

## Consumer preference for national vs. private brands: The influence of brand engagement and self-concept threat

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### ABSTRACT

Previous research on self-brand connections has not considered the inclusion of brand categories (e.g., national and private brands). The current work examines consumers' preference for national and private brands and their tendency to include brands as part of their self-concept (measured by the brand engagement in the self-concept (BESC) scale and manipulated using a tagline). Study 1 revealed higher BESC consumers to prefer national (vs. private) brands. Study 2 identified a boundary condition for our initial study by demonstrating consumers higher in BESC to prefer national brands (relative to private brands) less when presented a self-concept threat. Additionally, results showed lower BESC consumers deferring to national (vs. private) brands when facing a self-concept threat. Finally, Study 3 results were consistent with Study 2 findings when brand engagement was manipulated (vs. measured). Our work suggests that when a self-concept threat unrelated to the branded self is presented, the central importance of brands, for those consumers more highly engaged with brands, will decrease to the point of impacting preferences.

### 1. Introduction

National brands are typically positioned as premium products (e.g., Cunningham et al., 1982; Steenkamp et al., 2010) via national promotional campaigns (e.g., Woodside and Taylor, 1978) touting the quality of components or construction. On the other hand, private brands are typically competitively positioned as lower priced, reasonable quality and value alternatives (e.g., Goldsmith et al., 2010; Rosen, 1984). The relationship between national and private brands is unique as national brands often rely on retailers to carry their products in order to reach consumers while those same retailers may offer their own competing private brand alternatives (Hoch and Banerji, 1993). The relationship is further complicated by the fact that retailers recognize the customer-attracting value of carrying national brands (Shapiro, 1993) and the same manufacturers are often relied upon to produce both national and private brands. Such interdependencies notwithstanding, a fundamental fight for market share and associated revenues persists between national and private brands in many retail environments (Gielens, 2012).

Motivated by this unique competitive juxtaposition, marketing scholars have conducted considerable research on private and national

brands. Prior work has explored perceived differences between national and private brands, often focusing on profiles of respective customers. For example, researchers have identified various demographic variables (e.g., education, income, household size; e.g., Richardson et al., 1996), as well as traits (e.g., Lichtenstein et al., 1993), related to seeking out and paying for the lowest prices for products (i.e., those typically associated with private brands). Drivers of market share for these respective types of brands have also been extensively explored as well as consumers' varying perceptions of quality (e.g., Bao et al., 2011) and risks associated with differing types of brand purchases (e.g., Erdem et al., 2004).

While early research and market observation have typically shown a stronger position for national brands compared to private brands (e.g., Dunn et al., 1986), more recent research finds a growing preference for private brands among some consumers who have positively experienced such goods (e.g., Kaswengi and Diallo, 2015; Lamey et al., 2007). The growth in private brand popularity raises questions regarding conclusions from past research finding relatively consistent negative consumer responses to private brands (e.g., in terms of quality perceptions).

In the current work we draw upon theoretical advances regarding

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the role of brands relative to the self-concept (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005; Hammerl et al., 2016), exploring and helping to clarify what drives preferences for national brands over private brands and vice versa. In particular, our main objective is to investigate the impact of consumers' brand engagement with their self-concept (BESC; Sprott et al., 2009) and the effect of such engagement regarding national or private brand preferences. Brand engagement has been shown to impact consumers' willingness to pay and to wait for a favorite brand to release a new product (Sprott et al., 2009), as well as to provide meaning to users and connections between a brand and users (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Following Sprott et al. (2009) theorizing regarding a consumer's tendency to include brands in the self-concept, we propose that such brand engagement will influence consumer preferences for national and private brands. Our second objective is to explore a theoretically-relevant boundary condition for brand engagement's draw to national versus private brands. In particular, we explore self-concept threat and its moderating effect on the influence of brand engagement on preferences for national versus private brands. Given that the self-concept is typically considered to be composed of two dimensions (Campbell, 1990), namely knowledge (e.g., important brands used to define the self) and evaluative (i.e., self-esteem), examining the moderating impact of a self-concept threat is in line with self research. Investigating boundary conditions from the moderating influence of a self-concept threat is relevant due to past research demonstrating consumers draw to meaning-laden products as a means to recover from a lowered self-view (e.g., Gao et al., 2009; Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010). Further, we determine whether brand engagement can not only be measured, but also manipulated. To date, brand engagement has been examined primarily from a consumer's dispositional standpoint. We explore whether marketers potentially have the capability to instill an importance of brands, in general, amongst their target market.

Hypotheses are derived from relevant literature; we then present three experiments testing them. First, we test in Study 1 whether a relationship exists between a consumer's disposition of brand engagement and preference for national vs. private brands. In Study 2, we extend findings from Study 1 by testing self-concept threat as a boundary condition for national vs. private brand choice depending on a consumer's level of brand engagement. Our last study tests for the robustness of results from Studies 1 and 2 by manipulating, rather than measuring, brand engagement. We close with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications to research and practice.

## 2. Conceptual development and hypotheses

### 2.1. National brands, private brands and the self

Consumer perceptions regarding national and private brands have been shown to influence choice of both. For example, the greater market share associated with national (vs. private) brands has been attributed to higher quality perceptions of such brands (e.g., Bao et al., 2011; Steenkamp et al., 2010). Related research has shown that quality perceptions are heavily influenced by extrinsic cues (e.g., advertising, packaging; Richardson et al., 1994), especially when intrinsic cues are unavailable (Sprott and Shimp, 2004). Perceived risk also contributes to differing responses to national and private brands, with higher risk typically being associated with private brands (Batra and Sinha, 2000). Despite apparent advantages of national brands in terms of perceived quality and risk, private brands maintain noteworthy market share for retailers due to lower prices (e.g., Ailawadi et al., 2001), which can be especially attractive to consumers during an economic downturn (e.g., Lamey et al., 2007). Even after a recession, consumers may not return to national brands suggesting that private brands cannot be overlooked as viable retailer-based competition relative to national brands (Hoch and Banerji, 1993). While demographic and socioeconomic factors

(e.g., Murphy, 1978) have yielded somewhat inconsistent results (Richardson et al., 1996), psychological constructs such as price consciousness (e.g., Sinha and Batra, 1999) and value consciousness (e.g., Garretson et al., 2002) have been shown to differentiate between national and private brand buyers with higher levels of both constructs being associated with private brand buyers.

Research has primarily examined responses to the underlying characteristics of national and private brands (e.g., quality, extrinsic cues) without consideration of how self-concept is impacted or affects preferences. This situation is somewhat surprising, given the considerable amount of research exploring the role of the self-concept with regard to brands (e.g., Belk, 1988; Cheng et al., 2012; Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005; Hammerl et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2011; Rindfleisch et al., 2009). We contend that self-brand connections can provide new insights into preferences for national or private brands (e.g., Sprott et al., 2009).

Underlying our work is the notion of the "branded self"—a multifaceted view of the self-concept (Markus, 1977), in which each of its components influence a person's judgment and behavior (Markus, 1983; McConnell, 2011). Belk (1988) introduced the idea of self-brand connections as related to the extended self, whereby possessions can become part of a person's self-concept; Fournier (1998) further elaborated this idea suggesting that consumers can form relationships with brands similar to those formed with humans. Escalas and Bettman (2003) empirically supported Fournier's (1998) work, demonstrating that people do indeed form connections between the self and a brand. Once formed, consumer self-brand connections can fulfill self-defining purposes like approval and self-representation (Rindfleisch et al., 2009).

Drawing from Escalas and Bettman's (2003, 2005) brand connection work as well as that of scholars showing important others to contribute to one's self-concept (Cross et al., 2000), Sprott et al. (2009) proposed that brands correspondingly can make up part of the self—a notion represented by the construct "Brand Engagement in the Self-Concept (BESC)." The BESC construct, measured using a scale developed by Sprott et al. (2009), is an individual difference variable reflecting consumers' self-construal in terms of important (often multiple) brands. Supporting BESC's importance to the self, consumers with higher levels of BESC are better able to access favorite (vs. least favorite) brands from memory and to recall branded products they own. Importantly, BESC has been shown to impact reactions to brand-specific marketing. For example, brand engagement can help predict consumer attention to favorite brands that are overtly branded, as well as brand loyalty (Sprott et al., 2009).

The construct of BESC addresses an inherent limitation associated with prior branding work by providing a broader perspective regarding the relationship between consumers and brands in their lives. BESC is distinct from related branding constructs, such as self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005) and attachment to possessions (Ball and Tasaki, 1992). The latter constructs are focused on a relationship with a specific brand or object while BESC is a "generalized tendency for consumers to include multiple brands as part of the self" (Sprott et al., 2009). As such, BESC is particularly relevant to understanding how consumers relate with broader categories of brands such as national and private brands, both of which include multiple specific brands across various product categories.

We expect that consumers with a greater tendency to include important brands in their self-concept (i.e., high BESC) will be more drawn to national (vs. private) brands, as these brands are likely to be more widely marketed and therefore better known. Often, national brands enjoy more favorable market perceptions, thereby supporting a (high BESC) consumer's self-concept. Supporting this postulation is research showing more favorable brand images and associations to have been built for national brands through costly and impactful communication strategies (e.g., Hoch and Banerji, 1993). Further, national

brand promotional and packaging efforts result in better brand knowledge and recognition; such characteristics result in greater likelihood of a brand being included in a consumer's consideration set (Keller, 1993). Consumers with a higher (vs. lower) BESC disposition are more likely to engage brands with more enhanced images for which they have greater knowledge—that is, national (vs. private) brands. We therefore hypothesize:

**H1.** Consumers with higher levels of brand engagement in the self-concept will prefer national over private brands.

## 2.2. The moderating effect of self-concept

The self-concept is generally recognized as being comprised of knowledge and evaluative dimensions (Campbell, 1990). In an effort to better understand the mechanisms by which brand engagement can influence preference for national and private brands, we explore the possible moderating effects regarding the evaluative dimension of the self. The evaluative facet of one's self is quite prominent, such that most people cannot prevent a decrease in self-esteem when their self-concept is threatened (Baumeister et al., 2003). While people innately desire to maintain a positive view of the self (Brown et al., 1988), just how self-esteem is maintained fluctuates (Leary, 2007), as do methods of self-evaluation (Crocker and Wolfe, 2001). Just as some may incorporate important others as elements of the self-concept and use them to help determine self-worth (Cross et al., 2000), a similar relationship to brands and branded products has also been demonstrated (Spratt et al., 2009).

People not only maintain a positive self-evaluation, but also repair the self when faced with a threat to the self-concept (Carver and Scheier, 1981; Duval and Wicklund, 1973). Depending on a person's disposition and circumstances surrounding the threat, methods used to mitigate a threat to the self typically include participation in a related activity (e.g., informed of poor performance on a task and then committing to complete the same task in the future; Sedikides and Gregg, 2008) or involvement with an unrelated behavior (e.g., faced with one's mortality people indulge in unhealthy snacks at a greater rate than those not facing this threat; Mandel and Smeesters, 2008). Research has also explored how other consumption-related activities can serve as a response to a threat to one's self-concept (e.g., Gao et al., 2009; Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010). For instance, Gao et al. (2009) reduced the self-esteem of participants by having them use their non-dominant hand to write about their intelligence and showed a resulting increase in preference for “intelligent” products (e.g., pens). Consistently, Sivanathan and Pettit (2010) found that a threatened self-concept resulted in preference for status goods (e.g., rare photographs, expensive watches). Such findings suggest that product choice (i.e., related or unrelated to the threatened component of the self) can be motivated by, and targeted at improving, one's threatened self-concept (e.g., Batra and Ghoshal, 2017; Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982).

While forms of product consumption have been shown to improve a threatened self-concept, less is known about the role of brands with regard to this effect. Brands clearly are often used for self-expression (Chernev et al., 2011); reactions to a threat to the self should vary in terms of consumer propensity to engage brands as part of the self-concept. In particular, we propose that a non-brand related threat to the self-concept moderates the effect of brand engagement on preference for national (vs. private) brands. As discussed earlier, consumers with lower levels of BESC may have weaker preferences for national brands, primarily due to their lack of concern for, or value placed on, the stronger brand images associated with national brands. When the self-concept is threatened in these consumers and when they do not have alternative means of self-affirmation, we expect them to turn toward an untapped potential: the self-enhancing properties of national vs. private

brands. For lower brand engagement consumers, the extrinsic properties of national (vs. private) brands such as their higher price and differential sensory benefits may represent an alternative symbolic meaning that can help one cope with the threat to the self-concept (Piacentini and Mailer, 2004; Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010). Thus, lower brand engagement consumers may be more likely to be drawn to the stronger brand images of national (vs. private) brands when facing a self-threat due specifically to their chronic tendency to disregard brands as elemental to their self-definition. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H2.** For consumers lower on brand engagement, a non-brand-related threat to the self-concept will increase preference for national brands relative to private brands.

Following a threat to the self-concept, association with, or consumption and evaluation of national brands may not enhance the lowered self-concept of consumers with higher levels of brand engagement. For such consumers, meaning-laden brands (i.e., national brands) are already included as part of their self-concepts—brands possessing marketplace positioning are central to how they define themselves. A threat to the self-concept unrelated to the branded self (e.g., personal traits, social roles) is unlikely to be addressed via important brands for these consumers and should therefore reduce preference for national brands relative to private brands. If our expectations for high brand engagement consumers are accurate, then repairing the threatened component of the self-concept unrelated to the branded self should be more influential than the brand-related dimension of the self. This reasoning is consistent with recent research demonstrating that a specific threat to the self-concept can deactivate any other salient selves (Critcher and Dunning, 2015). Additionally, prior work has shown that consumers with high self-brand connections will protect the self instead of the brand when negative information is discovered (Cheng et al., 2012). These findings lead us to expect a different scenario for high (vs. low) brand engagement consumers facing a non-brand-related threat. Specifically, in the absence of alternative means of self-affirmation, high brand engagement consumers should be drawn less to meaning-laden national brands. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H3.** For consumers higher on brand engagement, a non-brand-related threat to the self-concept will reduce preference for national brands relative to private brands.

## 3. Study 1

Designed to test our first hypothesis, this study tests whether varying levels of brand engagement in a consumer's self-concept affects national and private brand choices. A simulated shopping task was the context and the BESC scale was used to measure brand engagement. Further, we compare the influence of BESC to other established measures (i.e., private brand attitude, value and price consciousness) shown to have an effect on national and private brand preferences. In order to effectively understand the relationships among our constructs of interest, we employed a survey methodology for our independent variables followed by a choice task for the dependent variable. Additionally, we utilized a convenient student sample consistent with prior research examining national and private brand consumption (e.g., Chou and Wang, 2017; Lupton et al., 2010).

### 3.1. Method

Undergraduates from a large Northwestern university ( $N = 88$ ; 53% female) were prescreened for recognition of the private brand in the choice task and received course credit for completing our study. Participants initially completed the brand engagement in the self-

concept scale (Spratt et al., 2009), followed by Burton et al. (1998) measure of private brand attitude, and Lichtenstein et al.'s (1993) measures of value and price consciousness (items anchored by 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree"). All measures were presented as being unrelated to the main study; scales subsequent to the BESC measure were randomly presented.

Participants were then asked to imagine that friends would be visiting over the weekend and that a list of grocery products was needed to satisfy varying tastes based on items in their food pantry (Manning et al., 1998). With a spending limit of \$40, participants were provided a booklet containing seven product categories (fruit juice, canned vegetables, peanut butter, canned fruit, pasta, salad dressing, and cereal), each with 12 items that included both national and private brands. Products were presented (on paper) via a high-resolution photo, each with a shelf label listing unit pricing information. Location of national and private brands was randomized such that each brand category was equally presented on top and bottom in addition to left and right. Participants indicated quantity desired next to each item (see Appendix A). A demand artifact question at the end of the study indicated that no participants linked the apparently unrelated surveys with the focal choice task.

### 3.2. Results

The BESC measure was internally consistent ( $\alpha = .94$ ), and its mean ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) was comparable to those reported in the literature. Participants reported a mean value for private brand attitude above the scale midpoint ( $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) as well as for value ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) and price consciousness ( $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). From the correlation matrix in Table 1, BESC was positively related to private brand attitude and negatively correlated with price consciousness. As expected and consistent with prior research, value and price consciousness were positively correlated.

For our linear regression model, the percentage of national brands chosen served as the dependent measure. National brand choice was regressed on BESC, private brand attitude, value consciousness, and price consciousness. A main effect for BESC was found, whereby participants higher (vs. lower) in BESC generally favored national (vs. private) brands,  $B = .079$ ,  $t(84) = 3.22$ ,  $p = .002$ . Specifically, each unit increase in BESC resulted in a 7.9% increase in national brands selected. Also, a main effect for private brand attitude manifested; participants higher (vs. lower) in private brand attitude generally favored private (vs. national) brands,  $B = -.069$ ,  $t(84) = -2.18$ ,  $p < .05$ : a unit increase in private brand attitude resulted in a 6.9% decrease in national brands selected over private brands. Neither value or price consciousness were significant in the linear regression model,  $p$ -values  $> .24$ . Table 2 provides the regression model results. There was no evidence of multi-collinearity with all VIFs below 1.20.

### 3.3. Discussion

Study 1's findings support H1 demonstrating that increasing levels of BESC resulted in greater national brand purchases. This result is evidence that brand engagement with the self influences consumers' preferences for broad categories of brands (such as national or private brands). Additionally, Study 1 confirms the importance of BESC as an additional predictor of national and private brand choice. While value and price consciousness were not related to national brand choice, BESC and private brand attitude had similar (albeit opposite) effects. This study leaves open the question of whether the influence of brand engagement on the selection of national and private brands is moderated by threat to one's self-concept.

**Table 1**  
Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics (Study 1).

	1	2	3	4
1. BESC	1.00			
2. Private Brand Attitude	.22 <sup>*</sup>	1.00		
3. Value Consciousness	.06	.12	1.00	
4. Price Consciousness	-.23 <sup>*</sup>	-.08	.32 <sup>**</sup>	1.00
<i>M</i>	4.03	4.20	5.27	4.42
<i>SD</i>	1.37	1.05	1.03	1.32
Cronbach's Alpha	.94	.77	.84	.82

Notes:  $N = 88$  (listwise deletion). BESC = brand engagement in the self-concept; Spratt et al. (2009).

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

**Table 2**  
Linear regression model testing effects of BESC and other relevant measures on national label brand choice (Study 1).

Predictor ( $R^2 = .161$ )	National brands/total products		
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
BESC	.340	.025	.002
Private Brand Attitude	-.226	.032	.032
Value Consciousness	.125	.033	.249
Price Consciousness	-.099	.026	.369

Notes: BESC = brand engagement in the self-concept; Spratt et al. (2009).

## 4. Study 2

Study 2 tests whether a threat to the self-concept moderates the influence of brand engagement on preferences for national or private brands (H2 and H3). In addition to identifying a potential boundary condition, Study 2 provides further insight regarding BESC's influence on preferences for brand categories and the role of the evaluative component of the self. Following findings of Crocker et al. (2003), self-concept threat was manipulated by exposing undergraduate participants to quantitative problems drawn from the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). To ensure the internal validity for our self-concept threat manipulation and determine whether it would lead to differences compared to a control condition, we opted for an experimental methodology in a laboratory environment with a student sample.

### 4.1. Pretests

Two independent pre-tests were conducted for Study 2. In the first, five people confirmed that the GRE problems<sup>1</sup> chosen for the main study were properly classified as challenging or easy. The second pretest was conducted to ensure that the experimental conditions significantly differed in evaluation of the self after a threat as well as ruling out mood as an alternative explanation for expected main study effects. Ostensibly participating in a study of concentration abilities (Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010), undergraduates ( $N = 41$ ; 54% female) from a large Northwestern university were randomly assigned to the self-concept threat (four hard GRE problems) or no threat (four easy GRE problems) conditions. Participants were given six minutes to complete the assigned questions. Participants in the self-concept threat

<sup>1</sup> GRE quantitative problems used for Study 2's pre-tests and main study are available upon request from the first author.

condition were told they had achieved an equivalent score with the bottom 10% of the university student population taking the exam (Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010); those in the no threat condition were given no feedback. Participants then completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) mood scale (Watson et al., 1988) followed by a self-report of esteem (“I have high self-esteem”; 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 7 = “Strongly Agree”; Gao et al., 2009).

While the PANAS scales (i.e., positive and negative) did not significantly differ between conditions (*p-values* > .10), those receiving the self-threatening feedback reported significantly lower self-esteem ( $M = 4.50, SD = 1.47$ ) than those in the no threat condition ( $M = 5.26, SD = .86$ ),  $t(39) = 2.08, p < .05$ . Thus, self-concept threat was successfully manipulated while not being confounded by mood.

4.2. Method

The main study was conducted in a lab environment with undergraduate participants from the same university participating for partial course credit ( $N = 228$ ; 44% female). Upon arrival, participants, prescreened for recognition of the private brand in the choice task, completed the BESC measure in an ostensibly unrelated survey. They were then randomly assigned to the self-concept threat or no threat condition. After completing hard or easy GRE problems and receiving either negative or no feedback, participants completed the same shopping task as in Study 1. Lastly, participants completed a demand artifact question; no participants linked the experimental condition with the focal task.

4.3. Results

The BESC scale was internally consistent ( $\alpha = .93$ ) with measures of central tendency again consistent with extant research ( $M = 4.11, SD = 1.19$ ). Experimental conditions served as an independent variable in our regression analyses and were dummy-coded (no threat = 0, self-threat = 1). As in Study 1, the dependent measure was national brand choice, represented as the percentage of national brands chosen.

National brand choice was regressed on mean-centered BESC, dummy-coded experimental conditions, and the interaction between those variables. One significant effect emerged from this analysis—the two-way interaction between BESC and the dummy-coded experimental conditions,  $\beta = -.232, t(225) = -2.70, p < .01$ —see Table 3 for regression results.

To further explore the significant interaction, a floodlight analysis was conducted (Spiller et al., 2013) to determine the value(s) of BESC at which the moderating threat to the self-concept (vs. no threat) comparison was significant (at  $p < .05$ ). Shaded regions in Fig. 1 indicate the range of BESC values over which the threat to the self-concept (vs. no threat) comparison was significant. As shown, when BESC was 2.59 or lower, results revealed a significant difference in preference for

**Table 3**  
Hierarchical regression analysis testing effect of BESC x Self-concept threat interaction on national label brand choice (Study 2).

Predictor	National brands/total products		
	$\beta$	SE	p
Step 1 ( $R^2 = .071$ )			
BESC	.068	.018	.312
Self-concept threat	-.016	.043	.815
Step 2 ( $R^2 = .190$ )			
BESC x Self-concept threat	-.232	.036	.008

Notes: BESC = brand engagement in the self-concept; Sprott et al. (2009). BESC (mean-centered); No threat (dummy code = 0) vs. Self-concept threat (dummy code = 1). For a visual representation of the two-way interaction, see Fig. 1.

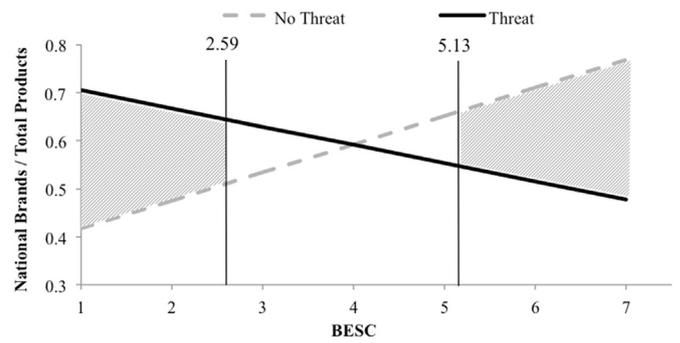


Fig. 1. BESC x Self-concept threat interaction on national label brand choice (Study 2).

national (vs. private) brands for those under a threat to the self-concept (vs. no threat). Supportive of H2, participants with a lower brand engagement disposition and facing a threat to their self-concept selected more national brands, while those facing no threat opted for more private brands. In contrast, higher brand engagement under a threat to the self-concept (vs. no threat) led to a significant difference in preference for national (vs. private) brands. Consistent with H3, consumers who reported higher levels of BESC and experienced a self-concept threat had lower preference for national brands (relative to private brands), compared to those who faced no threat to the self.

4.4. Discussion

Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 by showing the interaction of brand engagement in the self and a threat to the self-concept to influence preferences for national brands relative to private brands. Consistent with our reasoning and previous literature (e.g., Gao et al., 2009), participants with lower brand engagement selected more national brands when faced with a threat to the self (vs. no threat). On the other hand, consumers reporting higher levels of BESC showed a weakened preference for national brands (relative to private brands) when faced with a self-concept threat (vs. no threat).

Despite the influence of brand engagement on national and private brand choice emerging in both Studies 1 and 2, we acknowledge that up to this point we have only measured BESC. In Study 3, we manipulate brand engagement, rather than measure it. Additionally, the shopping task in Studies 1 and 2 required participants to select from various national or private brands. Based on this approach, our dependent variable was a relative percentage of national brands out of all purchases. Given the composition of this measure, determining the exact nature of the preference shift within Study 2 is difficult to ascertain. As an example, the decrease in percentage of national brands as BESC increased (for those facing a threat) could be due to either decreased interest in national brands or an increase in preference for private brands (or even a combination of both). To address this situation, we measure attitudes for national and private brands in Study 3 in order to better understand the nature of effects to ensure we have a clearer idea of how consumers are responding to these two categories of brands. Further, the shopping task utilized in Studies 1 and 2 included pricing information and various grocery categories. To rule out potential confounds related to price and product category in the studies conducted thus far, we control for these elements in the design of Study 3.

5. Study 3

Our goals in Study 3 are to again test Hypotheses 2 and 3, check the robustness of the findings in Study 2, provide a deeper understanding into the nature of Study 2's focal interaction, and illuminate direct

managerial implications from our results. We manipulate brand engagement in the self-concept using a tagline presented in an advertisement for an over-the-counter pain reliever. By manipulating brand engagement within a single product category, we can provide causal evidence of the influence of brand engagement on brand preferences, including when consumers are faced with a threatened self-concept. Since the design comprised of various manipulated variables, we once again used an experimental methodology in a laboratory environment with a student sample for the main study.

### 5.1. Pretest

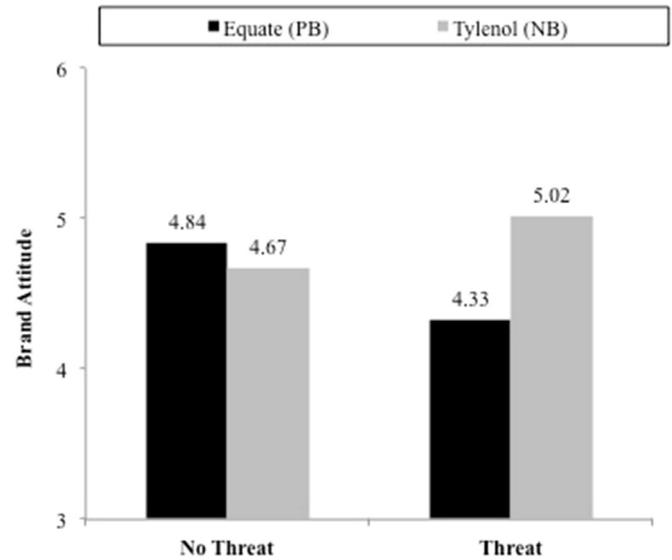
Prior to administering the main study, we conducted a pretest to ensure that our tagline did in fact manipulate brand engagement. We recruited participants ( $N = 91$ ; 42.9% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for a small monetary incentive. After being informed that an anonymous pharmaceutical company desired feedback on a newly developed tagline, participants were randomly presented either a tagline manipulating importance of the branded self (i.e., "When thinking of yourself...your brands should matter...") or a control condition (i.e., "Won't irritate your stomach...when you need pain relief..."). Next, participants completed a three-item scale for state brand engagement in the self-concept ( $\alpha = .92$ ;  $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) adapted from Sprott et al.'s (2009) BESC disposition measure (i.e., "Please indicate the extent to which you are thinking about the important brands in your life", "Please indicate the extent to which you are thinking about the connection between your brands and yourself", "Please indicate the extent to which you are thinking about the personal connection you have with the brands you most prefer"; 1 = none at all and 5 = a great deal). A  $t$ -test revealed that participants presented the tagline for importance of the branded schema reported greater state brand engagement ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) than those shown the control condition ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = .94$ ),  $t(89) = 3.32$ ,  $p = .001$ . Thus, brand engagement in the self-concept was successfully manipulated.

### 5.2. Method

The main study was conducted in a behavioral lab at a large Midwestern university; undergraduates ( $N = 254$ , 57.9% female), prescreened for recognition of the private brand used in the study, were provided partial course credit for the participation. The study consisted of a three-way design where participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (brand engagement in the self-concept: control vs. manipulated)  $\times$  2 (self-concept threat: control vs. manipulated)  $\times$  2 (brand category: Equate – private brand vs. Tylenol – national brand) between-subjects design.

Participants followed the procedures, as in Study 2, for the self-concept threat manipulation by completing either hard or easy GRE quantitative problems and receiving negative or no feedback. Next, as a cover story and seemingly a separate study, participants were told that either Equate or Tylenol desired their feedback on its new advertisement. Participants were then shown one of four advertisements featuring a tagline, previously pre-tested, manipulating importance of brands to the self or a control condition; and Equate or Tylenol for the private or national brand (see Appendix B for advertisements used). After given ample time to examine the assigned advertisement, participants completed a three-item, seven-point brand attitude scale (semantic differential: bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive;  $\alpha = .96$ ;  $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). Before exiting the lab, participants completed a demand artifact question; no participants linked the apparently unrelated surveys with our hypotheses.

### Control Condition Tagline



### Brand Engagement Tagline

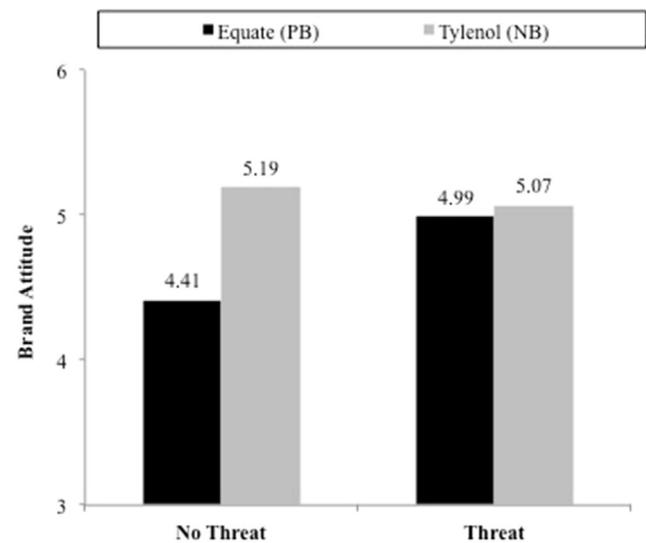


Fig. 2. Brand engagement manipulation  $\times$  Self-concept threat  $\times$  Brand category interaction on brand attitude (Study 3).

### 5.3. Results

We ran a 2 (brand engagement in the self-concept)  $\times$  2 (self-concept threat)  $\times$  2 (brand category) ANOVA on brand attitude. Two significant effects emerged from this analysis. First, a significant main effect for brand category showed that participants evaluated the national brand ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) more favorably than the private brand ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $F(1, 246) = 4.28$ ,  $p < .05$ . Notably, both the national and private brand were evaluated above the midpoint. There was also a three-way interaction among brand engagement in the self-concept, self-concept threat, and brand category,  $F(1, 246) = 5.52$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Fig. 2 for a depiction of the interaction). To understand the nature of the interaction further, contrast analyses were performed

examining the effect of brand engagement in the self-concept on brand attitude across the self-concept threat conditions for each of the brand categories.

In the control condition, where importance of the branded self was not manipulated, participants evaluated the national brand ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) or private brand ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) similarly when no threat was presented,  $F(1, 246) = .25$ ,  $p > .60$ . However, when faced with a self-concept threat,  $F(1, 246) = 4.06$ ,  $p < .05$ , participants reported more favorable attitudes towards the national brand ( $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) compared to the private brand ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ); thus, we found consistent findings with Study 2 and further support for H2.

For those faced with a tagline stressing the importance of the branded self, participants showed more favorable attitudes toward the national brand ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) compared to the private brand ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) when no threat to the self-concept was present,  $F(1, 246) = 5.84$ ,  $p < .05$ . In contrast, when the self-concept was threatened, there were no differences between attitudes for the national ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) and private ( $M = 4.99$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) brands,  $F(1, 246) = .60$ ,  $p > .80$ . As reflected in Fig. 2, the nature of the interaction is driven by an increase in private brand attitude, rather than a reduction in attitudes for the national brand. Thus, the pattern of effects when brand engagement was manipulated provides further support for H3, but also provides clarity in terms of the underlying nature of the effect. Once again, our findings are consistent with Study 2, where participants with a higher BESC disposition did not select more national brands (but rather selected more private brands) when faced with a self-concept threat compared to those who did not experience a threat.

#### 5.4. Discussion

In Study 3, we support and extend results from prior studies by manipulating (rather than measuring) brand engagement. By reminding participants of the importance of brands to the self, we provide causal evidence of brand engagement's effect on preferences for brand categories such as national and private brands. Furthermore, by manipulating the importance of brands to the self, we find support for our reasoning regarding the varying effect of the branded self on brand preferences when faced with a non-brand-related threat to one's self-concept.

Study 3 measured brand attitude as the dependent variable, an approach that complements and clarifies the choice-based results of Study 2. Specifically, national (vs. private) brand attitude was higher only for participants exposed to the control condition tagline and under conditions of a self-concept threat. When importance of the branded self was not activated, the stronger image and favorable associations in the marketplace for national brands (compared to private brands) enabled participants to self-affirm with national brands. On the other hand, when importance of the branded self was activated, participants reported a preference for the national (vs. private) brand under no threat; such a differential preference was not observed when participants were presented with an unrelated self-concept threat. The nature of this effect seems to be driven by an increase in private brand attitude among these consumers. By experimentally manipulating brand engagement in the self-concept and measuring brand attitude, this study provides further support for our theoretical rationale and additional insight on our focal interaction. Thus, Study 3 enriches our understanding of the importance of the self when considering consumer reactions to national and private brands, a finding with important theoretical and practical implications discussed below.

## 6. General discussion

Study 1 found that higher levels of brand engagement in the self

resulted in stronger consumer preference for national brands (H1). Consumers with higher levels of BESC selected more national brands most likely due to greater brand building efforts, more knowledge, better brand images, and greater personal relevance of those brands (Keller, 1993). Studies 2 and 3 provided further insight regarding the relationship between the self and preferences for national/private brands by examining the moderating effects of a threat to the self-concept. In Study 2, participants with a lower brand engagement opted for more national (relative to private) brands when faced with a threat to the self-concept unrelated to brands (compared to a no-threat control condition). Consistently in Study 3, when brand engagement in the self was not activated, participants evaluated the national brand more favorably than the private brand, but only when faced with a self-concept threat unrelated to brands. These findings are consistent with previous literature showing a preference for meaning-laden products when the self-concept is attacked (e.g., Angle and Forehand, 2016; Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010).

The effect of a threat to the self unrelated to brands results in a different outcome for those with higher levels of engagement with brands in the self-concept. In Study 2, we showed in a shopping task that national (relative to private) brand choice of higher BESC consumers was considerably reduced when presented a threat. Consistently in Study 3, when brand engagement was manipulated (via an advertising tagline), we only found a difference between private and national brand attitudes when no self-concept threat was present, with the attitudinal difference being eliminated when the self-concept was threatened. By assessing brand preferences with attitudinal measures, our results in Study 3 also indicated that the reduced selection of national brands (relative to private brands) in Study 2 could be attributed to a more favorable view of private brands rather than to a decreased evaluation of national brands.

The reduced preference for national (vs. private) suggests that the salience of the branded self may decrease when consumers (with a higher BESC disposition or presented a brand engagement manipulation), experience a self-concept threat unrelated to the branded self. We threatened the self-concept by providing negative feedback after participants completed difficult GRE problems. The nature of our self-concept threat manipulation was unrelated to brands. Due to this feature, the presentation of the threat manipulation may have made less salient the branded aspects of the self in the shopping task (Study 2) and in brand evaluations (Study 3). This suggests not only a decrease in attention to the promotional efforts of national (vs. private) brands, but also an increase in the importance of the self-concept rather than brands as part of the self.

#### 6.1. Theoretical implications

The construct of BESC has broadened our theoretical perspective regarding consumer brand relationships. Previous research in self-brand connections has not considered inclusion of a brand category (e.g., national and private brands). Rather, work regarding the consumer's branded self has focused on brands in general—examining aspects such as how high and low BESC consumers react to branded products differentially (e.g., recall branded products; Sprott et al., 2009). Herein we demonstrate that specific brands (i.e., national and private brands) generate varied responses depending on a consumer's tendency to include brands as part of the self. The ability of the branded self to be drawn to a specific brand category (e.g., national brands) is closely linked with customer-based brand equity and the associative network memory model (Keller, 1993). When a consumer with a high BESC disposition is in the aisle of a store, an activation of brand knowledge from previously encountered marketing activities may occur, resulting in a higher likelihood of selecting the relevant brands over other brands (e.g., national brands over private brands).

Importantly, we also contribute to the self-brand connections literature by revealing the possibility for marketers to situationally activate the importance of the branded self. Previous BESC research has focused on the construct's influence as a measured disposition and its influence on various consumption decisions. By manipulating the importance of brands through brand communications, we provide causal evidence of brand engagement's effect on preferences for various brand categories and potentially other important marketing outcomes.

Insights gained from measuring and manipulating BESC under a self-concept threat contribute to existing theory related to the type and degree of consumer brand relationships. Published work has demonstrated a self-concept threat to influence consumers and their product selection to repair the self (e.g., [Angle and Forehand, 2016](#); [Gao et al., 2009](#); [Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010](#)). We are not aware, however, of existing work exploring the effects of a self-concept threat in the context of brand engagement and preferences for national vs. private brands. The current work extends beyond merely replicating previous research in another consumption context. Specifically, our research suggests that when a component of the self, unrelated to the branded self, is threatened, the central importance of brands may decrease, potentially shifting preferences away from meaning-laden brands.

The fact that in Studies 2 and 3, consumers with higher levels of brand engagement (measured or manipulated) did not demonstrate preferences toward national (relative to private) brands, as in Study 1, conveys important insight concerning the branded self. Our findings reveal that for consumers where brands play a self-defining role, particular brands carry significant meaning only under conditions when no self-concept threat is made. When a self-concept threat unrelated to the branded self occurs for a consumer, attention will be drawn away from the importance of brands, likely resulting in preferences for a particular branded good (i.e., selecting more national brands relative to private brands) to decrease. Interestingly, in Study 3, we learn that the nature of the reduction in selecting meaningful brands is not necessarily due to a less favorable view of the symbolic brand. Unexpectedly, Study 3 shows the decreased preference for national brands (relative to private brands) can be attributed to a more favorable view for the less promoted brand (i.e., private brand). This finding suggests that an unrelated self-threat for consumers more highly engaged with brands can weaken their draw to highly promoted brands (i.e., national brands) and open the door for less meaningful brands (i.e., private brands) to influence consumption.

## 6.2. Practical implications

Manufacturers and retailers of both national and private brands can gain insight from the current work. Perhaps of greatest interest is the influence of the self-concept, particularly how the branded self and threats thereunto can affect preferences for national and private brands. Previous national/private brand research has considered consumers' perceptions of quality and risk associated with both brand categories (e.g., [Bao et al., 2011](#); [Erdem et al., 2004](#); [Muruganatham and Priyadharshini, 2017](#)). As a result, much of the promotional work surrounding national brands has focused on quality ([Hoch and Banerji, 1993](#)). At the same time, however, quality perceptions of private brands have improved ([Goldsmith et al., 2010](#)), and once consumers start sampling and purchasing private brands, they often do not return to national brands ([Lamey et al., 2007](#); [Sprout and Shimp, 2004](#)).

The current work indicates that the self-concept (i.e., the branded self) may be elemental regarding how national brand manufacturers can combat the growing popularity of private brands. Our work suggests that promotional activities for national brands should be designed with the branded self in mind. To do so, national brands must truly understand their target market and convey messages in their promotional efforts connecting to the self-concepts of consumers, reminding

them of the importance of national (vs. private brands) to their lives. For example, national brand manufacturers could ask consumers, through their promotional campaigns, why they would want to serve their family and guests brands anything less than the national brand that is personally important to them. We showed that the importance of the branded self can be activated in consumers; perhaps such activation is easier and more effective for manufacturers of national brands relative to the sometimes difficult task of highlighting quality differences with rival private brands. This is particularly the case in some markets for which the two brand categories have reached parity in quality perceptions for many consumers ([Lamey et al., 2007](#)).

Our work also supports the notion that national brands are more deeply embedded in consumers' memories than are private brands, thereby increasing likelihood of consumers connecting with national brands. These self-brand connections to national brands will likely result, for the most part, in consumers preferring national (vs. private) brands in a retail setting. As such, national brands should continue to invest resources towards maintaining their stronger brand images and familiarity in the marketplace. For retailers of private brands, conventional wisdom and our results in Study 1 seem to suggest that private brands should focus on those consumers who are less likely to rely on a branded self (i.e., low BESC consumers). However, in Study 3, highly brand-engaged consumers did not find the national brand less favorable (compared to the private brand), but were more drawn to private brands when faced with a threat to their self. Importantly, highly brand-engaged consumers' more favorable attitude towards private brands suggests that these retailers should not necessarily focus on their typical market segment of shoppers (i.e., price and value conscious). Our work opens the door for private brand retailers, and even other brand categories with less symbolic meaning, to target consumers that have the tendency to define the self with meaning-laden brands. Once private brand retailers can convince consumers with higher brand engagement to try their brand and provide them with a satisfactory experience, these consumers may opt for a private brand moving forward.

Marketers of national brands should be more concerned with the self-concept of consumers with a high BESC disposition or salient branded self. Our findings suggest that preferences for national brands from promotional activities and brand recognition may be undermined if consumers, who view brands as important to their self, are caused to question their self-concept. National brands should therefore highlight aspects in their marketing efforts such as quality and taste; such attributes are unlikely to activate the overall self-concept of highly brand engaged consumers and thus negatively impact preferences for national brands relative to private brands. In conclusion, it is clear that national and private brands competing for the same groups of consumers can benefit by understanding and carefully attending to the interaction of how people view themselves and their branded self in developing marketing strategies for their respective target markets.

## 6.3. Limitations and future research

Future research is suggested by our current work. Although we used multiple dependent variables (i.e., choice task and evaluation) to measure preferences for national and private brands within eight different product categories, our lab setting has limited external validity. A field study would be worthwhile to test the generalizability of our findings. Future work should also seek process evidence on the decreased influence of the branded self and increased importance of the overall self-concept. In light of the evidence in Study 3 about highly brand-engaged consumers' reduced relative preference for national brands, an important further step in this research area would be the assessment of the reduced importance of the branded self in favor of repairing the global self-concept. Third, subsequent research should take a closer look at consumers who prefer private brands. In Study 3,

our results indicated that the interaction between brand engagement and self-concept threat led to an increase in private brand attitude, rather than a decrease in national brand attitude. The more favorable evaluation of private brands after manipulating brand engagement and self-concept threat suggests that private brands can potentially play an important role in consumers' lives. Indeed, national/private brand research would benefit from insight on those consumers who define their branded self with private brands. To date, researchers have investigated the demographics and dispositions of national and private brand shoppers and focused on understanding the connections consumers have with brands that possess strong images and associations. However, research has neglected to examine whether and to what degree consumers define their branded self with less promoted brands.

Lastly, another opportunity for exploration involves moving beyond the context of national and private brands to other brand delineations (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian). From our set of studies, we demonstrated brand engagement's influence on one particular brand categorization (i.e., national vs. private brands). By testing other brand distinctions besides national/private, future research could determine if preferences for only certain types of brands or for brands in general, can reduce for a highly brand-engaged consumer under a self-concept threat. In

particular, the question that arises is whether we would see some consumers under a self-concept threat be less drawn to hedonic brands (e.g., Nike, Apple, Starbucks) relative to functional brands (e.g., Champion, Dell, Folgers). Another important avenue to explore would be different product categories than what we used in our set of studies. Our studies showed that brand engagement had an influence on national and private brand choice in both the food and personal care product categories. Each of the product categories used in our studies are instances of a consumer ingesting such products. This leads to the question on whether we would replicate our results in other product categories such as apparel or electronics. In the case of apparel products, consumers are wearing the clothing brands they select and purchase. As such, we would expect that the results demonstrated in our studies would extend to apparel (and even to on-the-go devices such as earphones and smartphones), characterized by close physical proximity between self and product. However, our results might not emerge for a good number of electronic appliances, which are usually used in the comfort of a consumer's home. Such work in different brand and product categories would extend knowledge of how consumption behaviors are influenced when a consumer faces a threat to the self-concept.

Appendix A. Shopping Task Product Category Example

See Appendix Fig. A1



Fig. A1.

## Appendix B. Advertisements used in Study 3

See Appendix Fig. B1

<p><b><u>Control Condition Tagline – Private Brand:</u></b></p> 	<p><b><u>Brand Engagement Tagline – Private Brand:</u></b></p> 
<p><b><u>Control Condition Tagline – National Brand:</u></b></p> 	<p><b><u>Brand Engagement Tagline – National Brand:</u></b></p> 

Fig. B1.

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