioning (Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005), this phenomenon has until now received only scant attention in the marketing and consumer behavior literatures. Second, we demonstrate that implicit egotism is not limited to arbitrary situations where (brand) names and name letters match (Brendl et al. 2005; Nuttin 1985; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002), but generalizes to more generic self-cues in brand names, such as ‘I’ and ‘my’. In so doing, this research not only contributes to literature on implicit egotism but also to branding literature by providing the first evidence that personal pronouns in brand names affect brand name evaluation.

Third, this work adds to a deeper understanding of the role of the self’s valence in egotism related phenomena. Although we do acknowledge that preference for certain pronouns may partially result from existing associations with real brand names, we show that the extent to which referring to the consumer’s self in brand names is beneficial for brand evaluation depends on the self’s valence. More specifically, our findings indicate that the self-referencing brand judgment bias is not the same for all people, but that the attraction effect is particularly characteristic for consumers with a favorable self-view, whereas an avoidance effect is particularly characteristic for consumers whose self-view is acutely threatened. By showing that referring to the consumer’s self in brand names can be both beneficial and harmful, but that the effect is dependent on the self’s valence, this work highlights the importance of understanding the dynamic role of the self in consumer behavior (Oyserman 2009; Reed II et al. 2012), and more specifically in branding (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen 2012).

Fourth and finally, this work provides a fuller understanding of the self-referencing effect as a self-maintenance or self-regulation mechanism. Although it is well established in marketing and consumer research that people use brands and products to construe and maintain a positive self-view (Aaker 1999; Belk 1988), and that people are motivated to protect their self-view when threatened (Sherman and Cohen 2006), this work puts both well-known observations together and shows that consumers feel attracted to generic self-referencing brands when they can function in a self-affirming or self-boosting way and that consumers avoid generic self-referencing brands when they reflect negatively on themselves. As such, these findings paint a picture of the generic self-referencing effect as a highly functional and adaptive strategy (Carver 2004; Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009; Sivanathan and Pettit 2010). Moreover, this work introduces self-expressiveness of the target brand as an important determinant for the strength of the self-referencing effect, a factor previously neglected. The finding that the brand judgment bias is particularly pronounced for self-associated targets with a self-expressive function contributes to the ongoing discussion about the generalizability of egotism effects to various evaluations in everyday life (Gallucci 2003; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002; Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005; Simonsohn 2011). Altogether, this work answers the call for more in-depth research on qualifying conditions of egotism related phenomena (Hodson and Olson 2005; Simonsohn 2011) by zooming in on the role of the consumer’s self and the possible functions brands serve.
Our findings provide several directions for future research. First, although the ‘classic’ egotism effects by Pelham and colleagues (Jones et al. 2004; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002; Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005) have been demonstrated in involving, personally relevant contexts (e.g., important life decisions), the evaluation task in our research can be considered relatively non-involving to our participants. On the one hand, that makes good sense, since one can argue that the effect is assumed to be more impulsive and associative, rather than propositional and reflective (Strack and Deutsch 2004; Greenwald and Banaji 1995) and hence will surface particularly under these conditions. Indeed, although consumers were exposed only briefly to self-referencing brand names, their judgment was immediately influenced. Moreover, these findings were observed absent of usage or ownership (Beggan 1992; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1990), nor after repeated pairing of the self with the brand (Perkins and Forehand 2012). On the other hand, systematic research on the role of personal relevance is currently lacking and hence, future research might profitably explore whether the underlying psychological processes differ across differentially involving personal circumstances.

Furthermore, future research might assess whether the self-referencing effect is culture-specific. That is, whether the phenomenon is mainly observed in Western, individualistic cultures where holding and expressing self-centered motives and cognitions is deemed acceptable, or also extends to Eastern cultures where people may be more restrained in expressing a positive self-view, and where the self is expressed through collective identities, i.e., in ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ terms (Heine and Hamamura 2007; Schmitt and Allik 2005). Relatedly, it would be interesting to look deeper into cross-linguistic effects of self-cues (Hoorens et al. 1990), since the brand judgment bias in our work was also found using first person pronouns in a (for the participants) non-native language.

Although brands are of enormous economic importance to companies and consumers heavily rely on these labels for product evaluation (Keller and Aaker 1992), the role of self-referencing pronouns in brand names and their effect on brand judgment is surprisingly enough poorly understood. This research contributes to practice by showing that simply referring to the consumer’s self by using such pronouns as self-cues in brand names may influence a host of consumption decisions. In so doing, and given that people’s default self-view is positive, the current findings emphasize a brand naming strategy to increase the likelihood that consumers evaluate a brand favorably. Specifically, our findings indicate conditions that play a key role in determining when this brand naming strategy is likely to be successful, as for instance when the marketplace setting is self-affirming (Lee, Kim, and Vohs 2011; White and Argo 2009). Additionally, the current findings add to our knowledge on how brands can establish brand identification (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Although the creation of brand identification is often experienced as a long-term, expensive process (Aaker 1997), we demonstrate that brands featuring generic personal pronouns, just by being present in the consumer’s environment, easily become associated with the consumer’s self.
We began this article by noting that the use of personal pronouns in branding has surged in the last decade. Whether this brand naming strategy is based on marketers’ intuition or not, the present findings emphasize the validity of this trend. Seemingly trivial, generic self-cues in brand names can mobilize self-referencing effects, leading consumers to evaluate pronoun containing brands more positively. As such, the present findings not only underscore the fundamental role of the self in consumer brand judgment, but also provide a provocative alternative account for the stunning marketing success of such global brands as Ipad, Iphone, MySpace and Ikea.