



IE UNIVERSIDAD

TESIS DOCTORAL/
DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Comunicaciones de Marca Autocríticas: Diferenciación
Conceptual y Respuestas del Consumidor

Self-Critical Brand Communications: Conceptual
Differentiation and Consumer Responses

Vaishnavi Kale

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DEDICATION

“विद्यया अमृतमश्नुते”

“Through knowledge, one attains eternity.”

— Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad, Verse 11

To my mother, *Vrunda*, and my great-grandmother, *Sarajini*.

Beyond loving me unconditionally, you gave me the greatest gift:
the inspiration to seek knowledge all my life.

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ABSTRACT

Brand communications have traditionally emphasized positive product attributes to foster favorable consumer perceptions. However, a growing trend in marketing deviates from this norm by embracing self-directed negative messaging. This dissertation introduces and investigates the novel phenomenon of Brand Communications with Self-Directed Negative Messages (BCSNMs), encompassing three distinct strategies: self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging. Despite their apparent counterintuitiveness, BCSNMs present significant opportunities for brands seeking to communicate effectively with consumers and build strong relationships.

Chapter 1 establishes presents a comprehensive conceptual framework integrating psycholinguistic theories with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). It BCSNMs based on whether they are monosemic (single meaning) or polysemous (multiple meanings). Utilizing the ELM, this framework explains how varying consumer involvement influences their interpretations and responses to BCSNMs. This chapter clarifies the interpretative processes underlying consumers' evaluations and proposes an agenda for future research.

Chapter 2 empirically tests consumer responses to self-deprecating advertisements and the brands who employ them through six experimental studies. Findings indicate that when self-deprecation targets less critical product attributes, consumers perceive brands as more socially attractive. This enhanced social attractiveness mitigates consumer skepticism, fosters brand trust, and reduces advertisement avoidance.

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to examining consumers' product-related evaluations when exposed to self-deprecating advertisements. The chapter posits that self-deprecating messages, deliberately disclosing flaws, disrupt consumer expectations, prompting them to rationalize these weaknesses by inferring compensatory strengths in unobservable,

experience-related attributes. Four experimental studies consistently confirm that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements prompt more positive, experience-focused consumer inferences.

Overall, this dissertation contributes to marketing theory by systematically categorizing BCSNMs and empirically substantiating the nuanced strategic advantages of self-deprecation. It offers actionable managerial insights, emphasizing how marketers can effectively leverage transparent self-criticism to cultivate consumer trust, reduce skepticism, and positively shape product evaluations within increasingly skeptical consumer markets.

RESUMEN

Las comunicaciones de marca han hecho hincapié tradicionalmente en los atributos positivos de los productos para fomentar una percepción favorable por parte de los consumidores. Sin embargo, una tendencia creciente en el marketing se aleja de esta norma y adopta mensajes negativos autodirigidos. Esta tesis doctoral presenta e investiga el novedoso fenómeno de las comunicaciones de marca con mensajes negativos autodirigidos (BCSNM, por sus siglas en inglés), que abarca tres estrategias distintas: el autodesprecio, la falsa modestia y los mensajes ambivalentes. A pesar de su aparente contradicción, las BCSNM ofrecen importantes oportunidades a las marcas que buscan comunicarse de forma eficaz con los consumidores y establecer relaciones sólidas.

El capítulo 1 establece un marco conceptual integral que integra las teorías psicolingüísticas con el modelo de probabilidad de elaboración (ELM). Clasifica las BCSNM en función de si son monosémicas (un solo significado) o polisémicas (múltiples significados). Utilizando el ELM, este marco explica cómo la diferente implicación de los consumidores influye en sus interpretaciones y respuestas a las BCSNM. Este capítulo aclara los procesos interpretativos que subyacen a las evaluaciones de los consumidores y propone una agenda para futuras investigaciones.

El capítulo 2 comprueba empíricamente las respuestas de los consumidores a los anuncios publicitarios autodespreciativos y a las marcas que los utilizan a través de seis estudios experimentales. Los resultados indican que, cuando el autodesprecio se centra en atributos menos críticos del producto, los consumidores perciben las marcas como más atractivas socialmente. Este mayor atractivo social mitiga el escepticismo de los consumidores, fomenta la confianza en la marca y reduce la evitación de los anuncios.

En el capítulo 3, la atención se centra en examinar las evaluaciones de los consumidores relacionadas con los productos cuando se exponen a anuncios publicitarios autodespreciativos. El capítulo postula que los mensajes autodespreciativos, que revelan deliberadamente defectos, alteran las expectativas de los consumidores y los llevan a racionalizar estas debilidades infiriendo fortalezas compensatorias en atributos no observables y relacionados con la experiencia. Cuatro estudios experimentales confirman de manera consistente que los anuncios autodespreciativos (frente a los autopromocionales) provocan inferencias más positivas y centradas en la experiencia por parte de los consumidores.

En general, esta tesis contribuye a la teoría del marketing al categorizar sistemáticamente los BCSNM y corroborar empíricamente las sutiles ventajas estratégicas del autodesprecio. Ofrece ideas prácticas para la gestión, haciendo hincapié en cómo los profesionales del marketing pueden aprovechar eficazmente la autocrítica transparente para cultivar la confianza de los consumidores, reducir el escepticismo y moldear positivamente las evaluaciones de los productos en unos mercados cada vez más escépticos.

INTRODUCTION

To advertise is, at its core, to promote something to the public with the intention of attracting customers (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This fundamental instinct to promote existed long before targeted ads appeared on Instagram Stories, influencers collaborated on viral TikTok campaigns, or brands spent millions on Super Bowl commercials. According to popular lore, though its historical accuracy remains debated, one of the earliest recorded advertisements can be traced back to Thebes, Egypt around 3000 BCE (Oyemaja, 2023). A fabric merchant is said to have commissioned a papyrus notice promoting his shop as the place “*where the best cloth is woven to your desires.*” From these ancient commercial societies to the billboards of Times Square and today’s algorithm-driven platforms, the core of advertising has remained consistent: to promote what makes a product or brand desirable to consumers. This emphasis on self-promotion is evident in popular slogans like BMW’s “*The ultimate driving machine,*” Gillette’s “*The best a man can get,*” Apple’s “*Think Different,*” and Disneyland’s “*The Happiest Place on Earth*” (Hodges, Estes, & Warren, 2024).

Nonetheless, a less conventional approach has emerged in the marketplace, where brands communicate their flaws by criticizing themselves. In contrast to traditional self-promotion, these messages seem counterintuitive. After all, why would a brand intentionally draw attention to its shortcomings? Yet, examples such as Carlsberg’s campaign, “*Probably not the best beer in the world,*” or Picnic Chocolate Bar’s description as “*Deliciously Ugly*” show a distinct form of advertising that directly challenges conventional norms. These self-directed negative messages denote an intriguing phenomenon that brands use to stand out in an oversaturated media environment.

Existing research on this type of communication in marketing primarily focuses on two-sided messaging, where both positive and negative attributes of a product are presented

simultaneously (e.g., Crowley & Hoyer, 1994). However, the literature remains largely silent on more extreme forms of self-criticism, such as self-deprecation, where brands openly highlight their flaws, or humblebragging, in which brands make seemingly self-effacing remarks that are strategically designed to draw attention to a positive trait. This distinction is crucial because the psychological mechanisms and consumer responses triggered by explicit or covert negative messaging may differ significantly from those elicited by two-sided messaging that straightforwardly includes both positive and negative claims.

This gap presents an opportunity to explore the conceptual distinctions of various self-directed negative messaging strategies and their distinct effects on consumer perceptions and behavior. The objective of this dissertation is to introduce, define, and develop a comprehensive understanding of Brand Communications with Self-Directed Negative Messages (BCSNMs), a newly proposed category within brand marketing communications. This category consists of three distinct strategies — self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging. The dissertation begins by conceptually differentiating these strategies and explaining how consumers evaluate BCSNMs depending on their level of involvement during message processing. In addition to this conceptual contribution, the dissertation presents an empirical investigation focusing particularly on self-deprecating advertising. Specifically, it examines how this form of messaging influences consumer responses across three dimensions: brand evaluations, attitudes toward the advertisement, and perceptions of the advertised product.

This dissertation comprises three chapters, each addressing a key aspect of self-directed negative messaging in brand communications. The first chapter develops a conceptual framework to categorize and differentiate Brand Communications with Self-Directed Negative Messages (BCSNMs). The second chapter empirically studies how self-deprecating advertisements, compared to traditional self-promoting messages, influence

perceptions of brand social attractiveness and trustworthiness, as well as consumer skepticism and likelihood of advertising avoidance. The final chapter investigates how this self-deprecating advertising affects product-related inferences, specifically examining whether highlighting flaws in observable attributes leads consumers to make positive assumptions about unmentioned, unobservable attributes.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 introduces and develops a conceptual framework for understanding Brand Communications with Self-Directed Negative Messages (BCSNMs), a novel category of brand messaging that includes self-deprecation (explicitly highlighting brand flaws), humblebragging (implicit boasting disguised as modesty), and two-sided messaging (explicitly presenting both positive and negative attributes). While marketing literature has examined a range of negative communication strategies, such as sarcasm (Becker & Anderson, 2019), dark humor (Saavedra Torres et al., 2023), comparative advertising (Thompson & Hamilton, 2006), consumer teasing (Oba, Howe, & Fitzsimons, 2025; Sun et al., 2023), and fear (Witte & Alan, 2000) or guilt appeals (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2006), these approaches typically direct criticism toward external entities like consumers, competitors, or societal norms. In contrast, brand communications that involve self-directed negative messages, where the brand becomes the target of self-critique, remain underexplored. Drawing on theories from social psychology, linguistics, and marketing, the chapter categorizes BCSNMs based on their message structure and underlying meaning. It employs the Psycholinguistic Model of Language Comprehension and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to propose how consumer involvement influences the interpretation and effectiveness of monosemous (single-meaning) versus polysemous (multi-meaning) BCSNMs. The chapter briefly differentiates BCSNMs from other negative message types that target entities other than the brand itself (e.g., consumer-teasing,

competitive advertising), and introduces a set of theoretical propositions along with a robust research agenda to guide future investigations on this emerging form of brand communication. Ultimately, it offers insights into how brands can strategically deploy different types of self-directed criticism to enhance consumer engagement and brand evaluations in a skeptical marketplace.

Chapter 2 presents the first empirical investigation into the effectiveness of self-deprecating advertisements. Across six experiments, this chapter examines whether, when, and why such messaging can foster more favorable consumer responses compared to self-promoting advertisements. Drawing on theories from impression management and social psychology, this chapter identifies two key prerequisites for self-deprecation to be received positively: (1) the self-deprecating message must be perceived as deliberate, not unintentional, and (2) the self-deprecated attribute must be of low importance to the consumer. Building on these conditions, the chapter demonstrates that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements enhance brand trust, through increased social attractiveness of the brand and decreased consumer skepticism. Additionally, by enhancing brand trust and reducing consumer skepticism, self-deprecating advertisements contribute to a managerially significant outcome: reduced advertising avoidance. In a time where consumers are constantly bombarded with promotional content and increasingly wary of traditional advertising tactics, this reduction in advertising avoidance is particularly valuable. It suggests that self-deprecating advertisements can help brands break through consumer resistance and foster more receptive engagement with their communications.

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to consumers' product-related responses, specifically the impact of self-deprecating advertisements on perceptions of experience attributes — those product qualities that cannot be evaluated until after use, such as comfort, durability, or taste. While most advertisements rely on self-promoting messages to highlight experience

attributes, (e.g., Energizer's tagline "*It keeps going, and going, and going...*" emphasizes durability), this chapter explores the effect of drawing attention to observable flaws in search attributes (e.g., design, packaging, price) to positively influence how consumers evaluate the unobservable. Using theories of inference making from psychology and compensatory reasoning from consumer research, the chapter posits that when consumers encounter a brand that voluntarily highlights a product's weakness in observable attributes, they are prompted to rationalize the brand's motives. This rationalization process can lead them to infer compensatory strengths in other, unmentioned areas, especially those that are harder to verify before purchase. Across four studies, the research shows that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements focused on search attributes are more likely to trigger positive inferences on the product's experience attributes. This research aims to provide new insights into how brands can use self-criticism to influence consumer judgments of product performance.

This dissertation makes several important contributions to marketing theory and practice. Conceptually, it introduces and defines BCSNMs and provides a theoretical framework to explain how consumers interpret and respond to these messages. Chapter 1 advances theory by integrating the Psycholinguistic Model of Language Comprehension (Elman, 2009; Li & Joanisse, 2021; Treiman et al., 2003) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010) to show how consumer involvement levels influence interpretation of monosemous versus polysemous BCSNMs. It contributes to linguistic applications in marketing by proposing a classification system based on message meaning and presents a 21-item research agenda for future work, extending prior studies on advertising language, valence, and framing (e.g., Xiang et al., 2019; Carnevale et al., 2017; Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2019). Chapter 2 addresses inconsistent findings in self-deprecation literature (e.g., DelGreco & Denes, 2020; Zell & Exline, 2010) and extends

advertising research that traditionally focuses on self-promotion (Hernandez et al., 2019; Eisend, 2006), by showing that self-deprecation leads to positive brand- and advertisement-related evaluations under the right conditions. Chapter 3 extends these insights to product-level perceptions, demonstrating that self-deprecating messaging about observable, search attributes (e.g., design) can lead consumers to make inferences about unobservable, experience attributes (e.g., comfort or functionality). This chapter contributes to consumer inference-making literature (Kardes et al., 2004) by introducing the concept of lateral inferences, where consumers infer strength in one attribute based on a flaw in another. It also advances compensatory reasoning research which has primarily focused on comparative contexts, where consumers evaluate multiple brands simultaneously (Chernev & Carpenter, 2001; Chernev, 2007). In contrast to prior work, which typically provides cues about both the strong and weak attributes (Kramer et al., 2012), we demonstrate that compensatory inferences can occur in single-product contexts, even when the inferred attribute is not explicitly suggested. Consumers spontaneously generate inferences about unmentioned experience attributes, revealing a more implicit and consumer-driven compensatory process than previously theorized.

From a managerial perspective, this dissertation offers strategic guidance for deploying self-directed negative messaging across numerous brand touchpoints. Chapter 1 recommends tailoring message structure to consumer involvement levels, while Chapter 2 identifies self-deprecation on low-importance traits as an effective trust-building tactic. Given that brands now speak to consumers across a variety of touchpoints beyond traditional advertising, managers can consider using this strategy in contexts such as packaging, social media, and influencer marketing. Chapter 3 provides insights for brands seeking to highlight experience-related product attributes without explicit self-praise. Messages criticizing the brand on visible, search attributes can prompt consumers to infer strength in unmentioned,

experience attributes. This approach is particularly relevant for premium brands, where high price already serves as a cue for elevated product experience. Since brand meaning is more strongly established when multiple cues lead to the same inference (Batra, 2019), self-deprecation can be a valuable complement to price-based signalling in shaping consumer perceptions. Collectively, the findings empower marketers to foster strong connections with consumers, reduce advertisement avoidance, and guide consumer inference, while avoiding overreliance on traditional self-promotional strategies.

This dissertation aims to encourage and advance scholarly dialogue on self-critical brand communications and spark further research in this emerging area. At the same time, it aims to equip marketers and retailers with strategies to build consumer trust and craft effective brand communications.

INTRODUCCIÓN

Hacer publicidad es, en esencia, promocionar algo entre el público con la intención de atraer clientes (Merriam-Webster, s.f.). Este instinto fundamental de promocionar existía mucho antes de que aparecieran anuncios dirigidos en Instagram Stories, los influencers colaboraran en campañas virales de TikTok o las marcas gastaran millones en anuncios de la Super Bowl. Según la tradición popular, aunque su exactitud histórica sigue siendo discutida, uno de los primeros anuncios de los que se tiene constancia se remonta a Tebas, Egipto, alrededor del año 3000 a.C. (Oyemaja, 2023). Se dice que un comerciante de telas encargó un anuncio en papiro en el que promocionaba su tienda como el lugar *«donde se tejen las mejores telas según sus deseos»*. Desde estas antiguas sociedades comerciales hasta las vallas publicitarias de Times Square y las plataformas actuales impulsadas por algoritmos, el núcleo de la publicidad ha permanecido constante: promover lo que hace que un producto o una marca sean deseables para los consumidores. Este énfasis en la autopromoción es evidente en eslóganes populares como *«La máquina de conducir definitiva»* de BMW , *«Lo mejor que un hombre puede conseguir »* de Gillette , *«Piensa diferente»* de Apple y *«El lugar más feliz de la Tierra »* de Disneyland (Hodges, Estes y Warren, 2024).

Sin embargo, en el mercado ha surgido un enfoque menos convencional, en el que las marcas comunican sus defectos criticándose a sí mismas. En contraste con la autopromoción tradicional, estos mensajes parecen contraintuitivos. Después de todo, ¿por qué iba una marca a llamar la atención intencionadamente sobre sus defectos? Sin embargo, ejemplos como la campaña de Carlsberg, *«Probablemente no sea la mejor cerveza del mundo »*, o la descripción de la barra de chocolate Picnic como *«Deliciosamente fea »* muestran una forma distinta de publicidad que desafía directamente las normas

convencionales. Estos mensajes negativos autodirigidos denotan un fenómeno intrigante que las marcas utilizan para destacar en un entorno mediático sobresaturado.

Las investigaciones existentes sobre este tipo de comunicación en marketing se centran en los mensajes de dos caras, en los que se presentan simultáneamente los atributos positivos y negativos de un producto (por ejemplo, Crowley y Hoyer, 1994). Sin embargo, la bibliografía guarda un gran silencio sobre las formas más extremas de autocrítica, como el autodesprecio, en el que las marcas resaltan abiertamente sus defectos, o el humblebragging, en el que las marcas hacen comentarios aparentemente autodespectivos que están estratégicamente diseñados para llamar la atención sobre un rasgo positivo. Esta distinción es crucial porque los mecanismos psicológicos y las respuestas de los consumidores provocados por los mensajes negativos explícitos o encubiertos pueden diferir significativamente de los provocados por los mensajes de doble cara que incluyen directamente afirmaciones tanto positivas como negativas.

Esta laguna presenta una oportunidad para explorar las distinciones conceptuales de varias estrategias de mensajería negativa autodirigida y sus distintos efectos sobre las percepciones y el comportamiento del consumidor. El objetivo de esta tesis es introducir, definir y desarrollar una comprensión global de las comunicaciones de marca con mensajes negativos autodirigidos (BCSNM), una categoría propuesta recientemente dentro de las comunicaciones de marketing de marca. Esta categoría consta de tres estrategias distintas: el autodesprecio, la humildad y los mensajes de doble cara. La tesis comienza diferenciando conceptualmente estas estrategias y explicando cómo evalúan los consumidores las BCSNM en función de su nivel de implicación durante el procesamiento del mensaje. Además de esta aportación conceptual, la disertación presenta una investigación empírica centrada especialmente en la publicidad autodespreciativa. En concreto, examina cómo influye esta

forma de mensaje en las respuestas de los consumidores en tres dimensiones: evaluaciones de la marca, actitudes hacia el anuncio y percepciones del producto anunciado.

Esta tesis doctoral consta de tres capítulos, cada uno de los cuales aborda un aspecto clave de los mensajes negativos autodirigidos en las comunicaciones de marca. El primer capítulo desarrolla un marco conceptual para categorizar y diferenciar las comunicaciones de marca con mensajes negativos autodirigidos (BCSNM). El segundo capítulo estudia empíricamente cómo los anuncios autodespreciativos, en comparación con los mensajes autopromocionales tradicionales, influyen en las percepciones del atractivo social y la fiabilidad de la marca, así como en el escepticismo del consumidor y la probabilidad de evitar la publicidad. El último capítulo investiga cómo afecta esta publicidad autodespreciativa a las inferencias relacionadas con el producto, examinando específicamente si resaltar los defectos de los atributos observables lleva a los consumidores a hacer suposiciones positivas sobre atributos no mencionados e inobservables.

Resúmenes de los capítulos

El capítulo 1 introduce y desarrolla un marco conceptual para comprender las comunicaciones de marca con mensajes negativos autodirigidos (BCSNM), una novedosa categoría de mensajes de marca que incluye el autodesprecio (resaltar explícitamente los defectos de la marca), la humildad (jactancia implícita disfrazada de modestia) y los mensajes de doble cara (presentar explícitamente atributos tanto positivos como negativos). Aunque la literatura sobre marketing ha examinado una serie de estrategias de comunicación negativa, como el sarcasmo (Becker & Anderson, 2019), el humor negro (Saavedra Torres et al., 2023), la publicidad comparativa (Thompson & Hamilton, 2006), las burlas a los consumidores (Oba, Howe, & Fitzsimons, 2025; Sun et al., 2023), y apelaciones al miedo (Witte & Alan, 2000) o a la culpa (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2006), estos enfoques suelen dirigir las críticas hacia entidades externas como los consumidores, los competidores o las

normas sociales. En cambio, las comunicaciones de marca que implican mensajes negativos autodirigidos, en los que la marca se convierte en el blanco de la autocrítica, siguen estando poco exploradas. Basándose en teorías de la psicología social, la lingüística y el marketing, el capítulo categoriza los BCSNM en función de la estructura de su mensaje y del significado subyacente. Emplea el Modelo Psicolingüístico de Comprensión del Lenguaje y el Modelo de Probabilidad de Elaboración (ELM) para proponer cómo influye la implicación del consumidor en la interpretación y la eficacia de los BCSNM monosémicos (de significado único) frente a los polisémicos (de significado múltiple). El capítulo diferencia brevemente los BCSNM de otros tipos de mensajes negativos que se dirigen a entidades distintas de la propia marca (por ejemplo, la provocación del consumidor, la publicidad de la competencia), e introduce un conjunto de proposiciones teóricas junto con una sólida agenda de investigación para orientar futuras investigaciones sobre esta forma emergente de comunicación de marca. En última instancia, ofrece ideas sobre cómo las marcas pueden desplegar estratégicamente diferentes tipos de críticas autodirigidas para mejorar el compromiso de los consumidores y las evaluaciones de las marcas en un mercado escéptico.

El capítulo 2 presenta la primera investigación empírica sobre la eficacia de los anuncios autocríticos. A través de seis experimentos, este capítulo examina si, cuándo y por qué este tipo de mensajes pueden fomentar respuestas más favorables de los consumidores en comparación con los anuncios autopromocionales. Basándose en teorías de la gestión de impresiones y la psicología social, este capítulo identifica dos requisitos previos clave para que el autodesprecio se reciba positivamente: (1) el mensaje autodespreciativo debe percibirse como deliberado, no involuntario, y (2) el atributo autodespreciativo debe tener poca importancia para el consumidor. Partiendo de estas condiciones, el capítulo demuestra que los anuncios autodespreciativos (frente a los de autopromoción) aumentan la confianza en la marca, a través de un mayor atractivo social de la marca y una disminución del

escepticismo del consumidor. Además, al aumentar la confianza en la marca y reducir el escepticismo del consumidor, los anuncios autodespreciativos contribuyen a un resultado significativo desde el punto de vista de la gestión: la reducción de la evitación de la publicidad. En una época en la que los consumidores son bombardeados constantemente con contenidos promocionales y desconfían cada vez más de las tácticas publicitarias tradicionales, esta reducción de la evitación publicitaria es especialmente valiosa. Sugiere que los anuncios autodespreciativos pueden ayudar a las marcas a romper la resistencia de los consumidores y fomentar un compromiso más receptivo con sus comunicaciones.

En el capítulo 3, la atención se centra en las respuestas de los consumidores relacionadas con el producto, concretamente en el impacto de los anuncios autodespreciativos sobre las percepciones de los atributos de experiencia, es decir, aquellas cualidades del producto que no pueden evaluarse hasta después de su uso, como la comodidad, la durabilidad o el sabor. Mientras que la mayoría de los anuncios se basan en mensajes autodespreciativos para resaltar los atributos de experiencia (por ejemplo, el eslogan de Energizer «*It keeps going, and going, and going...*» enfatiza la durabilidad), este capítulo explora el efecto de llamar la atención sobre los defectos observables de los atributos de búsqueda (por ejemplo, el diseño, el envase, el precio) para influir positivamente en la forma en que los consumidores evalúan lo inobservable. Utilizando las teorías de la elaboración de inferencias de la psicología y el razonamiento compensatorio de la investigación del consumidor, el capítulo postula que cuando los consumidores se encuentran con una marca que destaca voluntariamente la debilidad de un producto en atributos observables, se ven impulsados a racionalizar los motivos de la marca. Este proceso de racionalización puede llevarles a inferir puntos fuertes compensatorios en otras áreas no mencionadas, especialmente las que son más difíciles de verificar antes de la compra. A través de cuatro estudios, la investigación muestra que los anuncios autodespreciativos

(frente a los autopromocionales) centrados en los atributos de búsqueda tienen más probabilidades de desencadenar inferencias positivas sobre los atributos de experiencia del producto. Esta investigación pretende aportar nuevas ideas sobre cómo las marcas pueden utilizar la autocrítica para influir en los juicios de los consumidores sobre el rendimiento del producto.

Esta tesis doctoral hace varias aportaciones importantes a la teoría y la práctica del marketing. Desde el punto de vista conceptual, introduce y define los BCSNM y proporciona un marco teórico para explicar cómo interpretan y responden los consumidores a estos mensajes. El capítulo 1 avanza en la teoría integrando el Modelo Psicolingüístico de Comprensión del Lenguaje (Elman, 2009; Li & Joanisse, 2021; Treiman et al., 2003) y el Modelo de Probabilidad de Elaboración (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010) para mostrar cómo influyen los niveles de implicación del consumidor en la interpretación de los BCSNM monosémicos frente a los polisémicos. Contribuye a las aplicaciones lingüísticas en el marketing proponiendo un sistema de clasificación basado en el significado del mensaje y presenta una agenda de investigación de 21 ítems para futuros trabajos, ampliando estudios previos sobre el lenguaje publicitario, la valencia y el encuadre (por ejemplo, Xiang et al., 2019; Carnevale et al., 2017; Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2019). El capítulo 2 aborda los hallazgos incoherentes en la literatura sobre el autodesprecio (por ejemplo, DelGreco & Denes, 2020; Zell & Exline, 2010) y amplía la investigación publicitaria que tradicionalmente se centra en la autopromoción (Hernández et al., 2019; Eisend, 2006), al demostrar que el autodesprecio conduce a evaluaciones positivas de la marca y del anuncio en las condiciones adecuadas. El capítulo 3 amplía estos conocimientos a las percepciones a nivel de producto, demostrando que los mensajes autodespreciativos sobre atributos observables y de búsqueda (por ejemplo, el diseño) pueden llevar a los consumidores a hacer inferencias sobre atributos no observables y de experiencia (por

ejemplo, la comodidad o la funcionalidad). Este capítulo contribuye a la literatura sobre la realización de inferencias por parte de los consumidores (Kardes et al., 2004) introduciendo el concepto de inferencias laterales, en las que los consumidores infieren la fortaleza de un atributo basándose en un defecto de otro. También supone un avance en la investigación sobre el razonamiento compensatorio, que se ha centrado principalmente en contextos comparativos, en los que los consumidores evalúan varias marcas simultáneamente (Chernev y Carpenter, 2001; Chernev, 2007). A diferencia de los trabajos anteriores, que suelen proporcionar pistas sobre los atributos fuertes y débiles (Kramer et al., 2012), demostramos que las inferencias compensatorias pueden producirse en contextos de un solo producto, incluso cuando el atributo inferido no se sugiere explícitamente. Los consumidores generan espontáneamente inferencias sobre atributos de experiencia no mencionados, lo que revela un proceso compensatorio más implícito e impulsado por el consumidor de lo que se había teorizado anteriormente.

Desde el punto de vista de la gestión, esta tesis ofrece orientación estratégica para desplegar mensajes negativos autodirigidos en numerosos puntos de contacto con la marca. El capítulo 1 recomienda adaptar la estructura del mensaje a los niveles de implicación del consumidor, mientras que el capítulo 2 identifica el autodesprecio en rasgos de poca importancia como una táctica eficaz para generar confianza. Dado que las marcas hablan ahora a los consumidores a través de una variedad de puntos de contacto más allá de la publicidad tradicional, los directivos pueden considerar el uso de esta estrategia en contextos como el envasado, las redes sociales y el marketing de influencers. El capítulo 3 ofrece ideas para las marcas que buscan destacar los atributos del producto relacionados con la experiencia sin un autoelogio explícito. Los mensajes que critican a la marca en atributos visibles, de búsqueda, pueden inducir a los consumidores a inferir fortaleza en atributos no mencionados, de experiencia. Este enfoque es especialmente relevante para las marcas

premium, en las que un precio elevado ya sirve como indicio de una experiencia elevada del producto. Dado que el significado de la marca se establece con más fuerza cuando múltiples indicios conducen a la misma inferencia (Batra, 2019), el autodesprecio puede ser un valioso complemento de la señalización basada en el precio a la hora de conformar las percepciones del consumidor. En conjunto, las conclusiones capacitan a los profesionales del marketing para fomentar conexiones sólidas con los consumidores, reducir la evitación de la publicidad y guiar la inferencia del consumidor, evitando al mismo tiempo una dependencia excesiva de las estrategias tradicionales de autopromoción.

Esta disertación aspira a hacer avanzar el diálogo académico sobre la comunicación autocrítica de las marcas y a suscitar nuevas investigaciones en este ámbito emergente. Al mismo tiempo, pretende dotar a los profesionales del marketing y a los minoristas de estrategias para fomentar la confianza del consumidor y elaborar comunicaciones de marca eficaces.

CHAPTER 1. BRAND COMMUNICATIONS WITH SELF-DIRECTED NEGATIVE MESSAGES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH AGENDA

Abstract

Traditional advertisements typically portray products and brands positively when interacting with their target consumers. However, some brands embrace an unconventional approach by integrating self-directed negative messages. In this conceptual paper, we examine this counterintuitive strategy, which we term as Brand Communications with Self-Directed Negative Messages (BCSNMs). Employing theories from social psychology, linguistics, and marketing, we identify and categorize BCSNMs into three distinct types: self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging. We utilize frameworks like the Psycholinguistic Model of Language Comprehension and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to systematically analyse potential consumer evaluations and formulate propositions considering a spectrum of consumer, brand, and context-related moderating factors. Our research uncovers nuanced distinctions among the three BCSNMs, emphasizing their conceptual differences and varied effects on consumers' brand evaluations. This research provides valuable insights for both marketing scholars and practitioners on the strategic implementation of BCSNMs while engaging with their consumers.

Keywords: *Self-deprecation, humblebragging, two-sided messaging, brand communications*

1.1. Introduction

Brand communications, often regarded as “the lifeblood of any brand” (Keller, 2020, p. 997), refer to a concerted effort to construct and maintain a brand (Batra & Keller, 2016). They are pivotal in reaching the right target audience (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016), building brand awareness (Smith & Taylor, 2004), highlighting competitive advantages (Batra & Keller, 2016), driving product demand (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2018), and fostering consumer loyalty (McAlister et al., 2016; Stewart & Pavlou, 2002). Given the substantial investments brands make in strategically crafting these communications (Navarro, 2023), they primarily emphasize the benefits and strengths of the brand.

Nevertheless, brand communications sometimes take an unconventional route by incorporating self-directed negative messages, such as product or brand criticism. A notable example is Buckley’s cough syrup, which employs the slogan *“It tastes awful. And it works.”*¹ Listerine follows a similar approach with the tagline *“The taste people hate. Twice a day.”*² Porsche adopts the slogan *“Too fast. Doesn’t blend in. People will talk.”*³ While these slogans may appear similar because each criticizes the product to some extent, they differ in their structures and underlying meanings. Buckley’s advertisement uses two-sided messaging, explicitly mentioning both negative and positive product attributes. The slogan uses the negative aspect (poor taste) to highlight the positive characteristics of the product, specifically its efficacy. In contrast, Listerine’s slogan straightforwardly self-deprecates, acknowledging that consumers dislike the taste of its product, without providing any additional benefits or information. Porsche’s advertisement, on the other hand, ostentatiously states “supposed” flaws in their product, while surreptitiously portraying them

¹ <https://www.buckleys.ca/about-buckleys/award-winning-advertising/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/09/business/media-business-advertising-listerine-venerable-brand-mouthwash-has-been.html>

³ <https://davedye.com/2022/03/29/remember-those-great-porsche-ads-1-bruce-bildsten/>

as benefits. In other words, Porsche humblebrags by criticizing the car for being too fast and conspicuous, yet it subtly positions these traits as appealing.

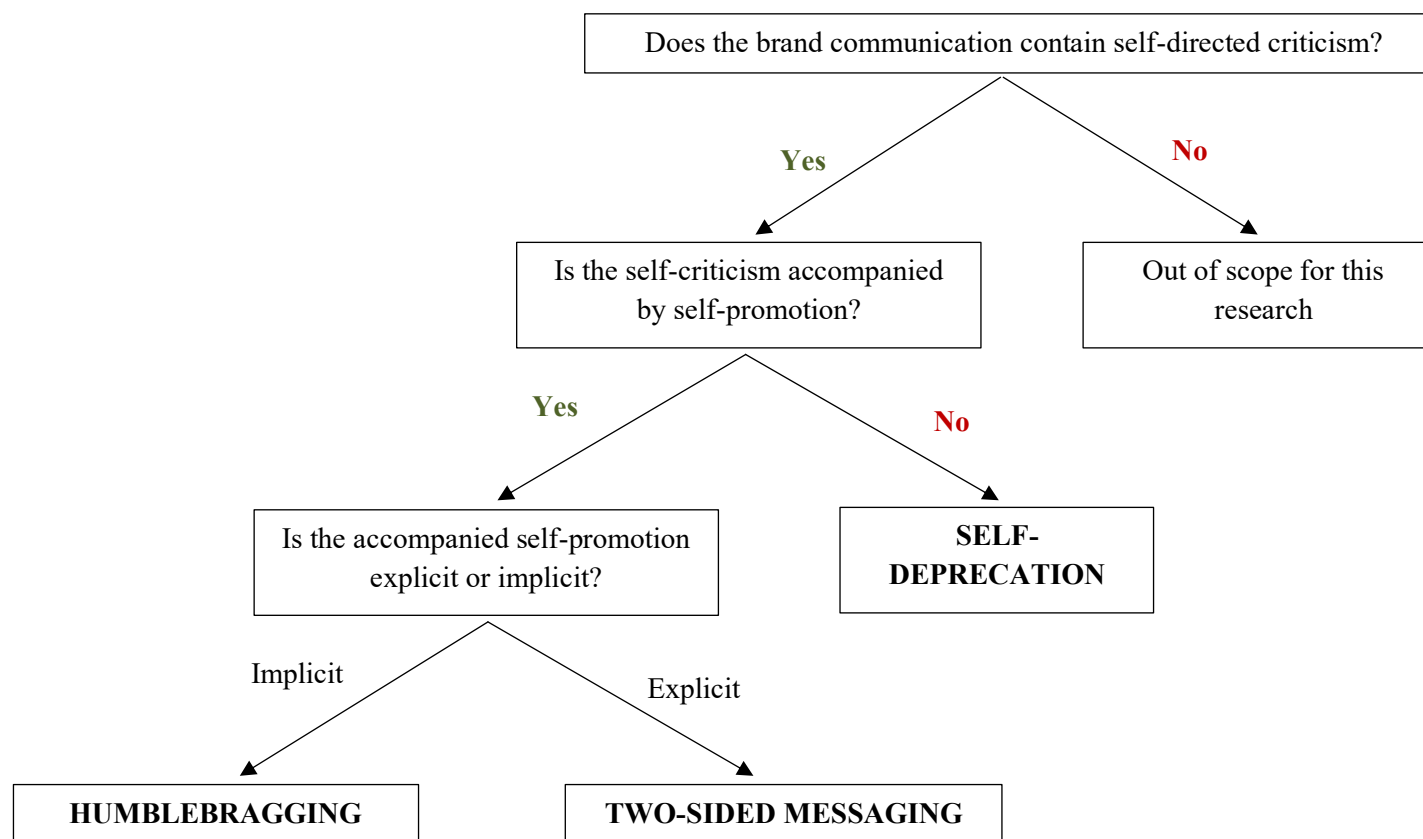
We acknowledge that marketers use other negative communication strategies – such as sarcasm (Becker & Anderson, 2019), dark humor (Saavedra Torres et al., 2023), comparative advertising (Thompson & Hamilton, 2006), consumer-targeted negative advertisements (Sun et al., 2023), and appeals that evoke negative emotions like disgust (Morales, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2012), fear (Witte & Alan, 2000), guilt (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2006), and shame (Brennan & Binney, 2010) as well. Although these communications contain negative undertones, their criticism targets external entities—competitors, consumers, or broader societal norms—rather than the brand itself. For example, appeals with sarcasm and dark humor typically target the consumers, competitors, or society (Becker & Anderson, 2019). Comparative advertising highlights shortcomings in a competitor’s product (Thompson & Hamilton, 2006), and consumer-targeted negative advertisements criticize the brand’s own consumers (Sun et al., 2023). Finally, brand communications inducing negative emotions (e.g., fear, disgust) introduce unpleasant situations that consumers can potentially avoid or remedy by purchasing the marketed products (Brennan & Binney, 2010).

While such strategies contain negative undertones, our research specifically focuses on brand communications with self-directed negative messages (hereafter referred to as BCSNMs), namely self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging. We propose that while these BCSNMs all include self-criticism, they are conceptually distinct from one another (See Figure 1.1). We seek to understand *whether*, *when* and *how* self-directed criticism can help brands attract consumers and positively influence their brand evaluations. Our research addresses questions such as: “How are BCSNMs interpreted based on the messages’ structures and underlying meanings?” and “How does consumer

involvement level influence how consumers perceive and respond to them?” We use the psycholinguistic model of language comprehension (Elman, 2009; Li & Joannis, 2021; Treiman et al., 2003) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Briñol, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to expound, exemplify, and theoretically distinguish between BCSNMs and to understand how consumers interpret and respond to them.

BCSNMs are rare in a marketplace dominated by claims of product or brand superiority (Eisend, 2006). Most brand communications are self-promoting, boasting claims of excellence. Consumers perceive such claims as biased, self-serving, and lacking credibility (Deibert, 2017), leading to heightened skepticism and avoidance of brand communications (Ham, 2017; Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). Indeed, industry reports document a significant loss of consumer trust in brands and advertisers (Ipsos, 2022). Consumers often find such advertisements as disruptive and experience negative emotions when viewing them, prompting them to disengage with brand content (McDonald, 2018). Consequently, brands miss out on opportunities to connect with and attract consumers. This leads to substantial financial losses stemming from ineffective advertising expenditures (Rua, 2021). Weary of pervasive marketplace self-promotion, consumers seek authentic, honest, and transparent interactions with brands (Nunes, Ordanini, & Giambastiani, 2021). Recent advertising research shows that brands can employ self-directed criticism to transparently communicate their flaws and enhance brand trust while mitigating advertisement avoidance (Kale & Sayin, 2024). Our research provides a comprehensive understanding of consumer responses to different types of BCSNMs, offering marketers valuable insights for addressing contemporary challenges in branding and marketing.

Figure 1.1. Flowchart Explaining Differences between BCSNCs



BCSNMs have received relatively little attention from marketing scholars, who have predominantly focused on two-sided messaging (e.g., Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Hernandez, da Costa Filho, & Strano, 2023; Rucker, Petty, & Briñol, 2008). However, self-critical communication has been investigated in social psychology (Sezer et al., 2018; Sezer, 2022; Speer, 2019), organization behavior (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; Grant, Hodge, & Sinha, 2018), interpersonal communication (Allen, 1991; Austin, Constabile, & Smith, 2022; Critcher, O'Donnell, & Jung, 2018; DelGreco & Denes, 2020; Doty, 2019; O'Donnell, Jung, & Critcher, 2016; Wittels, 2012; Zell & Exline, 2010), and political science (Baumgartner et al., 2018). Synthesizing findings from these disciplines and employing the psycholinguistic model of language comprehension (Elman, 2009; Li & Joannis, 2021; Treiman et al., 2003), we categorize BCSNMs as either monosemous or polysemous and explain how this distinction might affect consumers' processing and evaluation. The psycholinguistic model distinguishes between straightforward, single-meaning (i.e., monosemous) communication and complex, multi-meaning (i.e., polysemous) communication. We assert that polysemous messages necessitate more cognitive processing compared to monosemous messages. As a result, consumers' attentiveness and level of engagement would influence how they interpret and evaluate such messages. Combining insights from the psycholinguistic model of language comprehension and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Briñol, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), we offer propositions regarding how consumer involvement may distinctly affect their evaluations of brands that employ monosemous and polysemous BCSNMs. We then outline a comprehensive research agenda, posing key questions for future exploration on how various consumer, brand, and context-related factors may shape consumer evaluations of BCSNMs.

1.2. Brand Communications with Self-Directed Negative Messages (BCSNMs)

We begin by defining and examining the three focal BCSNMs: self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging. We consolidate insights from the existing literature to understand how these BCSNMs are perceived as communication strategies.

1.2.1. *Self-deprecation.*

Self-deprecation is defined as “any statement that conveys a negative self-evaluation” (Speer, 2019, p.806). It involves communicating one’s shortcomings by pointing out flaws, mistakes, or imperfections (Owens, 1993; Critcher, O’Donnell, & Jung, 2018). Despite receiving comparatively less attention from marketing scholars, self-deprecation has been explored in various fields, including social psychology (DelGreco & Denes, 2020; Owens, 1993; Critcher et al., 2018; Speer, 2019), organization behavior (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019), and politics (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Dewberry & Fox, 2012). The existing literature on the effects of self-deprecation has produced mixed results. Some studies have shown negative outcomes, where individuals employing self-deprecation were perceived as less skilled (Zell & Exline, 2010) and possessing low self-esteem (Critcher et al., 2018; O’Donnell et al., 2016; Owens, 1994). Zell and Exline (2010) examined how participants, who believed they were engaged in a competitive situation, responded to different appeasement strategies employed by the winner. The authors compared three strategies: self-deprecation, offering to share their prize, and saying nothing. The findings revealed that winners who self-deprecated to appease others were perceived as less likeable and skilled as compared to those who offered to share their winnings or remained silent. In the context of interpersonal communications, O’Donnell and colleagues (2016) found that individuals who self-deprecated about their intelligence or looks were perceived as having low self-esteem.

In contrast, other studies have highlighted positive effects of self-deprecation. For instance, in the online dating context, individuals who responded to compliments self-deprecatingly were perceived as more likeable than those who opted to self-praise (DelGreco & Denes, 2020). In job interviews, Bitterly and Schweitzer (2019) demonstrated that candidates who admitted their weakness with humorously self-deprecating responses were

perceived as warmer and more competent than those who chose not to disclose their weaknesses. Matwick and Matwick (2017) observed that celebrity chefs using self-deprecation on cooking shows were seen as humorous, authentic, and relatable. Austin and colleagues (2022) found that on the social media platform Instagram, self-deprecating captions were evaluated more positively than self-praising ones, because the former were seen as less arrogant and more humorous. Smith and Powell (1988) showed that leaders practicing self-deprecating humor were seen as more adept at easing tension and fostering participation than those who used humor to ridicule others. Similarly, Hopton and colleagues (2013) found that self-deprecating leaders appeared more relatable and humbler, narrowing the status gap with their followers.

As such, the extant literature shows that individuals may either perceive self-deprecators positively, associating them with qualities like trustworthiness, humility and modesty, or form judgments based on the negative aspects conveyed through self-deprecation. Given that brands are strongly motivated to cultivate favorable impressions on consumers (Fisk & Grove, 1996; Spear & Roper, 2013), self-deprecation might be viewed as risky and is seldom incorporated in brand communications. However, some brands defy the norm of self-promotion and choose to self-deprecate instead. For example, the beer brand Carlsberg advertised itself as, “*Probably not the best beer in the world.*”⁴ Oatly, the plant-based milk brand employed self-deprecation in their product names “*Quite Ordinary Strawberry Ice Cream*” and “*Pretty Average Vanilla Ice Cream.*”⁵ The automobile brand Citroën advertised its electric car Ami with the taglines, “*Surprisingly, we didn’t fire the designer,*” and “*The worst part is not that the doors are mounted backwards. It’s that we*

⁴ <https://www.marketingweek.com/carlsberg-overhauls-brand-and-beer/>

⁵ <https://highwidehandsome.com/news/dont-judge-brand-bus-bench-dont-like-oatlys-advertising-youre-wrong/>

did it on purpose.”⁶ Thus, although infrequently utilized, self-deprecation is leveraged by certain brands in the marketplace, underscoring the need for scholarly investigation into the motivations and outcomes of such a communication strategy. Notably, only one study in the marketing literature has shown that brands using self-deprecating advertisements are perceived as more socially attractive than those using self-promoting ones, particularly when the self-deprecation targets a less important brand attribute. This approach reduces consumer skepticism, enhances brand trust, and decreases the tendency to avoid advertisements (Kale & Sayin, 2024). No other research has explored this topic, highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

1.2.2. *Humblebragging.*

“Humblebragging is a testament to the amount of ardor and subterfuge people bring to the craft of self-promotion” (Alford, 2012, p. 4). Characterized as the act of bragging veiled within a complaint or an appearance of humility (Sezer et al., 2018), humblebragging entails false modesty disguised as self-criticism. Individuals who humblebrag present a seemingly modest, complaining, or self-critical statement (Alford, 2012), yet their underlying aim is to subtly highlight their admirable qualities or achievements (Wittels, 2012). This tactic is employed by individuals who seek to boast without appearing as vain or self-absorbed, intending to simultaneously project both warmth and competence (Doty, 2019). Hence, while humblebragging may appear as a self-deprecating statement on the surface, it fundamentally serves as a covert attempt at self-promotion (Alford, 2012).

Humblebragging is a common strategy in social media among brands, celebrities, and influencers. This tactic is so widespread that a Twitter account was specifically created to highlight humblebragging posts⁷ (Wittels, 2012). While brands typically avoid

⁶ <https://jalopnik.com/citroen-has-re-discovered-the-joys-of-self-deprecating-1846731599>

⁷ <http://twitter.com/Humblebrag>

humblebragging in their communications, individuals serving as spokespersons, endorsers, and contracted influencers frequently adopt this approach (Wittels, 2012). For example, Gwyneth Paltrow, a renowned actress and founder of the lifestyle brand ‘Goop,’ shared an Instagram post outlining various physical imperfections accompanied by an immaculate and attractive photograph of herself. Thus, she evidently expressed humility by criticizing herself but covertly bragged about herself and her brand by posting a flawless, aspirational image (Deacon, 2022). Another example is an advertisement encouraging people to visit the city of Oslo. This advertisement opens with the line, “*I wouldn’t come here.*”⁸ The narrator, a 31-year-old local, overtly complains about how life in Oslo is ‘*too easy*,’ stating that ‘*everything is just so available*,’ with no lines at museums and no waits at restaurants. While he overtly lists things that are ‘wrong’ with Oslo, he covertly highlights them as desirable attributes that make the city worth visiting.

Humblebraggers, motivated to create positive impressions, use this approach to self-promote without having to bear the social backlash of blatant bragging (Sezer et al., 2018). However, upon closer inspection, evaluators recognize the bragging hidden behind feigned humility, and thus, perceive the humblebragger negatively (Grant et al., 2018; Sezer et al., 2018). Indeed, extant research shows that humblebragging often proves ineffective as an impression management strategy and yields counterproductive outcomes (Grant et al., 2018; Sezer et al., 2018). Sezer and colleagues (2018) asked participants on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to evaluate the sincerity and likeability of a hypothetical person who either straightforwardly bragged by saying “I got accepted to all the top schools” or humblebragged using the statement “I have no idea how I got accepted to all the top schools.” Results suggested that humblebraggers were seen as significantly less sincere and likeable than those who bragged directly. The conflicting signals inherent in humblebragging, where individuals

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vhD59ac7nw&ab_channel=VisitOSLO

attempted to appear modest while subtly showcasing their accomplishments, resulted in perceptions of insincerity and manipulation (Sezer et al., 2018) and led to even greater reductions in likability and perceived competence when compared to openly bragging. Grant and colleagues (2018) examined how investors react to humblebragging by company leaders, especially CEOs. They found that, when compared to the use of direct brags or modest statements, employing humblebragging diminished the credibility of CEOs and discouraged evaluators' willingness to invest. Paramita and Septianto (2021) found, in the context of social media advertising, that Instagram influencers who employed humblebragging as opposed to straightforward bragging about their experiences at a renowned restaurant, were perceived as more irritating and annoying. Consequently, this led consumers to develop negative attitudes towards the restaurant itself.

Although most research about humblebragging has documented negative consequences, some findings in interpersonal communication suggest that humblebragging may lead to positive evaluation when the humblebragger is a high-status individual (Chen, Liu, & Mattila, 2020; Paramita & Septianto, 2021). In the context of online reviews, humblebrags from individuals perceived as experts, such as frequent travellers, tend to be received more positively compared to similar statements made by novices, because humblebragging novices are perceived as insincere (Chen et al., 2020). Further, humblebragging brand endorsements made by celebrities are perceived as amusing, while those made by influencers are viewed as irritating (Paramita & Septianto, 2021). Within these contexts, the positive reception of humblebrags from high-status individuals may be closely tied to their elevated status rather than the content of the humblebrag.

Given these instances of humblebragging in various brand-consumer communication contexts, we seek to identify the conditions under which consumers accept the apparent

humility of a humblebrag as genuine, and when they discern the concealed bragging, identifying the overt humility as a misdirection intended to convey veiled self-promotion.

1.2.3. *Two-sided messaging.*

Two-sided messaging is a communication form which involves presenting both supporting and opposing arguments about a proposition (Allen, 1991). Scholars of persuasive communication initially studied this strategy (Allen, 1991; Bither, 1977; Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; McGuire, 1961), arguing that mild criticism or negative information directed at a subject, followed by countering that negative argument by providing positive information can effectively persuade people. This helps people cope with stronger negative arguments, while simultaneously increasing the believability of the positive aspects presented (Allen, 1991; McGuire, 1961).

Prior literature in persuasive communications has demonstrated multiple positive consequences of two-sided messaging. Hendriks and colleagues (2023) found that scientists and politicians who presented two-sided arguments by including both pros and cons of mask usage during the COVID-19 pandemic were attributed greater expertise, integrity, and trust compared to those who presented one-sided arguments by focusing solely on the pros. Similarly, Cornelis and colleagues (2014) examined two-sided and one-sided messages aimed at reducing teenage binge-drinking. The one-sided message presented a single anti-binge drinking argument, narrating a case of alcohol poisoning: *“Because of binge drinking, Thomas, 16 years old, got alcohol poisoning.”* The two-sided message utilized the same anti-binge drinking argument but also introduced a pro-binge drinking argument: *“Thanks to the alcohol, he was very popular that night”* (Cornelis et al., 2014, p. 258). The authors found that teenagers who saw the two-sided (versus one-sided) anti-binge-drinking message expressed lower binge-drinking intentions. Notably, this effect was more pronounced among teenagers highly invested in the issue of binge-drinking.

In brand communications, two-sided messaging refers to presenting consumers with both positive and negative information about a product or brand (Lee & Johnson, 2022). Examples of two-sided messages include slogans for Buckley's cough syrup "*It tastes awful. And it works,*"⁹ and "*Everything you want in a cough remedy. And nothing you want in taste,*"¹⁰ and Cadbury's Picnic chocolate bar's slogan "*Deliciously Ugly.*"¹¹ Extant research in marketing points to several positive outcomes of two-sided messaging (for a comprehensive review, see Eisend, 2006). For instance, Etgar and Goodwin (1982) compared consumer attitudes toward one-sided and two-sided beer advertisements, in which the one-sided message highlighted the beer's taste and quality, while the two-sided version also acknowledged its high calorie content. Consumer responded more positively to the two-sided than the one-sided message. Bohner et al. (2003) similarly examined how two-sided and one-sided messaging affects brand's credibility by presenting participants an advertisement for an Italian restaurant. The one-sided version praised the restaurant's delicious and fresh dishes, whereas the two-sided version additionally mentioned the absence of an outdoor seating and parking space. The findings revealed that utilizing two-sided messaging enhanced consumer perceptions of the restaurant owner's credibility, which led to more positive attitudes towards the restaurant.

Eisend (2007) investigated why two-sided messaging strengthened credibility. He discovered that adding negative information led consumers to perceive the brand as more truthful, thus increasing credibility. Additionally, Eisend (2007) demonstrated that two-sided messaging in advertisements was perceived as pleasingly novel, as most advertisements typically highlight only positive features. This heightened novelty had a positive effect on consumers' attitudes towards the advertised product. Lee and Johnson (2022) also found that influencers who incorporated two-sided messages in their product reviews on Instagram were perceived as more authentic than those who posted one-sided messages, leading to enhanced electronic word-of-mouth intentions. Given the

⁹ <https://www.buckleys.ca/about-buckleys/award-winning-advertising/>

¹⁰ <https://x.com/rshotton/status/1070425657945972736>

¹¹ <https://adsspot.me/media/tv-commercials/picnic-bar-deliciously-ugly-43a93fdf0dab>

documented positive consequences of two-sided messaging in marketing literature, this approach is more commonly employed in brands communications compared to self-deprecation or humblebragging.

In this research, we intend to understand how consumers interpret these BCSNMs – self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging, and evaluate the brands that employ them. We propose that while all BCSNMs criticize the brand or product, consumers may interpret them differently. Self-deprecation and two-sided messaging provide direct criticism, while humblebragging entails subtly praising the brand or product under the guise of critique. Two-sided messages differ from self-deprecation, as they include both positive and negative attributes related to the product or brand. Furthermore, two-sided messages differ from humblebragging as they do not involve self-promotion within ostensibly self-deprecating statements. Instead of concealing intent, they transparently present both positive and negative information about the product or brand. Self-deprecating communications differs from humblebragging, as the former involves stating explicit, self-critical information about a brand or product, while the latter entails covertly self-praising while overtly engaging in self-criticism. In what follows, we use the psycholinguistic model of language comprehension (Elman, 2009; Li & Joannis, 2021) to systematically differentiate among the BCSNMs based on the nature of the message they convey. Thereafter, we employ the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to establish a framework to explain how varying levels of consumer involvement can impact their interpretations of BCSNMs.

1.3. The Psycholinguistic Model of Language Comprehension for Understanding Consumers' Interpretations of BCSNMs.

The psycholinguistic model of language comprehension (Elman, 2009; Li & Joannis, 2021; Treiman et al., 2003) delineates the cognitive processes through which

individuals interpret written and spoken language, explaining how ambiguity or clarity in intended meaning influences this comprehension (Dimofte & Yalch, 2007a). The model differentiates between two types of communications – monosemic and polysemous (Contini-Morava et al., 2004). Monosemic communications refer to messages with a single, unambiguous meaning, where the comprehension process is more straightforward (Contini-Morava et al., 2004). They have a direct, explicit message meant to be understood without inferring additional meanings (Contini-Morava et al., 2004). These communications are understood to be devoid of figurative interpretations, adhering strictly to their dictionary meanings and not expressing covert or subtle meanings (Pesina & Latushkina, 2015). They require less contextual interpretation, thereby making comprehension quicker and less prone to misunderstandings (Li & Joannis, 2021).

Polysemous communications, on the other hand, involve phrases with multiple meanings, requiring a more complicated process of semantic integration and understanding beyond the literal meaning of the words used (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). Such statements have both a literal and a figurative interpretation (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014; Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson, 2010). Literal interpretation occurs when the words or phrases are understood based on their conventional or dictionary meanings (Dimofte & Yalch, 2007b). Figurative interpretation is when the words or phrases are interpreted in a way that deviates from their dictionary meanings and conveys a more complex or subtle meaning (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). Inferring the figurative meaning involves using language symbolically or metaphorically to convey an idea that is different from the literal interpretation of words (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). In such instances, comprehension becomes more challenging as the reader relies on context and prior knowledge to decipher the intended meaning in the specific situation (Deane, 1988; Dimofte & Yalch, 2007b; Horvat et al., 2021).

The psycholinguistic model of language comprehension suggests that processing polysemous (versus monosemic) communication demands more significant cognitive resources (Deane, 1988; Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014; Horvat et al., 2021). Polysemous communications can cause temporary ambiguity during language processing, affecting comprehension speed and accuracy (Klein & Murphy, 2001; Williams, 1992). Studies in neuroscience have revealed that different areas of the brain are activated when processing monosemic versus polysemous messages, suggesting distinct neural pathways for dealing with semantic complexity and ambiguity (Rohaut et al., 2016; Tremblay et al., 2014). This difference not only affects how a message is interpreted but also shapes people's responses to the communicated message (Pesina & Latushkina, 2015).

1.3.1. Monosemic and polysemous messages in marketing.

Monosemic marketing messages provide straightforward and direct information about a product or service, avoiding the use of figurative language or subtle meanings (Burcea, 2014). The objective is to ensure that consumers easily comprehend the message without the need for extensive interpretation, thereby reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings (Burcea, 2014). For instance, KFC's slogan "It's finger lickin' good" is monosemic, aiming to convey a singular message and unequivocally portraying KFC's products as delicious, without allowing room for alternative interpretations.

Polysemous marketing messages, on the other hand, have more than one possible meaning (Puntoni et al., 2010). These include idioms, puns, and analogies that rely on ambiguity or figurativeness. Such statements may have a literal and a figurative meaning, wherein the former is obvious and easily processed, whereas the latter is "covert" and more challenging to process (Horvat et al., 2021). For instance, Pemco Insurance's slogan, "Safe drivers get it", can be interpreted literally, indicating that safe drivers purchase the insurance.

However, the communication can also be understood figuratively as conveying that safe drivers 'understand' why obtaining Pemco Insurance is important (Dimofte & Yalch, 2007b). Another example of polysemous marketing messages is The Economist's advertisement featuring a quote seemingly expressing a consumer's view "“I never read The Economist.” – Management trainee. Age 42” (Smith, 2013). While the literal interpretation suggests that the consumer does not read The Economist, the brand figuratively contends that the consumer remains a management trainee at 42 because they neglect reading the publication. As such, the advertisement emphasizes the value of The Economist in a professional's success (Smith, 2013). This message is crafted with the intention of offering multiple interpretations. In polysemous marketing messages, the figurative interpretation is usually the intended meaning, whereas the literal meaning is a semantic by-product (Quilty-Dunn, 2021; Puntoni et al., 2010; Scott, 1994). Quilty-Dunn (2021) argues that the literal meaning of polysemous sentences create a comparison between the literal and the figurative meanings and enhance the effect of figurative meaning of the message.

Our focal BCSNMs differ in semantic complexity, particularly in nature of the messages, whether they convey a literal meaning of self-criticism or imply a figurative meaning of self-promotion. Next, we categorize them based on their polysemous or monosemic nature.

1.3.2. *Categorization of BCSNMs as monosemic or polysemous.*

Self-deprecation (polysemous). While self-deprecation in brand communications may initially appear to convey a direct, self-critical message, we contend that it is polysemous, capable of eliciting both literal and figurative interpretations from consumers. In the realm of brand communications, where the primary aim is to establish positive impressions on consumers (Eisend, 2022), self-deprecation has the potential to prompt

consumers to infer additional figurative meanings that extend beyond the literal self-criticism. Its use may lead consumers to believe there is more to the story than the brand explicitly reveals, encouraging further interpretation. For example, Listerine's advertisement stating "The taste people hate. Twice a day" communicates that the product has an unpleasant taste which consumers dislike. The message has a literal meaning which conveys a negative product characteristic to consumers. However, consumers may infer a figurative, positive interpretation such as "it has an unpleasant taste, but it works," to justify why the brand is being self-critical. Similarly, Carlsberg's advertisement with the statement "Probably not the best beer in the world," literally acknowledges a shortcoming that it may not be the most superior beer brand. However, this intentional self-criticism may encourage consumers to figuratively interpret favourable qualities, such as the brand's honesty, authenticity, or humility. Thus, we suggest that self-deprecation is polysemic such that self-deprecating advertisements convey literal self-criticism, while inciting a figurative interpretation of inferring positive qualities.

Humblebragging (polysemous). Humblebragging is an overt attempt of self-deprecation with a covert aim of bragging (Sezer et al., 2018; Wittels, 2012). It presents negative information about the humblebragger but is meant to highlight their positive qualities (Doty, 2019; Feng, Chang, & Sun, 2023). For instance, a tweet by American actor Jared Leto said, "Just won GQ style award in Germany. Obviously, they made a mistake. I wonder how long till they come take it back. #andthewinnerisWHOOOPS!" (Shanahan, 2017). The literal interpretation of this communication is self-critical, where the actor appears to cast doubt on the legitimacy of his award, suggesting a mistake was made in his favour. This feigned modesty implicitly diminishes his own accomplishment. Yet, the communication is figuratively meant to highlight the distinction he received, while maintaining an appearance of humility. This example highlights the polysemous nature or

humblebragging, with a literal, self-critical meaning and a figurative, self-promoting interpretation.

Consider the advertisement for musician Lewis Capaldi's album stating, "5 million albums sold, 37 billion streams, and I'm still here, begging for your attention. Pathetic." The literal interpretation of this communication is seemingly self-critical, as Capaldi seemingly criticizes his need for attention and calls himself pathetic. However, figuratively, the musician brags about his achievements in terms of millions of records sold and billions of streams. Thus, we propose that humblebragging BCSNMs convey one message to consumers which can have two meanings – either the literal, i.e., humility and self-criticism or the figurative, i.e. bragging or self-promotion.

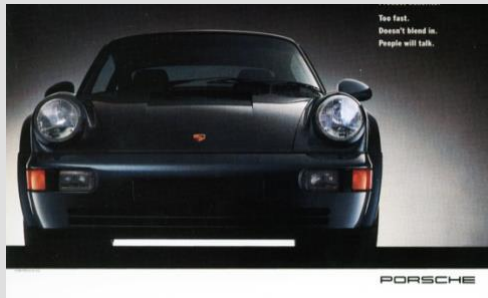
Two-sided messaging (monosemic). Two-sided messages present both negative and positive product information (Eisend, 2006; Etgar & Goodwin, 1982; Lee & Johnson, 2022). We categorize it as monosemic because two-sided messages provide a balanced view of a product by straightforwardly acknowledging both its positive attributes and potential drawbacks (Lee & Johnson, 2022). Even though they consist of both positively and negatively valenced communication, their overall meaning is monosemous and intended to be interpreted literally. For example, Cadbury's advertisement for the 'Picnic' chocolate bar described it as "*deliciously ugly*"¹², intending to highlight its taste while critiquing its appearance (Conley, 2001). This message is unambiguous, simultaneously praising the product's deliciousness and criticizing its visual appeal within the same communication. Similarly, Buckley cough syrup's advertisement "*People swear by it. And at it*"¹³ implies that consumers express frustration towards the product, possibly due to its unpleasant taste while concurrently endorse the product as an effective remedy for cough. This two-sided

¹² <https://adsspot.me/media/tv-commercials/picnic-bar-deliciously-ugly-43a93fdf0dab>

¹³ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/biggest-mistake-companies-make-customer-experience-sturdy-mckee>

advertisement clearly mentions that consumers endorse the product for its efficacy, while dislike its taste. The dual presentation of positive and negative aspects in the same communication in two-sided messaging is intended to be taken literally, providing a clear interpretation for consumers. Both positive and negative messages are explicitly stated, and brands don't intend consumers to infer any additional meanings. Hence, we conclude that two-sided messages are monosemous. See Table 1.1 for the categorization of BCSNMs based on their message nature and a summary of research findings on self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging.

Table 1.1. Classification Schemata of BCSNMs and Summary of Prior Literature

BCSNM	<i>Self-deprecation</i>	<i>Humblebragging</i>	<i>Two-sided Messaging</i>
Does Self-directed Criticism Accompany Self-promotion?	No	Yes	Yes
Mention of Self-Promotion	Not mentioned	Implicitly mentioned	Explicitly mentioned
Categorization based on Message Nature	Polysemous	Monosemous	Polysemous
Examples from the Marketplace	<p>The beer brand, Carlsberg's <i>"Probably not the best beer in the world"</i></p> 	<p>The automobile brand, Porsche's <i>"Too fast. Doesn't blend in. People will talk"</i></p> 	<p>The cough syrup brand, Buckley's <i>"It tastes awful. And it works."</i></p> 

<p>Summary of Research Findings in Prior Literature</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-deprecating leaders are perceived as more effective at encouraging participation in and resolving conflicts in an organization (Smith & Powell, 1988). • Winners of a classroom debate competition who self-deprecate appear less likeable and skilled than those who either share the winning prize or remain silent (Zell & Exline, 2010). • Self-deprecating leaders appear humbler and more relatable, narrowing the status gap with their followers in an organization (Hopton, Barling, & Turner, 2013). • Participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk perceive strangers who self-deprecate as more incompetent and unskilled than those who self-promote (O'Donnell et al., 2016). • Celebrity chefs on cooking television shows who self-deprecate are seen as humorous, authentic, and relatable (Matwick & Matwick, 2017). • Politicians who humorously self-deprecate are perceived as more likeable than those who ridicule their competitors (Baumgartner, Morris, & Coleman, 2018). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEOs who humblebrag appear less credible, reducing investors' willingness to invest, compared to those who either directly brag or make modest statements (Grant, Hodge, & Sinha, 2018). • Participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk perceive humblebraggers as less sincere and likable than who straightforwardly brag, viewing the former as manipulative for disguising self-promotion within a humble statement (Sezer, Gino, & Norton, 2018). • When evaluating social media posts, people admire straightforward bragging more than humblebragging (Doty, 2019). • Experts, such as frequent travellers, who humblebrag in online reviews are perceived more favourably than novices, as the latter are seen as insincere (Chen, Liu, & Mattila, 2020). • When endorsing a brand, influencers who humblebrag are seen as more irritating than those who brag straightforwardly, leading to negative brand attitudes. In contrast, humblebragging by celebrities is seen as entertaining, leading to positive brand attitudes (Paramita & Septianto, 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-sided messaging helps college students in coping with stronger negative arguments and enhances the believability of positive information (McGuire, 1961). • Two-sided messaging enhances advertisement persuasiveness by addressing counterarguments and increasing the credibility of positive aspects (Bither, 1977). • Two-sided messaging, which includes negative as well as positive information about a food product in an advertisement, results in more positive consumer ratings of that product compared to one-sided messaging that only consists of positive information (Etgar & Goodwin 1982). • Two-sided messaging in advertisements is more effective at increasing evaluations and purchase intentions among consumers with a neutral or negative prior attitude than those with a positive prior attitude (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994). • Two-sided messaging in advertisements facilitates favourable inferences about positive product attributes, particularly when consumers have more time to process and there is logical connection
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			<p>between the negative and positive attributes (such as tiny space and cozy atmosphere) (Bohner, et al., 2003).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-sided messaging in advertisements enhances brand credibility by incorporating negative information, making it appear more truthful and novel, which increases consumers' attention towards the advertisement (Eisend, 2007). • Two-sided messaging in health-related campaigns about binge-drinking reduces binge-drinking intentions among teenagers, particularly among those who are highly invested in the issue (Cornelis et al., 2014). • Influencers using two-sided messaging in social media marketing are perceived as more authentic, enhancing followers' word-of-mouth intentions (Lee & Johnson, 2022). • Politicians who use two-sided messaging in their arguments about wearing masks during the pandemic are perceived as having greater expertise, integrity, and trustworthiness (Hendriks et al., 2023).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk perceive strangers who self-deprecate as having lower self-esteem than those who self-promote (Critcher et al. 2018). • Self-deprecatingly and humorously admitting shortcomings in a job interview enhances perceptions of a job candidate's warmth and competence (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019). • Self-deprecating responses to compliments in an online dating platform increase a potential partner's likeability (DeIGreco & Denes, 2020). • Self-deprecating captions on Instagram are perceived as more humorous and less arrogant than self-praising ones (Austin, Constabile, & Smith, 2022). • Self-deprecating about a non-critical product attribute in an advertisement enhances a brand's social attractiveness, reduces consumer skepticism, increases brand trust, and decreases advertisement avoidance (Kale & Sayin, 2024). 		

<p>Theoretical Contributions of This Research</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This paper contributes to the marketing and branding literature by establishing BCSNM as a distinct and novel construct. 2. This paper conceptually distinguishes between three sub-types of this construct, i.e., self-deprecation, two-sided messaging, and humblebragging using theories from linguistics and persuasive communication. 3. This paper provides an explanation for the conflicting findings across psychology, organizational behavior, communication, marketing, political science, and linguistics by identifying involvement level as a determinant of accurate evaluations of self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging.
<p>Implications for Theory</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This paper challenges the prevalent emphasis on positive messaging in marketing by discussing the circumstances under which self-directed negative messages can elicit positive consumer responses. 2. This paper presents a robust agenda for future research, offering clear directions along with research questions and theoretical rationale for scholars to explore.
<p>Implications for Practice</p>	<p>This paper explains how consumer involvement influences the interpretation of BCSNMs, providing valuable insights for marketing managers on which BCSNMs might be more effective depending on the anticipated level of consumer involvement.</p>

Monosemous and polysemous messages necessitate varying levels of involvement in processing, as polysemous messages require more cognitive effort to determine the correct interpretation. Consequently, the required level of involvement for each BCSNM will vary depending on the nature of the message.

1.4. Elaboration Likelihood Model and Processing of Monosemic and Polysemous BCSNMs

The distinction between monosemous (single-meaning) and polysemous (multi-meaning) BCSNMs affects the cognitive effort required for comprehension, with polysemous messages demanding greater involvement to determine the intended meaning (Dancygier & Sweester, 2014). Given this, we use the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to explain how involvement influences consumers' evaluation of brands utilizing BCSNMs. ELM is dual-process theory that explains how consumer involvement determines whether information is processed deeply, with greater elaboration, or superficially, with lower elaboration (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Involvement refers to the cognitive effort individuals devote to processing a message (Kitchen et al., 2014; Petty & Briñol, 2011; Swasy & Munch, 1985). In marketing, it reflects the mental and emotional effort consumers invest in processing purchase-related information (Schumann et al., 2012). According to the ELM, consumers process information via two routes: the central route and the peripheral route (Petty et al., 1983). Highly involved consumers process information via the central route, carefully evaluating the message content and evidence in the brand communication (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Briñol, 2011). Conversely, low-involvement consumers take the peripheral route, relying on cues unrelated to the message content like images (Simmonds et al., 2020), music

(MacInnis & Park, 1991), source attractiveness or credibility (Cheng & Ho, 2015), and affective reactions (Park & Young, 1986). For instance, Cheung and colleagues (2012) assessed the persuasiveness of online reviews and discovered that low-involvement consumers were more influenced by peripheral features, such as the credibility of the reviewers measured via their ranking and ratings. On the other hand, high-involvement consumers were persuaded by the substantive content of the review, focusing on the clarity and quality of the arguments. In contrast, high-involvement consumers were persuaded by more objective and content-related factors, such as argument clarity and quality (Cheung et al., 2012).

A related model that explains consumer message processing is the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) (Chaiken, 1980), which, like ELM, proposes a dual-route framework. HSM distinguishes between systematic processing, where individuals analyze information in detail, and heuristic processing, where individuals rely on cognitive shortcuts to form judgments. Systematic processing in HSM is analogous to central-route processing in ELM, and heuristic processing resembles peripheral-route processing (Chen et al., 1996). However, unlike ELM, which assumes consumers follow either the central or peripheral route, HSM allows for concurrent processing, meaning consumers may use both heuristic and systematic approaches simultaneously (Ryu & Kim, 2015; Trumbo, 2002). While both models explain how consumers process messages, our focus is on how involvement levels differentially influence consumer responses to messages depending on whether they are monosemous or polysemous. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) identifies consumer involvement as a key factor in determining whether individuals engage in central or peripheral information processing. Therefore, we adopt ELM as our theoretical foundation, as it provides a clearer framework for examining how consumer involvement influences the interpretation and evaluation of polysemous and monosemous BCSNMs.

Our classification of BCSNMs as either single-meaning (i.e., monosemous) or multi-meaning (i.e., polysemous) suggests that the nature of the message dictates the cognitive effort required for accurate comprehension. Specifically, we distinguish BCSNMs by whether the self-directed negative message is paired with explicit positivity (as in two-sided messaging) or implicit positivity (as in humblebragging). We also consider whether the positive information is implicitly embedded in the message (as in humblebragging) or necessitates deeper cognitive processing for consumers to infer (as in self-deprecation). Understanding the figurative meanings in complex communications requires a higher degree of cognitive involvement from consumers (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to conceptualize how consumer involvement affects the interpretation of both monosemous and polysemous BCSNMs.

1.4.1. Key Factors Influencing Consumer Involvement:

Extant research suggests that consumer involvement is influenced by three key factors: motivation, time, and ability (Boisvert & Ashill, 2011; Petty & Briñol, 2011; Tung et al., 2017). Motivation reflects consumers' willingness to engage with a message based on its importance or personal relevance. Consumers process messages more deeply when they align with their interests (Tung et al., 2017). For instance, those who feel a strong attachment to a brand—particularly individuals experiencing brand love or identifying with a brand—invest greater cognitive effort in evaluating its messages (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Innovative, novel, and unconventional brands spark curiosity, leading consumers to devote greater cognitive effort to processing their messages (Boisvert & Ashill, 2011). Similarly, consumers' involvement levels increase when purchases involve high financial, social, or functional risks (e.g., cars, real estate, education; Drescher et al., 2014). However, when purchases are perceived as unimportant (e.g., low-cost items such as bread, detergent, trash bags), consumers are less motivated to process information deeply,

as a poor choice carries minimal consequences and does not significantly impact their lives (Pansari & Kumar, 2016). When purchase decisions are routine and involve familiar brands and products, consumers engage in low-involvement processing (Petty & Briñol, 2011). As they have already processed the information in previous encounters, allowing prior knowledge and past experiences to guide automated decision-making instead of requiring greater elaboration (Pansari & Kumar, 2016).

While motivation determines whether consumers intend to engage with a message, ability influences whether they can process it effectively. Consumer ability can be shaped by both individual differences and contextual factors. Consumers' cognitive capacity, defined as the mental resources available for information processing may affect their ability to analyze complex messages (Haugtvedt et al., 1992). Consumers who experience cognitive depletion after engaging in mentally demanding tasks have fewer resources to devote to subsequent purchase evaluations (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Research in marketing also shows that consumers feel more cognitively depleted in the evening compared to the afternoon or morning, reducing their capacity for high elaboration during that time (Yang et al., 2022). Additionally, cognitive capacity declines with age (Franco, 2023; Kremen et al., 2019; Lenehan et al., 2015; Sorce, 1995), affecting consumers' ability to process complex information. On the other hand, consumers with a longer attention span and higher working memory are more capable of engaging deeply in message processing (Cowan et al., 2005). Similarly, consumers with higher advertising literacy—the ability to understand advertising strategies and their persuasive intent—are more capable of engaging in deeper processing (De Jans et al., 2017).

Contextual factors, such environmental distractions, such as cluttered retail spaces or complex online interfaces, may also hinder consumers' ability to elaborate on messages (Anderson & Peitz, 2023). Similarly, media multitasking, like scrolling through social media

while watching television, reduces involvement with both media and diminishes the ability to process messages effectively (Garaus, 2020). Attention-grabbing appeals, such as humor or sexually suggestive imagery, capture attention momentarily (Yoon & Tinkham, 2013; Putrevu, 2008) but may divert cognitive resources away from the core message, reducing consumers' ability for deeper processing.

Even when consumers are motivated and capable of processing a message, time constraints can impact their level of involvement. When consumers are rushed or under pressure, they tend to engage in lower-involvement processing, relying on heuristics rather than deep elaboration. This tendency is especially evident in time-sensitive situations, such as seasonal offers (e.g., Starbucks' Holiday Flavoured Menu at Christmas), limited-time discounts (e.g., airline tickets and vacation packages), and promotional windows like 'Happy Hour' deals in hospitality settings (Barton et al., 2022). The anticipation of regret from missing out on an expiring deal can pressure consumers into making quick decisions, often bypassing thorough evaluation (Abendroth & Diehl, 2006). In such scenarios, consumers rely on simple cues such as brand familiarity, price discounts, or social proof—where they look to product ratings, bestseller labels, or customer reviews to guide their choices. Conversely, when consumers experience a surplus of free time, they engage in more careful decision-making (Chung et al., 2022). For instance, shoppers who have extra time while browsing online or waiting in a store are more likely to scrutinize product details, compare alternatives, and evaluate messages with greater attention, leading to more deliberate choices and reduced reliance on mental shortcuts.

Next, we outline our predictions on how consumer involvement may influence brand evaluations across different types of BCSNMs.

1.5. Research Propositions Regarding Consumers' Evaluations of Brands

Employing BCSNMs:

Brand communications play a pivotal role in shaping consumers' overall brand attitudes by influencing their judgments, perceptions, and beliefs based on the meaning they derive from the message (Brown & Stayman, 1992; Puntoni et al., 2010). When brand communications convey only a literal meaning or both literal and figurative meanings, their interpretation depends on consumers' involvement levels. We posit that high-involvement consumers are more likely to discern the figurative meaning of polysemous communications, whereas low-involvement consumers, who process information superficially via the peripheral route, tend to focus only on the literal meaning. In contrast, involvement level may have a less pronounced impact on monosemous communications, as these messages require only a literal interpretation. This section presents propositions on how consumer involvement influences brand evaluations in the context of BCSNMs.

1.5.1. Consumers' evaluation of self-deprecation in brand communications.

Our framework identifies self-deprecation as a polysemous brand communication, whereby its literal meaning is either accepted as it is or interpreted to infer additional figurative meanings. Drawing on the ELM (Petty et al., 1983; Rice, Kelting, & Lutz, 2012), we propose that low-involvement consumers, due to their limited engagement in deeper processing, are more likely to accept the literal negative meaning of a self-deprecating message at face value. Extant research has identified instances where accepting self-deprecation at face value results in negative evaluations (Critcher et al., 2018; O'Donnell et al., 2016; Zell & Exline, 2010). Such an interpretation may create expectations of subpar performance in the self-deprecated attribute, consequently leading to negative evaluations.

In contrast, high-involvement consumers are motivated to scrutinize all aspects of a message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). They can expend the cognitive effort required to discern the figurative meaning of self-deprecating polysemous messages (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010; Zúñiga, Torres, & Niculescu, 2015). Such consumers may critically contemplate why a brand would employ self-deprecation rather than self-promotion, especially in a context where brands typically aim to impress

consumers (Eisend, 2022). For example, self-deprecation in advertising may be perceived as a humorous departure from the norm of self-promotion, creating a discrepancy with consumer expectations (Speck, 1991). High-involvement consumers would actively process the message content, resolve such discrepancies and thereby generate explanations for the self-deprecation by deriving positive inferences about the brand or the product. Further, self-deprecation positions the brand as honest and modest (Kale & Sayin, 2024), which are virtues coveted by high-involvement consumers (Petty & Briñol, 2011). They may conclude that the brand acknowledges a shortcoming on a certain product attribute, because it might be compensating with other positive but unmentioned product attributes. The positive meaning inferred by high-involvement consumers may lead to positive evaluations of brands that utilize self-deprecating brand communications.

PI: Low-involvement (vs. high-involvement) consumers will more negatively (positively) evaluate a brand that employs self-deprecating brand communications.

1.5.2. Consumers' evaluation of humblebragging in brand communications.

Humblebragging is another polysemous mode of communication. Its literal meaning implies humility, while its figurative meaning suggests bragging. The literal meaning of a polysemous communication is straightforward and easily accessible, while the figurative meaning remains concealed and presents a greater cognitive challenge (Horvat, Bolognesi, & Lahiri, 2021). Comprehending the figurative meaning of a polysemous communication requires substantial cognitive effort (Zúñiga et al., 2015), and low-involvement consumers may not engage in such elaborate information processing (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010). Thus, we suggest that low-involvement consumers will understand only the literal meaning of a humblebragging BCSNM and overlook its figurative meaning. Literally, humblebragging statements suggest a modest, humble, and self-critical self-image (Sezer et al., 2018). Low-involvement consumers may focus on the overt humility or modesty of a brand that utilizes a humblebragging BCSNM and confer it with positive evaluations.

Contrarily, high-involvement consumers are likely to discern the subtle attempt at covert self-promotion concealed in the literal modesty of a humblebrag. Research has shown that when a humblebrag is recognized as an attempt at bragging, it would lead to negative consequences such as reduced perceptions of authenticity (Brooks, 2017), likeability, and sincerity (Sezer et al., 2018) of the humblebragger. Highly involved consumers may recognize the figurative meaning of humblebragging messages and interpret the apparent self-criticism as the brand's intentional attempt at manipulating their perceptions (Sezer, 2022). This may evoke annoyance (Eldin, 2020), skepticism (Cotte et al., 2005), and frustration (Klenk, 2020) toward the brand, leading consumers to evaluate it negatively.

P2: Low-involvement (vs. high-involvement) consumers will more positively (negatively) evaluate a brand that employs humblebragging brand communications.

1.5.3. Consumers' evaluation of two-sided messaging in brand communications.

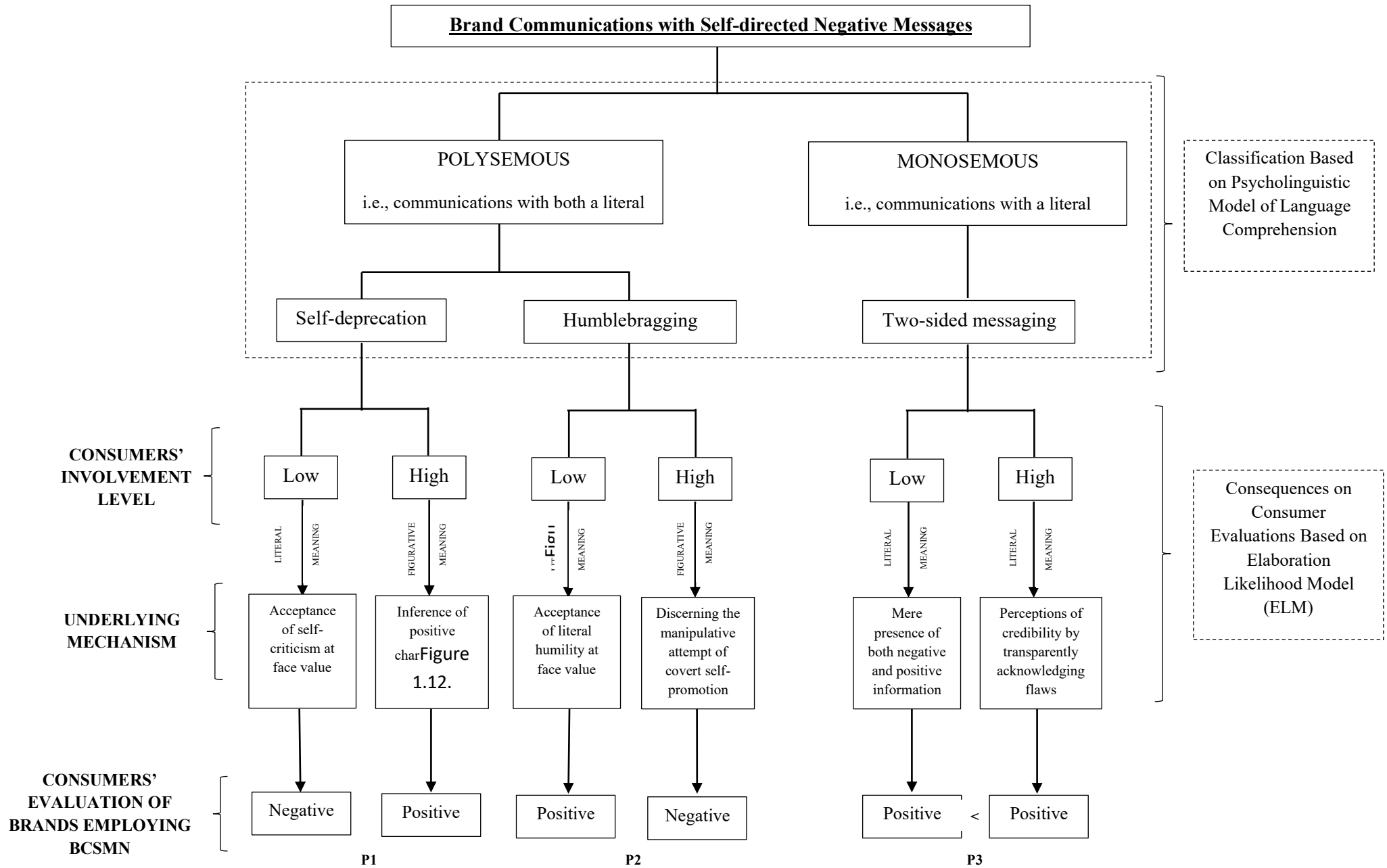
Two-sided messaging strategically incorporates negative information alongside positive claims to promote a brand (Eisend, 2006). Unlike humblebragging, where self-promotion is concealed within self-deprecation, two-sided messages explicitly convey both self-promoting and self-deprecating aspects (Lee & Johnson, 2022). Our framework identifies two-sided messaging as monosemous and thus, we propose that both low- and high-involvement consumers will interpret the literal meaning of two-sided messages. Nevertheless, highly involved consumers, who dedicate more cognitive resources to process a two-sided message, are likely to better appreciate the straightforward acknowledgment of a product or brand's flaws (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Etgar & Goodwin, 1982). These messages, by openly admitting imperfections, not only convey transparency but also enhance the credibility of the communicator (Eisend, 2007; Hernandez et al., 2023; Hunt & Smith, 1987; Rucker et al., 2008). Since the credibility of a communicator is an important factor for

high-involvement consumers (Petty & Briñol, 2011), they may evaluate the brands that use two-sided messages more positively than low-involvement consumers. According to the no-pain no-gain theory (Cheng, Mukhopadhyay, & Schrift, 2017), consumers may view negative product attributes in a two-sided message (e.g., the unpleasant taste of Buckley's cough syrup) as an essential trade-off for superior performance (Kramer et al., 2012; Saint Clair & Cunha Jr, 2024).

P3: Both low- and high-involvement consumers will positively evaluate brands that employ two-sided messages. However, high-involvement (vs. low-involvement) consumers will evaluate such brands more positively.

Our predictions highlight that variations in consumers' involvement levels will distinctly influence their evaluations of BCSNMs (See Figure 1.2 for the conceptual framework). Thus, understanding how monosemous and polysemous BCSNMs are distinctly processed by consumers is essential for aligning brand communications with desired brand outcomes and mitigating unintended consumer responses.

Figure 1.4. Conceptual Framework and Propositions



1.6. Directions for Future Research

In this research we offer propositions regarding how involvement levels influence consumers' evaluations of brands employing BCSNMs. Given the nascent and underexplored domain of self-critical brand communications, several research questions remain. Future marketing scholars can build on our work by empirically testing our propositions, comparing different BCSNMs, and examining key consumer-, brand-, and context-related factors that might influence our propositions regarding consumer responses toward the BCSNMs. Table 1.2 presents a summary of key future research directions along with potential research questions.

1.6.1. Direction 1: Empirical Examination of the Comparative Effects of BCSNMs

This paper explores how consumers cognitively interpret and evaluate BCSNMs, emphasizing the role of involvement level and message type in this process. While these insights provide a conceptual foundation, further empirical research is needed to test these propositions. Qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, could offer valuable insights into how consumers interpret BCSNMs and the emotional responses they elicit. Although cognitive evaluations shape how consumers process and assess brand messages, emotional responses can drive other downstream outcomes, including brand attachment, loyalty, word-of-mouth advocacy, social media engagement, and repeat purchase decisions. Research suggests that strong consumer-brand relationships are built primarily through emotional connections rather than purely cognitive assessments (Batra et al., 2012; Schmitt, 2012). Future studies could examine whether consumers experience positive emotions—such as delight, surprise, or affection—when interpreting the literal or figurative meanings of monosemous and polysemous BCSNMs. Empirically investigating these emotional responses could provide deeper insights into their influence on consumer behavior.

Additionally, experimental methods, including eye-tracking, reaction time measures, and neurophysiological tools (e.g., fMRI, EEG), could enhance our understanding of both the cognitive and affective dimensions of consumer responses to BCSNMs.

We focus exclusively on brands that self-criticize in their communications. However, how consumer responses differ between these brands and those employing other-directed criticism—such as negative messages aimed at competitor brands or consumers—remains unexplored. Future research could compare consumer evaluations of BCSNMs with those featuring other-directed negative messages, such as sarcastic, ironic, comparative, or consumer-insulting advertising (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996; Sun et al., 2023). Research in interpersonal communication suggests that individuals who self-criticize are perceived as more likeable than those who criticize others (Baumgartner et al., 2018). It would be valuable to investigate whether a brand using self-criticism is evaluated more positively than a brand that criticizes others. Recent marketing research has introduced a new phenomenon, brands playfully teasing their consumers, which fosters a sense of closeness and strengthens brand-consumer relationships (Oba et al., 2024). For example, Ryanair humorously mocks its customers for being “too poor” to afford premium airlines rather than criticizing itself for being a budget airline. Future research could investigate whether and when self-criticism through BCSNMs is a more effective strategy than playfully criticizing consumers.

1.6.2. Direction 2: Consumer-related Factors

Consumer responses to BCSNMs are unlikely to be uniform, as individual differences in psychological traits, cultural orientations, and needs can affect how these messages are evaluated (Batra & Keller, 2016; Bridger & Wood, 2017). Accordingly, future research may examine whether certain consumer-related factors could amplify or mitigate effectiveness of self-deprecating, humblebragging, or two-sided messaging.

One such factor is the need for uniqueness (NFU), defined as the extent to which consumers desire to differentiate themselves from others through their choices (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977; Tian et al., 2001). High-NFU consumers are drawn to brands that employ unconventional and non-conforming communication strategies (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). Since self-deprecation and humblebragging deviate from traditional advertising norms, consumers with a strong NFU may evaluate such brand messages more positively. However, as two-sided messaging has become increasingly mainstream (Eisend, 2006), it may no longer satisfy high-NFU consumers' desire for distinction, potentially reducing its effectiveness for this segment. Future researchers may examine to what extent would a consumer's NFU affect their responses to different types of BCSNMs. Are consumers with high NFU more likely to favour unconventional communication styles like self-deprecation or humblebragging as compared to two-sided messaging?

Consumers' differences in their need for authenticity (NFA), defined as their preference for sincerity and transparency in brand interactions (Bartsch, Zeugner-Roth, & Katsikeas, 2022; Morhart et al., 2015), may also influence how they evaluate BCSNMs. Consumers with high NFA value honesty (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018) and are likely to prefer brands that engage in self-deprecation or two-sided messaging, as these strategies convey openness and vulnerability. In contrast, humblebragging—combining self-promotion with artificial modesty—may be perceived as deceptive (Sezer et al., 2018). Given the increasing demand for authenticity, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z (Pradhan, 2023), future research may explore which type of BCSNMs would be more positively perceived by consumers with NFA.

Consumers with a high need for status (NFS) seek brands that signal prestige, exclusivity, and social dominance (Han et al., 2010). Humblebragging may align with their preferences, as it enables brands to project status while maintaining social acceptability

(Sezer et al., 2018). However, self-deprecation and two-sided messaging involve acknowledging flaws, which may be seen as diminishing a brand's prestige and competence (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). Marketing scholars may explore whether high NFS consumers would be more receptive to humblebragging brand communications, and view self-deprecation and two-sided messaging as detrimental to brand image.

Finally, consumers' cultural orientation may impact their responses to BCSNMs. Consumers from collectivistic cultures, which value humility and social harmony (Hofstede, 2011; Javalagi & Newman, 2024), may prefer self-deprecation and two-sided messaging due to their perceived sincerity. In contrast, individualistic consumers, who prioritize achievement and self-promotion (Kurman, 2001; Oyserman et al., 2008), may have different evaluations. Future research might help to understand how cultural orientation affects consumers' evaluations of brands that employ various types of BCSNMs.

1.6.3. Direction 3: Brand-related Factors

Consumers' prior brand perceptions can influence their evaluations of different types of BCSNMs. Consumers typically expect brands to communicate in ways that align with their existing perceptions of the brand (Fritz et al., 2017). These expectations are shaped by various factors, including brand type, personality, and other elements (Aaker et al., 2004; Batra & Keller, 2016).

Brand personality, defined by traits like sincerity, competence, ruggedness, excitement, and sophistication (Aaker, 1997), may moderate the effectiveness of self-critical brand communications. For instance, sincere brands (e.g., Patagonia) that emphasize honesty and transparency may benefit from self-deprecating or two-sided messaging, as these approaches align with consumer expectations of humility and openness. However, humblebragging may backfire, as consumers perceive it as insincere and self-serving (Sezer et al., 2018). Sophisticated brands (e.g., Cartier, Burberry) rely on prestige and exclusivity,

may find humblebragging more congruent with their image, allowing them to subtly reinforce their status (Sung et al., 2015). Marketing practitioners can gain valuable insights from studies that examine which brand personalities best align with different types of BCSNMs and how perceived fit influences consumer responses.

Similarly, brand archetypes - the core values and narratives of a brand (Spangenberg, 2021), may influence how consumers evaluate BCSNMs. “Caregiver” brands (e.g., Avis) emphasize reliability and service. For such brands, consumers may prefer self-deprecation and two-sided messaging, as they enhance credibility, aligning with the brand narrative. However, “Hero” brands (e.g., Nike, Tesla), which project ambition and dominance, may face negative evaluations if they engage in self-criticism, as it could dilute their aspirational image. Likewise, “Ruler” brands (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Rolex), associated with power and exclusivity, may be penalized for displaying vulnerability through self-critical communication. It would be interesting to test how the congruence between the brand archetype and the type of BCSNM affect consumer evaluations.

Consumer responses to BCSNMs may vary depending on whether the brand is global or local. Global brands, such as Apple and Nike, have a worldwide presence, while local brands, like Tanishq Jewellery from India or Bimba y Lola from Spain, are rooted in specific regions (Gürhan-Canli et al., 2018). Global brands are typically associated with higher quality, credibility, prestige, and status, leading consumers to expect these attributes (Mandler, Bartsch, & Han, 2021; Sayin et al., 2024). In contrast, local brands are closely tied to local cultures, reflecting local values and lifestyles (De Vries & Fennis, 2019; Xie et al., 2015). This connection enables local brands to build emotional bonds with consumers, fostering trust (De Vries & Fennis, 2019). Marketing scholars may test how these established associations may shape consumer responses to BCSNMs. Do consumers expect greater transparency and sincerity from local brands and therefore positively evaluate self-

deprecation? Would self-deprecation backfire for global brands, as it conflicts with the high expectations they have set? Is humblebragging from global brands perceived as more socially acceptable and therefore, more positively evaluated?

1.6.4. Direction 4: Context-related Factors

Consumer evaluations of brand communications are influenced by the broader context in which the message is delivered (Park et al., 2023; Reich & Pittman, 2020). The platform on which a BCSNM is broadcasted, such as TV programs, magazines, social media, may shape consumer expectations regarding brand messaging styles. For instance, social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok emphasize emotional relatability and informal engagement, while professional platforms like LinkedIn are more focused on status signalling, where displays of competence and success are better received (Reich & Pittman, 2020; Marder et al., 2024). Accordingly, the specific context of the media, such as the type of TV program or magazine in which an advertisement appears, can impact consumer responses. Future research could explore how platform-specific associations influence consumer reactions to different types of BCSNMs.

Another factor that may influence consumer responses is the source of the brand's self-critical messaging – whether it is delivered by a human spokesperson or an AI-driven tool. AI-powered communicators, such as chatbots, virtual assistants (e.g., ChatGPT, Siri, Alexa), automated customer service agents, and virtual influencers are increasingly used in brand-consumer interactions (Bergner, Hildebrand, & Häubl, 2023; Luo et al., 2019; Sands et al., 2022). While AI offers efficiency and personalization, consumers still expect warmth, emotional intelligence, and authenticity in brand communications (Gnewuch et al., 2024). As a result, AI entities are usually designed to closely mimic human emotions (Waytz & Norton, 2014). However, prior research suggests that when AI-entities mimic human behavior too closely, it can create discomfort, aversion, and disengagement in consumers

(Kätsyri et al., 2015; Gutuleac et al., 2024). Given that self-critical messaging, particularly self-deprecation, relies on human-like traits such as humility and vulnerability (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019), its effectiveness when delivered by AI-powered communicators remains an open question. Future research could examine how consumers respond to AI-generated self-critical messages compared to those delivered by human spokespersons of the brand and whether different forms of BCSNMs (e.g., self-deprecation, humblebragging, two-sided messaging) vary in their perceived appropriateness depending on the source. Similarly, as virtual influencers—AI-generated brand endorsers with human-like personas—gain popularity (Shepherd, 2024), an intriguing question arises: Do consumers respond to BCSNMs differently when they are conveyed by virtual influencers rather than real human influencers? Since virtual influencers lack genuine personal experiences (Sands et al., 2022), it remains unclear whether self-critical messaging, which relies on perceived authenticity, resonates with consumers in the same way. Investigating these questions could provide deeper insights into the evolving role of AI in brand communications.

1.6.5. Longitudinal Effects of BCSNMs

While prior research suggests that self-critical messaging may enhance trust in the short term (Kale & Sayin, 2024), its long-term impact remains unclear. Future studies may examine whether exposure to BCSNMs over time strengthens brand trust, fosters deeper brand relationships, or contributes to advertisement fatigue and diminishing returns. Given that self-directed criticism deviates from traditional advertising norms, it may be more memorable than conventional brand communications, potentially enhancing advertisement recall and long-term brand equity. Further, brands that infrequently incorporate self-critical messaging within a broader marketing mix may maintain novelty and credibility, while brands that overuse this strategy may risk desensitizing consumers or weakening brand

equity. Marketing researchers may employ longitudinal experimental designs and implicit memory measures (e.g., brand recall tasks) to assess whether repeated exposure to different types of BCSNMs affects brand perceptions and purchase behavior over extended periods.

1.6.6. Direction 6: Capturing Marketers' Perspective:

Finally, while the current research focuses on consumer responses, the managerial motivations, risk assessments, and strategic considerations behind adopting such messaging remain to be explored. Future research may examine brand managers' motivations and strategic considerations when employing self-directed negative messaging. It may be worthwhile understanding the risks and rewards that managers perceive in using such communications, as well as how they predict consumer reactions. This might help understand whether brand managers recognize the varying complexity of different forms of self-critical messaging—such as self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging—and whether they strategically select these based on brand positioning, target audience, or industry norms. Do marketers view polysemous BCSNMs as riskier due to their potential for misinterpretation? Qualitative interviews and surveys with brand managers across industries could offer practical perspectives that complement consumer-focused empirical studies.

Table 1.2 presents an outline of diverse research questions designed to guide future empirical and conceptual investigations to attain a comprehensive understanding of consumer evaluation of BCSNMs.

Table 1.2. Questions for Future Research

<i>Research Direction</i>	<i>Relevance of Research Direction</i>	<i>Research questions to be explored empirically or conceptually</i>	<i>Potential Contribution</i>
<i>Empirical Examination of the Comparative Effects of BCSNMs</i>	Understanding how different types of BCSNMs influence consumer evaluations will help marketers determine the most effective strategy.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what extent does consumers' involvement level influence evaluations of different types of BCSNMs? 2. How do self-deprecating, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging in brand communications distinctly affect consumers' emotional responses? 3. Do consumers experience positive emotions, such as delight or surprise, when interpreting the figurative meanings of polysemous BCSNMs? 4. How do self-deprecating, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging in brand communications distinctly affect consumer behavior, such as word-of-mouth advocacy, willingness to pay, and behaviors? 5. How do consumers differ in their evaluations of BCSNMs and those with <i>competition-directed</i> negative messages? 6. How do consumers differ in their evaluations of BCSNMs and those with <i>consumer-directed</i> negative messages? 	Provides empirical validation of the proposed framework by testing how involvement affects consumer evaluations and how BCSNMs compare to other brand communications.
<i>Consumer-related Factors</i>	Exploring how individual differences in needs, personality traits, and cultural backgrounds shape consumer evaluations.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. To what extent does a consumer's need for uniqueness affect their evaluations of self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging? 	Offers insights into consumer segmentation, helping brands tailor messaging

<p><i>Brand-related Factors</i></p>	<p>Examining how various brand types affect responses to BCSNMs.</p>	<p>8. To what extent does a consumer's need for authenticity affect their evaluations of self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging?</p> <p>9. To what extent does a consumer's need for status affect their evaluations of self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging?</p> <p>10. To what extent does cultural background impact consumers' interpretation and evaluation of BCSNMs?</p> <p>11. How does the fit between a brand's personality (e.g., sincere, sophisticated, exciting, competent, and rugged) and the type of BCSNM (self-deprecation, humblebragging, two-sided messaging) affect consumer evaluations?</p> <p>12. How does the congruence between a brand's archetype (e.g., 'Jester', 'Caregiver', 'Hero', and 'Ruler') and the type of BCSNMs (self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging) influence consumers evaluations?</p> <p>13. Do self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging have a distinct impact on consumer evaluations when utilized by global brands in comparison to local brands?</p>	<p>based on psychological and cultural traits.</p> <p>Contributes to branding strategies by identifying which BCSNMs align with different brand identities and market positioning.</p>
	<p><i>Context-related Factors</i></p>	<p>Investigating how different communication contexts influence consumer responses to different types of BCSNMs.</p>	<p>14. How does the congruence between the type of BCSNM and the communication platform (e.g., social media, professional networks, traditional advertising) on which they are shared influence consumer evaluations?</p> <p>15. To what extent does the source of self-critical message (human spokesperson vs. AI-entity) affect consumer evaluations?</p>

<i>Long-term Effects</i>	Assessing the enduring effects of different types of BCSNMs will provide insights into how often these messages should be used.	<p>of self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging in brand communications?</p> <p>16. How does repeated exposure to self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging affect consumer engagement and evaluations over an extended period of time?</p> <p>17. To what extent does repeated exposure to self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging affect brand recall?</p>	Helps brands optimize message frequency and adapt their self-critical communication strategies for sustained impact.
	<i>Capturing Marketers' Perspectives</i>	Understanding marketers' motivations, risk perceptions, and strategic decisions regarding using BCSNMs.	<p>18. How do brand managers perceive the risks and rewards associated with self-critical messaging?</p> <p>19. What factors influence brand managers' adoption of self-critical messaging strategies?</p>

1.7. General Discussion.

Given the considerable influence of communications on shaping consumers' brand perceptions, the use of BCSNMs may appear counterproductive to effective brand promotion. This research aims to comprehend how consumers evaluate BCSNMs and contends that consumer assessments may hinge on a) their level of involvement during the communication processing and consequently b) the meaning they derive from the communication. We systematically distinguish between BCSNMs and classify them as monosemous or polysemous communications. We introduce a framework grounded in the Psycholinguistic Model of Language Comprehension (Elman, 2009; Li & Joanisse, 2021; Treiman et al., 2003) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This framework explains how consumer involvement levels may impact their interpretation of monosemous and polysemous BCSNMs, subsequently shaping their brand evaluations. By exploring the complex relationship between consumers' involvement levels and their interpretation of BCSNMs, we offer propositions regarding how these dynamics influence brand evaluations. Finally, we offer a robust research agenda with twenty-one future research questions that accounts for various consumer, brand, and context-related factors, providing a comprehensive foundation for marketing scholars to investigate the construct of BCSNMs and its implications for consumer evaluations.

1.7.1. Theoretical Contributions.

This research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we present a novel theoretical framework offering a conceptual differentiation of self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging, which may be otherwise conflated, and predict how such conceptual differences may affect consumer evaluations. Second, we integrate findings from social psychology (Sezer et al., 2018; Speer, 2019), organization behavior (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; Grant et al., 2018), interpersonal communication (Allen, 1991;

Austin et al., 2022; Critcher et al., 2018; DelGreco & Denes, 2020; O'Donnell et al., 2016; Wittels, 2012), marketing (Eisend, 2006; Etgar & Goodwin, 1982; Hunt & Smith, 1987; Rucker et al., 2008), and linguistics (Elman, 2009; Li & Joannisse, 2021) to enrich our understanding of BCSNMs. Existing marketing research, which applies linguistic theories categorizes communications based on whether they are informational or emotional (Xiang et al., 2019), whether they are negatively or positively valenced (Carnevale et al., 2017), and whether the language is foreign or local (Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2019). We contribute to this research by categorizing communications based on the nature of the message. Specifically, we apply the Psycholinguistic Model of Language Comprehension (Elman, 2009; Li & Joannisse, 2021) to classify BCSNMs based on whether they are monosemous (single-meaning) or polysemous (multi-meaning). We use this classification to explain how variations in the meanings inferred by consumers from BCSNMs shape their evaluations.

Extant literature provides conflicting results regarding consumers' responses to self-critical communications. Some studies highlight positive consequences, such as increased likeability (DelGreco & Denes, 2020), warmth (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019), credibility (Bohner, 2003). Conversely, others suggest negative consequences, including perception of low self-esteem (Critcher et al., 2018) and competence (Zell and Exline (2010)). Brands might perceive the use of BCSNMs as a risky communications strategy due to these contradictory findings. Building on the Psycholinguistic Model of Language Comprehension and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), we suggest that whether consumers react negatively or positively to BCSNMs may depend on consumers' involvement level and the nature of the communication's meaning. Thus, we contribute to the ELM literature by demonstrating that the nature of the communications (monosemous or polysemous) might affect individuals' ability to process information, necessitating high involvement for accurate interpretation (Angst & Agarwal, 2009; Keskin et al., 2017; Park, Wei, & Lee,

2023; Shahab et al., 2021). Finally, we propose a comprehensive research agenda that aims to enrich marketing literature by encouraging deeper exploration of BCSNMs by scholars.

1.7.2. Managerial Implications.

This research offers several valuable insights for marketing practitioners. Our framework emphasizes the importance of thoughtful selection and strategic use of BCSNMs in marketing campaigns, considering their different effects on consumers' evaluations, based on the expected level of consumer involvement. Insights from this research could be relevant across various consumer-brand touchpoints. For example, marketing managers can strategically utilize BCSNMs to project an image of brand transparency, a virtue highly esteemed by consumers (Schroeder, 2020). Marketing managers can incorporate BCSNMs in their influencer marketing strategies, tailoring the communication based on various influencer types. In particular, micro- and nano-influencers, characterized by dedicated niche followers deeply engaged with their content (Himmelboim & Golan, 2023), could employ self-deprecation and two-sided messaging more effectively. It is advisable for them to steer clear of humblebragging, as high-involvement consumers closely following these influencers might perceive such behavior as insincere, potentially impacting their evaluations.

Brand communications typically serve the brand's self-interest (Fisk & Grove, 1996), often adopting a self-aggrandizing approach to showcase positive attributes (Eisend, 2006). A brand's decision to use BCSNMs may be viewed as a commitment by the brand to embrace open, transparent, fair, and responsible practices, with an effort to communicate these values to their target market (Ferrell et al., 2013; Gauzente & Ranchhod, 2001). It is crucial for marketing managers to employ BCSNMs ethically, with a sincere intention to transparently communicate product shortcomings, thereby contributing to building a trustworthy and honest brand. Importantly, marketing managers should not employ self-criticism merely as

a strategy to create an illusion of transparency while intending to manipulate consumers into purchasing their products and services (Aylsworth, 2022; Granstedt, 2025).

Finally, as research on BCSNMs remains nascent, a deeper understanding of their effect on consumer responses can enhance brand communication practices. Our agenda for future research provides a roadmap for exploring key consumer, brand, and contextual factors that may influence the effectiveness of self-critical messaging. By investigating consumer emotional responses, cross-cultural influences, and long-term effects, future scholars can offer data-driven insights to help marketers refine their messaging strategies. These findings will enable practitioners to balance transparency with persuasion, ensuring that BCSNMs foster positive consumer perceptions while aligning with brand identity.

1.7.3. Conclusion

This research advances our understanding of how consumers evaluate brands that employ self-critical messaging strategies. By conceptually distinguishing different forms of BCSNMs and emphasizing the role of consumer involvement in message interpretation, we provide a conceptual foundation for future work. Our framework contributes to branding and communication literature by clarifying how monosemous and polysemous messages influence consumer evaluations. Beyond theoretical contributions, this research presents a structured agenda for future investigations, outlining key consumer, brand, and contextual factors that may shape responses to BCSNMs. Future studies will be instrumental in refining strategic communication approaches and optimizing the effectiveness of self-critical messaging in various marketing contexts. We hope this work serves as a catalyst, encouraging further exploration into this area and enrich our understanding of the multitude of factors that shape consumer responses to BCSNMs.

CHAPTER 2. IMPRESSIVE INSULTS – HOW DO CONSUMERS RESPOND TO SELF-DEPRECATING ADVERTISEMENTS AND THE BRANDS WHO USE THEM?

Abstract

Most advertisements highlight a product's positive attributes to attract consumers. Yet, some brands deliberately criticize themselves by employing self-deprecation within their communications, such as Carlsberg's "Probably not the best beer in the world" campaign. This research examines whether, when, and why consumers react more favorably to self-deprecating advertisements. In six experiments, we demonstrate that when the self-deprecated attribute holds less importance to consumers, self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements enhance brand trust by elevating the brand's social attractiveness and diminishing consumer skepticism. Importantly, self-deprecation in advertisements also lowers consumers' tendency to avoid them. We empirically rule out several alternative explanations (i.e., consumer engagement, sentiment, nonconformity, and novelty) for these effects. Our research builds on prior studies in impression management and social psychology, contributing to the literature on advertising, self-deprecation, and consumer skepticism by promoting the strategic use of self-deprecating advertisements to bolster brand trust and reduce advertising avoidance. We offer actionable insights for managers and practitioners, highlighting how self-deprecation can effectively address the challenges of building trust in diverse consumer-facing marketing contexts.

Keywords: *self-deprecation, social attractiveness, brand trust, consumer skepticism, advertising avoidance*

2.1. Introduction

The marketplace is saturated with self-promoting advertisements like Disneyland's "Happiest place on Earth." However, certain brands occasionally deviate from this norm and deliberately accentuate their shortcomings. The 1965 Volkswagen advertisement stating, "If you can sell her on this, you can sell her on anything," Listerine's "The taste people hate. Twice a day," and Oatly's "This tastes like sh*t! Blah!" illustrate how brands employ self-deprecation in their advertisements. This departure from the conventional advertising approach of highlighting positive product characteristics (Eisend, 2006), raises intriguing questions about the underlying motivations of self-deprecating communications. To gain insights into consumers' real-world responses to such advertisements, we conducted sentiment analyses on user-generated comments in response to self-promoting and self-deprecating advertisements. We found that consumers exhibited positive rather than negative sentiments for both advertisement types (See Appendix A.15). However, the underlying reasons why certain brands choose self-deprecation over conventional self-promotion remain unclear, inspiring us to explore in experimental settings.

The existing social psychology literature on self-deprecation presents conflicting findings. Some psychologists associate self-deprecation with depression and anxiety (Luyten et al., 2007), viewing it as a form of self-sabotage wherein individuals internalize the negative remarks, they direct toward themselves (Breuning, 2016; Chandler, 2017). Conversely, other research indicates that self-deprecators are perceived as warm, humble, and less self-centered, fostering social attractiveness and closer interpersonal relationships (Baumgartner et al., 2018; DelGreco & Denes, 2020). This research explores self-deprecating advertisements, aiming to understand whether, when and why they prove more effective than self-promoting ones and proposes self-deprecating advertisements as a remedy to tackle consumers' declining trust in brands and subsequent advertising avoidance.

Prior research and industry evidence suggest a concerning decline in consumer trust towards advertising and brands (Ipsos, 2022; Rajavi et al., 2019). Upholding consumer trust is critical for brands as it directly impacts consumer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, repeat purchases, and market share expansion (Monahan & Romero, 2020). Additionally, declining trust may cause advertisement avoidance, where consumers tend to reduce their exposure to advertisements by ignoring them (McDonald, 2018). Advertisement avoidance imposes a significant annual financial burden for brands, exceeding US\$40 billion (Rua, 2021), and additionally disrupts consumer-brand relationships (Rojas-Méndez et al., 2009) and brands' ability to communicate with their customers effectively.

We posit that the erosion of trust stems partly from the prevalence of self-promotion in advertising, where brands predominantly highlight positive attributes (Eisend, 2006), leading to consumer skepticism (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). Extant literature identifies advertising as an impression management context, i.e., a setting in which brands are motivated to control the impressions consumers form of them (Schniederjans et al., 2018). Thus, brands deliberately use advertising to cultivate favorable impressions among consumers (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013). In such a context, we argue that consumers may value the transparency achieved through self-deprecation. By reducing perceived self-serving motives (Baumgartner et al., 2018), self-deprecation may enhance a brand's social attractiveness, which may alleviate consumer skepticism, enhancing their brand trust and reducing advertisement avoidance. We posit, however, that the effectiveness of self-deprecation depends on its directed focus. Specifically, we contend that self-deprecation will be socially attractive when directed toward lower-importance attributes. By criticizing themselves for traits that are deemed unimportant, self-deprecators can seem more honest and modest (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019), thereby garnering favorable evaluations. Conversely, self-deprecating about important attributes may invite

negative judgements (Critcher et al., 2018), as any positive impact might be outweighed by the criticism directed towards the important attribute. Thus, we propose that deliberate self-deprecation directed toward low-importance attributes in an advertisement would lead consumers to attribute higher social attractiveness to the brand, mitigating their skepticism, thereby enhancing brand trust and reducing advertisement avoidance.

To the best of our knowledge, this research is one of the first empirical inquiries into self-deprecating advertisements in marketing research. We demonstrate that self-deprecating advertisements, when focused on low-importance attributes, can enhance brand trust and reduce advertisement avoidance, making several significant contributions. First, we challenge the conventional wisdom that advertisements should primarily feature positive attributes by showing that self-deprecation can be effective under certain circumstances. Second, we resolve conflicting findings in the self-deprecation literature (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; Critcher et al., 2018) by demonstrating that it generates favorable responses when used deliberately on less important attributes. Finally, by revealing that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements reduce advertisement avoidance, our research offers valuable insights for marketers and opens intriguing avenues for future research.

2.2. Conceptual Background

2.2.1. *Self-deprecation.*

“Self-deprecation,” also known as negative self-evaluation or self-criticism (Owens, 1994), involves downplaying one’s skills or qualities (Owens, 1993). It is a form of “self-talk” that involves expressing negative self-views (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Critcher et al., 2018; Owens, 1993; Speer, 2019) and has been studied in impression management and interpersonal communication contexts across disciplines like organizational behavior,

political science, and social psychology (Owens, 1994; Speer, 2019; Vonk, 1999). Self-deprecating advertisements are rare because marketing communications typically convey positive product information. Consequently, marketing research on this phenomenon is scarce. One exception is the study by Mookerjee, Cornil, and Hoegg (2021), where the authors, without explicitly using the term self-deprecation, demonstrated that labeling organic products as ‘ugly’ increased purchase likelihood. We define our scope as advertisements that engage in self-criticism or convey negative product information and explore how consumers perceive self-deprecating advertisements. Self-deprecating advertising differs from two-sided messaging in that it solely involves criticism as evidenced by Carlsberg’s recent advertisement saying, “Probably not the best beer in the world,” or Citroën’s slogan, “Surprisingly, we didn’t fire the designer.” Conversely, two-sided messaging includes both praise and criticism (e.g., Picnic Chocolate Bar’s “Deliciously Ugly”) (Eisend, 2006, 2022).

Existing literature on self-deprecation yields contradictory findings. In social psychology, self-deprecation is often associated with lower self-esteem, leading others to believe the negative statements people make about themselves (Owens, 1994; O’Donnell et al., 2016). Critcher and colleagues (2018) prompted one group of participants to make self-deprecating remarks about their abilities, while another group (unaware of the prompt) evaluated the self-deprecating participants. Their results showed those who self-deprecated were judged as less skilled. O’Donnell and coauthors (2016) also revealed that individuals who self-deprecated about their intelligence or appearance were perceived as having less self-esteem.

Conversely, research in impression management revealed positive effects of self-deprecation. In a hiring context, candidates who self-deprecated were perceived as warmer and more competent than those who did not disclose any negative information (Bitterly &

Schweitzer, 2019). DelGreco and Denes (2020) showed that self-deprecating responses to compliments in online dating were perceived as more likeable than self-promoting ones. On social media, using self-deprecating hashtags suggested less arrogance and increased admiration (Austin et al., 2022). Research in political science highlighted that given the self-promoting tendency of politicians, self-deprecating comments evoked surprise and amusement, improving the politician's likability (Baumgartner et al., 2018).

Prior research demonstrating self-deprecation's positive outcomes (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019) revolves around its use on low-importance attributes that carry minimal significance to the evaluation. For example, job candidates were perceived favorably when they self-deprecated about their trigonometry knowledge (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019), an attribute that was irrelevant to the job requirements. A presidential candidate's self-deprecating comment about his weight – a characteristic unrelated to his political competence, increased his likability among voters (Baumgartner et al., 2018). Self-deprecating about a product's visual appeal by using "ugly" labeling highlighted the organic nature of the product, which improved consumers' taste and healthiness perceptions (Mookerjee et al., 2021). Thus, given that all brand communications are deliberate attempts to impress consumers (Houman Andersen, 2001), we suggest that using self-deprecating advertisements focused on low-importance attributes may cultivate positive consumer evaluations. Conversely, self-deprecation concerning high-importance attributes could lead to unfavorable evaluations, as the positive impact of self-deprecation might be overshadowed by the criticism directed towards the high-importance attribute.

In summary, we anticipate that the positive effects of self-deprecation will be evident in situations requiring impression management, such as job interviews (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019) or political campaigns targeting voter influence (Baumgartner et al., 2018), especially when directed towards low-important attributes. In these contexts, self-

deprecation is deliberate, with individuals intentionally engaging in impression management aiming to foster positive and closer connections with others (Schniederjans et al., 2018). Consequently, evaluators may appreciate self-deprecators' transparency, leading to favorable evaluations, i.e., social attractiveness.

2.2.2. *Social Attractiveness of Self-deprecation.*

Prior literature on interpersonal interactions demonstrates that self-deprecators are perceived as humble and likeable, causing others to seek closer relationships with them (Baumgartner et al., 2018; DelGreco & Denes, 2020). DelGreco and Denes (2020) show that women who self-deprecate by not readily accepting compliments are perceived as more socially attractive. People who display warmth, competence, and likability are often regarded as socially attractive, encouraging others to seek closer relationships with them (Andersen & Guerrero, 1996; Chen & Guo, 2021; Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert et al., 1995). We propose that brands deliberately self-deprecating on a low-importance attribute, given its association with traits such as humility (Vonk, 1999), likeability (DelGreco & Denes, 2020), warmth, and competence (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019), would be perceived as socially attractive.

Social psychology research highlights several advantages of social attractiveness, like elevated social status (Gilbert et al., 1995), credibility (Edwards et al., 2015), affiliation motivations (Gilbert, 1997), and reduced blame attributions (Alicke & Zell, 2009). Alicke and Zell (2009) discovered that socially attractive individuals received less suspicion, resulting in reduced accountability for their transgressions. Edwards et al. (2015) also illustrated that perceived social attractiveness increased credibility. While self-deprecation in advertising remains underexplored, research on two-sided messages indicates that presenting negative product information alongside positive aspects enhances likability (Kamins et al., 1989) and credibility, while reducing skepticism (Eisend, 2006). Mookerjee

and colleagues (2021) reveal that labeling a product as “ugly” (solely negative information) may augment seller credibility. Building on the prior literature, we contend that when a brand self-deprecates on a low-importance attribute in its advertisements, consumers will perceive the self-criticism as socially attractive, thereby reducing consumer skepticism.

2.2.3. *Consumer Skepticism, Brand Trust, and Advertisement Avoidance.*

Consumer skepticism, defined as the “tendency towards disbelief of advertising claims” (Obermiller et al., 2005, p.7), emerges when consumers detect self-serving motives in brand communications (Webb & Mohr, 1998). Campbell and Kirmani (2000) demonstrated that when salespeople are perceived to have self-serving motives, it triggers skepticism because of perceptions of insincerity and dishonesty. Since marketing communications aim to create positive consumer impressions (Houman Andersen, 2001), and advertisements typically present brands favorably (Eisend, 2006), consumers often harbor skepticism towards brand communications. This skepticism prompts heightened vigilance against brands’ promotional efforts and increased scrutiny of persuasion tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Webb and Mohr (1998) show that consumers become more skeptical of brand communications when they perceive exploitation of social causes for self-interest, thereby reducing the effectiveness of social campaigns.

As previously discussed, social attractiveness bolsters credibility, reduces suspicion, and mitigates skepticism (Alicke & Zell, 2009). We argue that self-deprecating advertisements, while enhancing a brand’s social attractiveness, are also perceived as less self-serving due to their self-critical nature, thus further reducing consumer skepticism. Additionally, consumer skepticism diminishes brand trust. For instance, skepticism toward online reviews resulted in distrust in both the review platform and the reviewed brands (Nam et al., 2020). Specifically, consumers’ skepticism about hotel reviews on TripAdvisor, a travel website, lowered their trust in both the hotel and TripAdvisor (Nam et al., 2020).

Furthermore, skeptical consumers were less likely to trust brand recommendations from their Facebook friends (Chari et al., 2016). Low brand trust triggers advertisement avoidance. Ketelaar and colleagues (2015) show that consumers lacking trust in a brand view advertisements as ineffective information sources and thus avoid them. Similarly, Beak and Morimoto (2012) illustrate that mistrust and skepticism towards brands' persuasion attempts causes consumers to avoid advertisements.

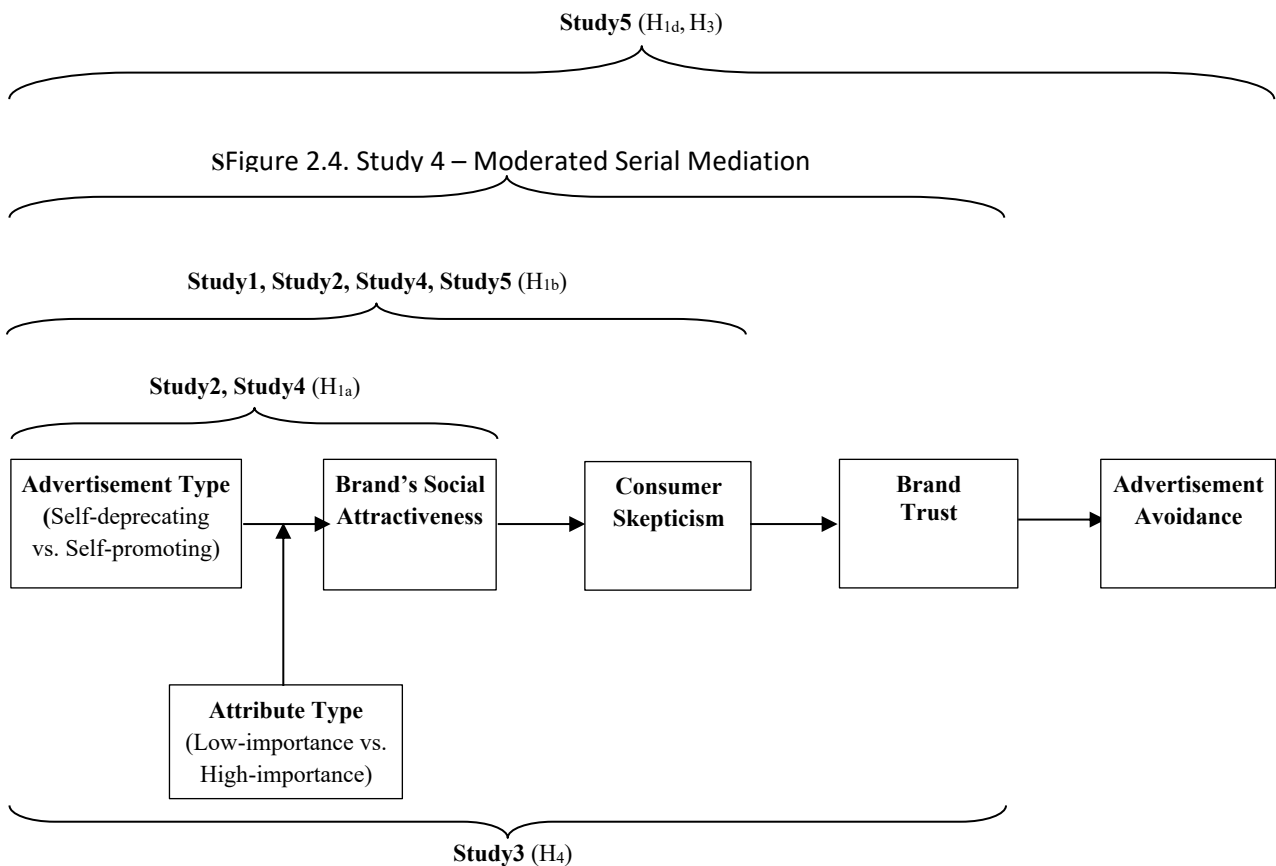
Combining insights from the prior literature, we argue that consumers will perceive a brand self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) on a low-importance attribute as more socially attractive, which will subsequently reduce consumer skepticism, enhance brand trust and diminish advertisement avoidance (See Figure 2.1). Formally, we hypothesize that:

H1: Self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements directed toward a low-importance attribute will (a) increase a brand's social attractiveness, (b) diminish consumer skepticism, (c) bolster brand trust, and (d) mitigate advertisement avoidance.

H2: The effect of self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements directed toward a low-importance attribute on brand trust will be serially mediated by brand's social attractiveness and consumer skepticism.

H3: The effect of self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements directed toward a low-importance attribute on advertisement avoidance will be serially mediated by consumer skepticism and brand trust.

H4: The effect of self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements on a brand's social attractiveness, consumer skepticism and brand trust will be attenuated when the self-deprecation is directed toward a high-importance attribute.

Figure 2.1. Conceptual Model

2.3. Study 1. Effect of Self-deprecating Advertisements on Consumer Skepticism and Brand Trust

In Study 1, we examined the effect of advertisement types (self-deprecating vs. self-promoting) on consumer skepticism and brand trust, using a fictitious coffee brand to avoid any bias arising from prior brand associations (Low & Lamb Jr, 2000). We designed our stimuli after rigorous pre-testing to ensure that (1) self-deprecated attribute is given low importance, (2) self-deprecation is perceived as deliberate, and (3) stimuli are equivalent on aspects such as aesthetic appeal, fluency, and consumer sentiment valence (See Appendix A2, A3, and A4). We posit that employing self-deprecation yields positive evaluations when directed at low-importance attributes and perceived as a deliberate strategy.

2.3.1. Procedure.

118 students from a Spanish university saw either a self-deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement (See Figure 2.2), and reported brand trust, consumer skepticism, and perceived self-deprecation (manipulation check). Fourteen participants failed an attention check question incorporated among the questions (“If you are reading this, select ‘Strongly Disagree’”) and were excluded from the analysis, leaving a final sample of 104. Since traditional advertising strategies typically self-promote (Eisend, 2006), they serve as the default against which we evaluate the effect of self-deprecating advertisements. Therefore, we did not employ a separate control condition to establish baseline effects. Given the scarcity of self-deprecating advertisements, individuals may exhibit heightened engagement in processing them, affecting their skepticism and trust. To address this, we measured the time participants spent observing the advertisements (in seconds) to indicate their engagement level. For this and subsequent studies, please see Appendix A.12 for measures and their reliability coefficients and Appendix A.13 for discriminant validity analysis for measures.

Figure 2.5. Study 1 Stimuli for Self-deprecating (A) and Self-promoting (B) Advertisement



2.3.2. Results and Discussion.

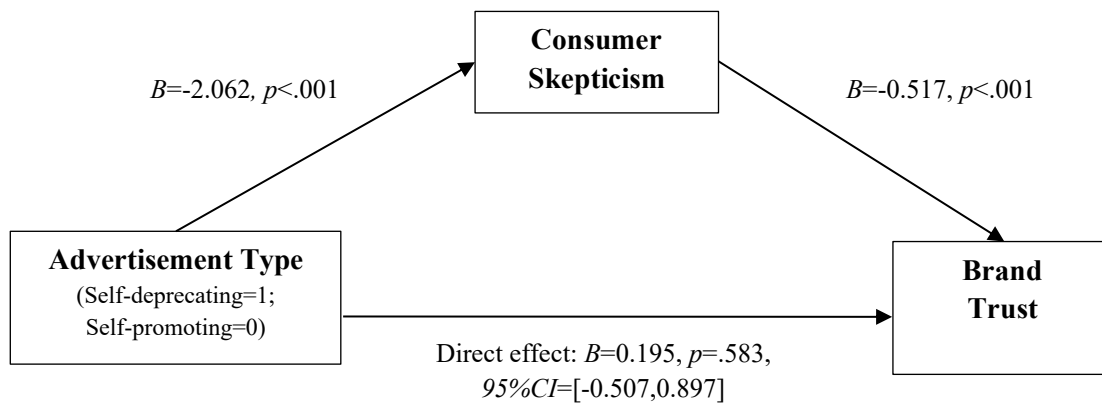
An independent sample t-test ensured the effectiveness of the advertising type manipulation. Participants rated the self-deprecating advertisement as significantly more

self-deprecating than the self-promoting one ($t(102) = 7.19, p < .001$). Independent samples t-tests revealed that the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement resulted in significantly higher brand trust ($t(102) = 3.538, p < .001$) and lower skepticism ($t(102) = -5.795, p < .001$) (Means reported in Table 2.1). A mediation test (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes, 2013; 10,000 samples) revealed that the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement reduced consumer skepticism, which in turn increased brand trust (index: $B = 1.067, se = .242, 95\%CI = [.627, 1.563]$) (See Figure 2.3 for all path coefficients). Participants did not spend more time observing the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement ($p = .843$), ruling out engagement as an alternative explanation.

Table 2.1. Results - Studies 1 and 2.

<i>Study #</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Self-deprecating Advertisement</i>	<i>Self-promoting Advertisement</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
		N=50	N=54		
<i>Study 1</i>	Perceived Self-deprecation	6.15 (1.56)	3.55 (2.08)	<.001	1.410
	Brand Trust	6.04 (1.72)	4.78 (1.90)	<.001	0.236
	Consumer Skepticism	3.99 (1.71)	6.06 (1.91)	<.001	-1.137
	Engagement	55.35 (65.02)	52.20 (94.94)	.843	0.038
		N=96	N=101		
<i>Study 2</i>	Perceived Self-deprecation	6.77 (2.10)	3.59 (2.31)	<.001	1.44
	Brand Trust	6.84 (1.44)	5.45 (1.74)	<.001	.087
	Consumer Skepticism	2.73 (1.57)	5.66 (2.17)	<.001	-1.55
	Brand's Social Attractiveness	5.82 (2.15)	4.56 (2.19)	<.001	.580
	Perceived Nonconformity	6.11 (2.22)	4.93 (2.17)	<.001	.540
	Engagement	24.56 (20.63)	22.05 (11.52)	.291	.151

Note: Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

Figure 2.Error! Bookmark not defined.. **Mediation Path Coefficients.**

Study 1 provided initial evidence that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements reduce consumer skepticism, thereby enhancing brand trust.

2.4. Study 2.

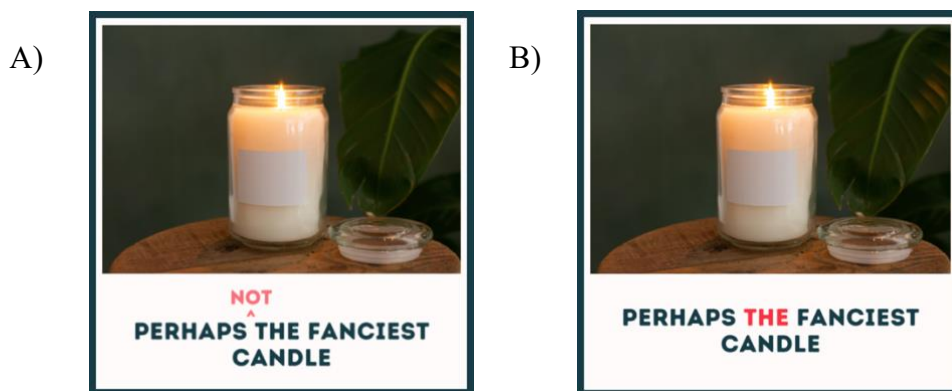
Study 2 used another product category and measured brand's social attractiveness alongside brand trust and consumer skepticism. Furthermore, we evaluated the perceived conformity of advertisements to advertising norms, with the aim of excluding non-conformity as a potential mediator. This decision was motivated by the deviance regulation theory, which suggests that nonconformity may garner positive evaluations (Blanton & Christie, 2003). Given that consumers anticipate self-promotion in advertisements (Eisend, 2006), self-deprecation might be perceived as nonconforming. Pretests ensured the effectiveness and equivalence of the advertisement types (See Appendix A.5 and A.6).

2.4.1. Procedure

201 participants (47.7% females, $M_{age} = 42.9$ years, USA residents recruited from Connect by CloudResearch) viewed either a self-deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement (See Figure 2.4). Four participants failed an attention check (as in Study 1) and were excluded from the analyses, resulting in a final sample of 197. Brand trust and consumer skepticism were measured as in Study 1. Brand's social attractiveness was

measured by prompting participants to envision the brand as a person and asking them to report their agreement with statements such as “I would like to have a friendly relationship with this personified brand” (Scale items in Appendix A.12). Next, participants rated perceived conformity (“How conforming is this advertisement’s style to the advertising industry norms?”; 1 = *not conforming at all* to 9 = *extremely conforming*), which we reverse-coded to form the perceived nonconformity measure. Finally, participants responded to a manipulation check (as in Study 1) and reported their demographics. We additionally measured the time spent observing the advertisement.

Figure 2.9. Study 2 Stimuli: Self-deprecating (A) and Self-promoting (B) advertisement.

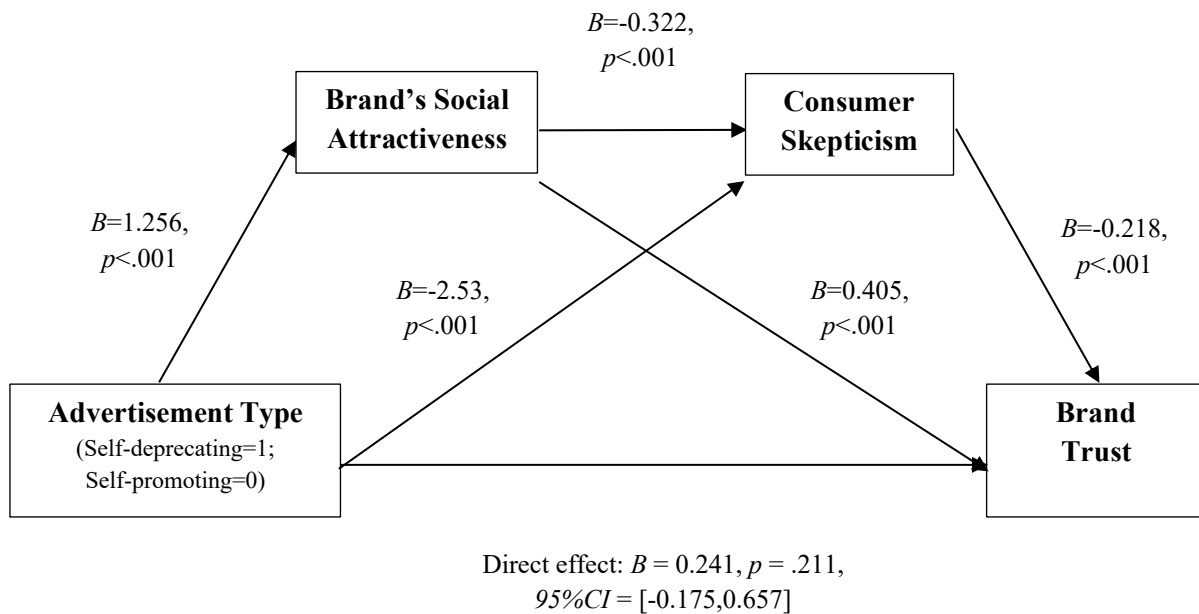


2.4.2. Results and Discussion.

An independent samples t-test revealed that the self-deprecating advertisement was rated significantly more self-deprecating than the self-promoting advertisement ($t(195) = 10.09, p < .001$). Other independent samples t-tests showed that the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement resulted in greater brand trust ($t(195) = 6.09, p < .001$), lower consumer skepticism ($t(195) = -10.84, p < .001$), and higher social attractiveness ($t(195) = 4.07, p < .001$) (Means reported in Table 2.1). Participants perceived the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement as more nonconforming ($t(195) = 3.79, p < .001$). We

ruled out nonconformity as an alternative explanation by conducting a parallel mediation analysis (Appendix A.7).

Hayes (2022, p.161) recommends utilizing parallel mediation only when no mediator causally influences another. Prior research implies a causal relationship between social attractiveness and skepticism (Alicke & Zell, 2009; Edwards et al., 2015) and between skepticism and brand trust (Chari et al., 2016; Nam et al., 2020). Hence, we tested for a serial mediation (Process Model 6; Hayes, 2022; 10,000 samples) to explore whether self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements increased a brand's social attractiveness, which reduced consumer skepticism, thereby enhancing brand trust, and found a significant and positive indirect effect ($B = .088$, $se = .035$, $95\%CI = [.031, .168]$) (See Figure 2.5 for details). The correlational nature of the relationship between the mediators allows for the possibility of alternative statistical models being significant (Engeler & Barasz, 2021). However, we assert the plausibility of our proposed serial mediation model (Figure 2.5), because our conceptualization relies on prior literature (Pieters, 2017). Study 2 indicated that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements positively influenced brand trust by enhancing brand's social attractiveness and decreasing consumer skepticism.

FFigure 2.11. Study 2 Parallel Mediation Path

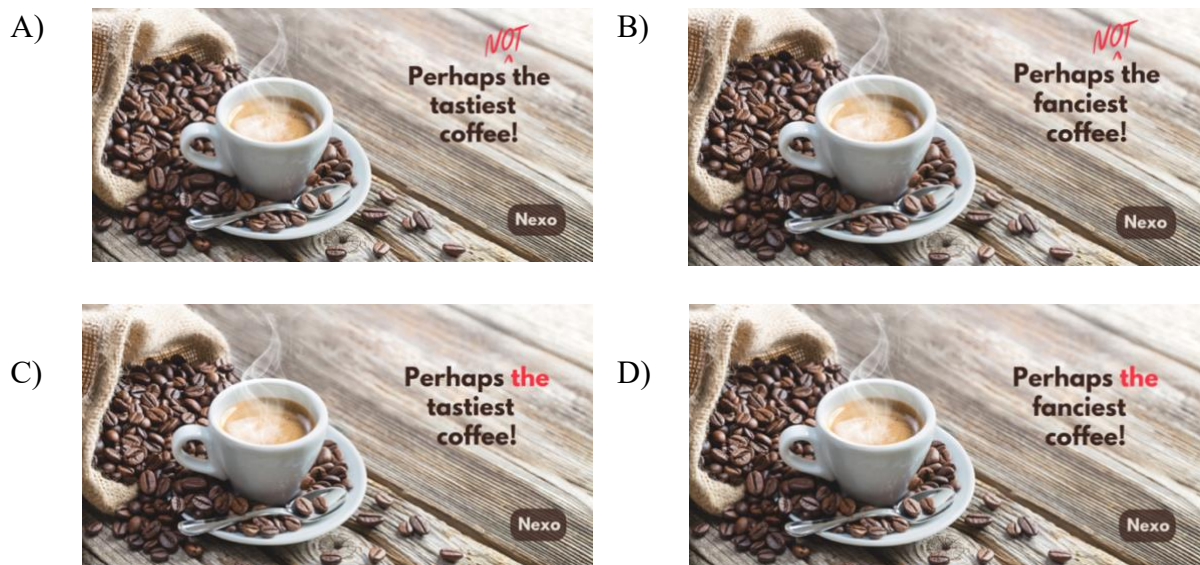
2.5. Study 3.

In Study 3, we examined the interaction effect of attribute importance and advertisement type on brand's social attractiveness, consumer skepticism and brand trust.

2.5.1. Procedure.

301 participants (49.12% females, $M_{age} = 39.05$ years, USA residents) were recruited from Connect by CloudResearch. Three participants failed an attention check (Choose the odd one – Chicago, Berlin, Tomato, Paris), leaving a final sample of 298. This study followed a 2 (advertisement type: self-deprecating vs. self-promoting) by 2 (attribute type: high- vs. low-importance) between-subjects design. Attribute types were selected via pretests (Appendix A.1). Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the advertisements presented in Figure 2.6, and then reported brand trust, consumer skepticism and brand's social attractiveness as in previous studies. Next, participants in the low-importance (high-importance) condition rated the importance of attribute “fancy” (“tasty”) for coffee (1 = not important at all, 9 = extremely important). Finally, participants rated perceived self-deprecation (manipulation check) and reported their demographics.

Figure 2.14. Study 3 Stimuli: High-importance Self-deprecating (A), Low-importance Self-deprecating (B), High-importance Self-promoting (C), Low-importance Self-promoting (D) Advertisement.



2.5.2. Results and discussion.

A two-way ANOVA test with advertisement type and attribute type as fixed factors and perceived self-deprecation as dependent variable found that the self-deprecating advertisement was considered significantly more self-deprecating than the self-promoting one ($F(1, 294) = 331.56, p < .001$). There was no other significant main or interaction effects (p 's $> .05$). Participants also rated the attribute “tasty” as significantly more important than “fancy” ($F(1, 294) = 271.62, p < .001$). The main effect of advertisement type and its interaction with attribute type were non-significant (p 's $> .05$) (Means in Table 2.2). These results indicated that manipulations worked as intended.

Another ANOVA test revealed a significant main effect of attribute type ($F(1, 294) = 5.69, p = .018$), and a significant interaction effect of advertisement type and attribute type on brand trust ($F(1, 294) = 8.13, p = .005$), but no main effect of advertisement type ($p > .05$). Participants in the low- (vs. high-importance) condition trusted the brand more.

Additional ANOVA tests revealed that the main effects of advertisement type and attribute were not significant for brand's social attractiveness and consumer skepticism (p 's > .05). However, their interaction effects on brand's social attractiveness ($F(1, 294) = 13.34, p < .001$), and consumer skepticism ($F(1, 294) = 10.12, p = .002$) were significant.

In the low-importance condition, participants exhibited significantly higher social attractiveness ($F(1, 294) = 7.07, p = .008$) and lower consumer skepticism ($F(1, 294) = 9.36, p = .002$), and marginally higher brand trust ($F(1, 294) = 3.08, p = .080$) for the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement. Conversely, in the high-importance condition, the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement significantly reduced brand trust ($F(1, 294) = 5.19, p = .023$) and social attractiveness ($F(1, 294) = 6.29, p = .013$) but did not significantly affect consumer skepticism ($p = .151$, Means in Table 2.2).

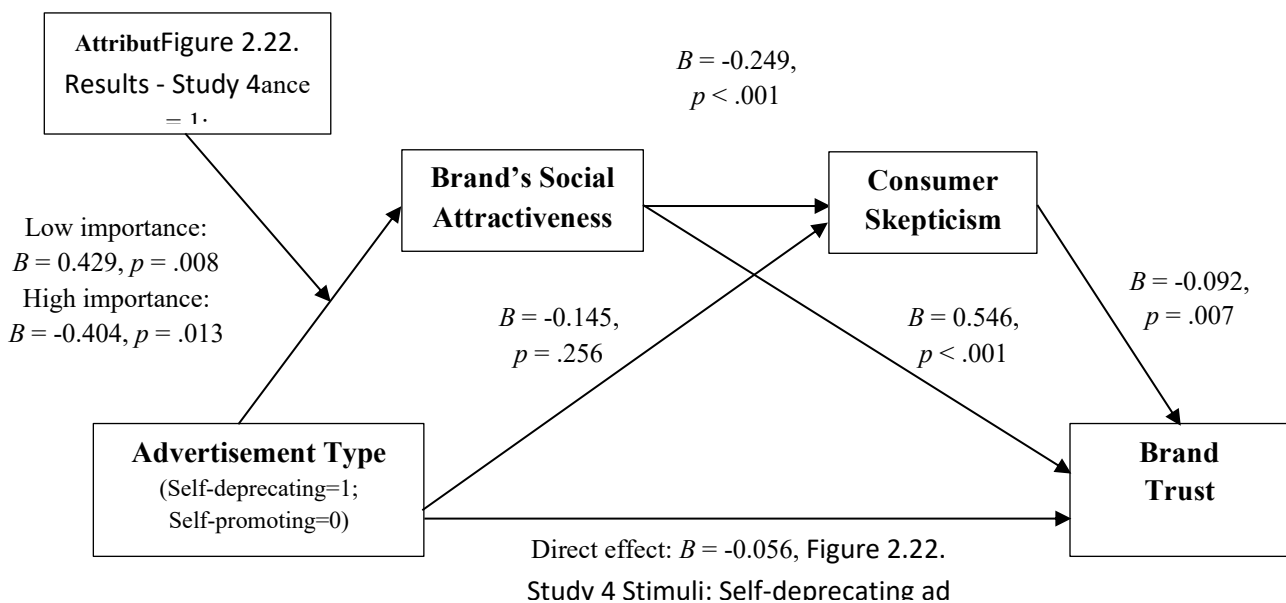
Table 2.2. Results – Study 3

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Low-importance Attribute</i>		<i>High-importance Attribute</i>		<i>Interaction Effect</i>		<i>Ad Type Main Effect</i>		<i>Attribute Type – Main Effect</i>	
	Self-deprecating ad (N=73)	Self-promoting ad (N=76)	Self-deprecating ad (N=74)	Self-promoting ad (N=75)	p	η_p^2	p	η_p^2	p	η_p^2
<i>Perceived Self-deprecation</i>	6.80 ^a (2.05)	2.75 ^b (2.10)	7.46 ^a (1.74)	2.81 ^b (2.30)	.241	.005	<.001	.529	.173	.006
<i>Attribute Importance</i>	4.23 ^a (2.54)	3.99 ^a (2.59)	7.89 ^b (1.20)	7.96 ^b (1.18)	.559	.001	.639	.001	<.001	.484
<i>Brand Trust</i>	6.40 ^a (1.45)	5.91 ^a (1.60)	5.37 ^b (2.14)	6.00 ^a (1.53)	.005	.024	.955	.000	.013	.021
<i>Consumer Skepticism</i>	4.07 ^a (2.25)	5.18 ^b (2.33)	4.86 ^b (2.29)	4.33 ^b (1.96)	.002	.034	.252	.005	.958	.000
<i>Brand's Social Attractiveness</i>	5.95 ^a (1.81)	5.09 ^b (1.93)	4.69 ^b (2.28)	5.49 ^a (1.83)	<.001	.041	.560	.001	.053	.013

Note: Standard deviations reported in the parentheses. Cell means with different superscripts within the columns “Low-importance attribute” and “High-importance attribute” denote significantly different means (p 's < .05) when comparing self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements.

A moderated serial mediation test (PROCESS Model 83, 10,000 samples; Hayes, 2022) replicated Study 2, revealing a significant indirect effect (index: $B = .019$, $se = .013$, $95\%CI = [.002, .050]$). The indirect effect of advertisement type on brand trust through increased social attractiveness and decreased consumer skepticism was significant and positive in the low-importance condition ($B = .010$, $se = .007$, $95\%CI = [.001, .028]$), but significant and negative in the high-importance condition ($B = -.009$, $se = .007$, $95\%CI = [-.027, -.0002]$) (See Figure 2.7). Thus, self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement increased brand's social attractiveness, which reduced consumer skepticism and enhanced brand trust only when the self-deprecation was on a low-importance attribute. Self-deprecation on a high importance attribute lowered the brand's social attractiveness, negating the positive effect of self-deprecating advertisements on brand trust.

Figure 2.16. Study 3 – Moderation **Figure 2.17. Study 5 Parallel Mediation**



We replicated these findings in a supplementary study, where we manipulated the attribute importance based on product type (hedonic versus utilitarian), while maintaining the product and slogan identical (See Appendix A.14).

2.6. Study 4.

Study 4 manipulated advertisement type with an alternate tagline and additionally examined whether perceived brand equity influenced the impact of advertisement type on the brand's social attractiveness, consumer skepticism, and brand trust. Prior research commonly operationalized brand equity by varying product prices, as brands associated with higher-priced products are perceived to possess greater equity (Erdem & Swait, 2001). Thus, we introduced different prices for the advertised product to analyze the interaction effect of price perceptions and advertisement type on the brand's social attractiveness, consumer skepticism, and brand trust.

2.6.1. Procedure.

500 female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 42.45$ years) from the US were recruited via Connect by CloudResearch. Twelve participants failed the attention check question (as in Study 1), leaving a final sample of 488. We exclusively recruited females, as we used female shoes in the advertisement (To & Patrick, 2021). The study had a 2 (advertisement type: self-deprecating vs. self-promoting) by 2 (price: low vs. high) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to see an advertisement for a fictitious orthopedic shoe brand (See Figure 2.8). The shoes were priced at either \$285 or \$75. A pre-test ensured that self-deprecation was perceived as deliberate and that "photogenic" is a low-importance attribute for orthopedic shoes (See Appendix A.8).

After viewing the advertisement, participants reported brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness. Prior research reveals that warmth and competence are antecedents to social attractiveness (Chen & Guo, 2021). Thus, we measured them to explore how they affect our hypothesized effects. Finally, participants responded to a price perceptions manipulation check (All scales in Appendix A.12) and reported perceived self-deprecation and their age.

Figure 2.23. Study 4 Stimuli: Self-deprecating ad with high-price (A), Self-deprecating ad with low-price (B), Self-promoting ad with high-price (C), Self-promoting ad with low-price (D)



2.6.2. Results and discussion.

A two-way ANOVA test on perceived self-deprecation found only a significant effect of advertisement type ($F(1, 484) = 648.91, p < .001$). The effects of product price and its interaction with advertisement type were not significant (p 's $> .05$). Another two-way ANOVA test on price perception revealed only a main effect of product price. As expected, \$285 was perceived as a significantly higher price than \$75 ($F(1, 484) = 375.81, p < .001$).

A series of two-way ANOVA tests revealed that advertisement type significantly affected brand trust ($F(1, 484) = 37.42, p < .001$), social attractiveness ($F(1, 484) = 26.42, p < .001$), and consumer skepticism ($F(1, 484) = 35.99, p < .001$). Price affected consumer skepticism ($F(1, 484) = 10.02, p = .002$), but not brand trust and social attractiveness (p 's $> .1$). Advertisement type and price had a significant interaction effect on brand trust ($F(1, 484) = 5.44, p = .020$) and consumer skepticism ($F(1, 484) = 6.19, p = .013$), but not on social attractiveness ($p = .238$) (Means reported in Table 2.3). Within the high-price condition, self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement significantly increased brand trust ($F(1, 484) = 35.86, p < .001$) and social attractiveness ($F(1, 484) = 20.06, p < .001$) and lowered consumer skepticism ($F(1, 484) = 36.16, p < .001$). Likewise, in the low-price condition, the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement significantly increased brand trust ($F(1, 484) = 7.13, p = .008$) and social attractiveness ($F(1, 484) = 7.80, p = .005$), and reduced consumer skepticism ($F(1, 484) = 6.14, p = .014$). While the hypothesized effects are directionally alike in both price conditions, they are stronger in the high (vs. low) price condition.

Table 2.3. Results – Study 4

<i>Measures</i>	<i>High-price</i>		<i>Low-price</i>		<i>Interaction Effect</i>		<i>Ad Type – Main Effect</i>		<i>Price</i>	
	Self-deprecating ad (N=124)	Self-promoting ad (N=121)	Self-deprecating ad (N=122)	Self-promoting ad (N=121)	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
<i>Perceived Self-deprecation</i>	6.99 ^a (2.23)	2.64 ^b (2.04)	7.19 ^a (1.94)	2.42 ^b (1.66)	.247	.003	<.001	.529	.932	.000
<i>Price Perceptions</i>	7.38 ^a (1.39)	7.67 ^a (1.29)	4.49 ^b (2.10)	4.60 ^b (1.88)	.555	.001	.195	.003	<.001	.437
<i>Brand Trust</i>	6.54 ^a (1.52)	5.32 ^b (1.68)	6.36 ^a (1.51)	5.82 ^b (1.65)	.020	.011	<.001	.072	.269	.003
<i>Consumer Skepticism</i>	3.61 ^a (2.33)	5.50 ^b (2.54)	3.46 ^b (2.44)	4.24 ^b (2.96)	.013	.013	<.001	.069	.002	.020

<i>Brand's Social Attractiveness</i>	5.83 ^a (2.06)	4.58 ^b (2.31)	5.89 ^a (2.13)	5.10 ^b (2.21)	.238	.003	<.001	.052	.149	.004
<i>Warmth</i>	6.59 ^a (1.73)	5.82 ^b (1.90)	6.63 ^a (1.74)	6.39 ^a (1.76)	.103	.005	.002	.020	.055	.008
<i>Competence</i>	6.74 ^a (1.69)	5.85 ^b (1.99)	6.65 ^a (1.82)	6.26 ^a (1.01)	.150	.004	<.001	.028	.350	.002

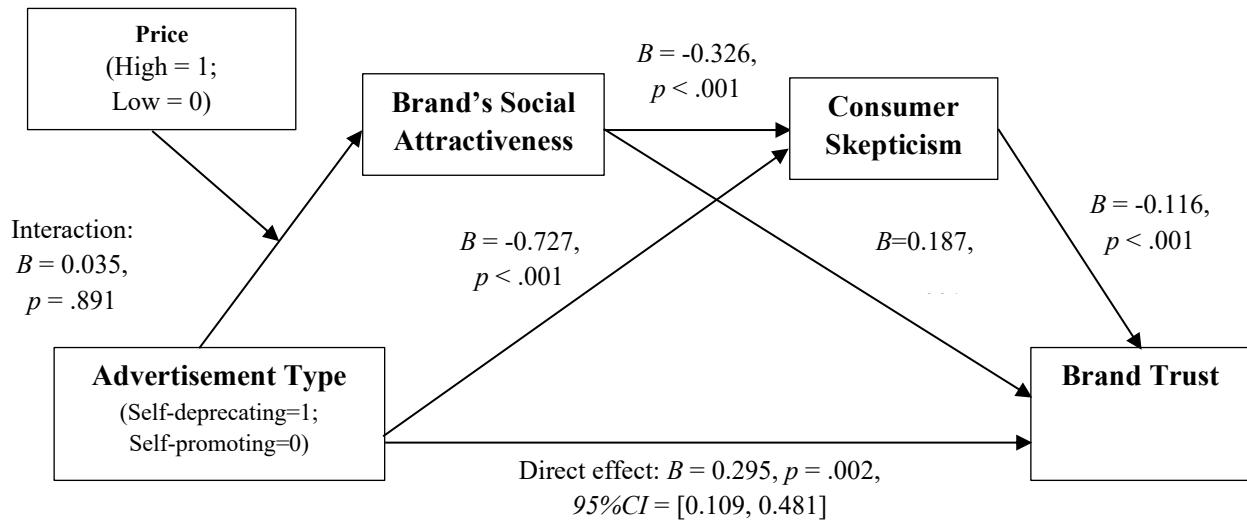
Note: Standard deviations reported in the parentheses. Cell means with different superscripts within the columns “High-price” and “Low-price” denote significantly different means (p 's < .05) when comparing self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements.

We additionally explored the effect of advertisement type and price on brand's perceived warmth and competence and found a significant main effect of advertisement type (warmth: $F(1, 484) = 8.68, p = .002$; competence: $F(1, 484) = 14.16, p < .001$), but no effect of price nor its interaction with advertisement type (p 's > .05). Given that perceived warmth and competence are antecedents of social attractiveness (Chen & Guo, 2021), the impact of advertisement type on them mirrored its effect on social attractiveness. Appendix A.9 presents results from two serial mediation analyses that support prior literature by demonstrating that perceived warmth and competence are antecedents to social attractiveness.

To test whether our main conceptual model holds even when perceived warmth and competence are included into the analysis, we ran another moderated serial mediation test (PROCESS Model 83, 10,000 samples; Hayes, 2022) with warmth and competence as covariates. Our results revealed a non-significant index of moderation mediation ($B = .001, se = .010, 95\%CI = [-.019, .021]$) because in both price conditions, the indirect effect of advertisement type on brand trust through brand's social attractiveness and consumer skepticism was significant and positive (High: $B = .018, se = .010, 95\%CI = [.002, .041]$; Low: $B = .018, se = .009, 95\%CI = [.005, .039]$) (See Figure 2.9 for details). Contrasting these two indirect effects reveal a non-significant effect ($c = .001, se = .010, 95\%CI = [-.021, .022]$). Therefore, we conclude that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting)

advertisements boosted brand trust through enhancing social attractiveness and reducing consumer skepticism in both price conditions. Our hypothesized effects are not moderated by price and hold even when we control for the effects of the brand's perceived warmth and

Figure 2.25. Study 4 – Moderated Serial Mediation Path Coefficients



2.7. Study 5.

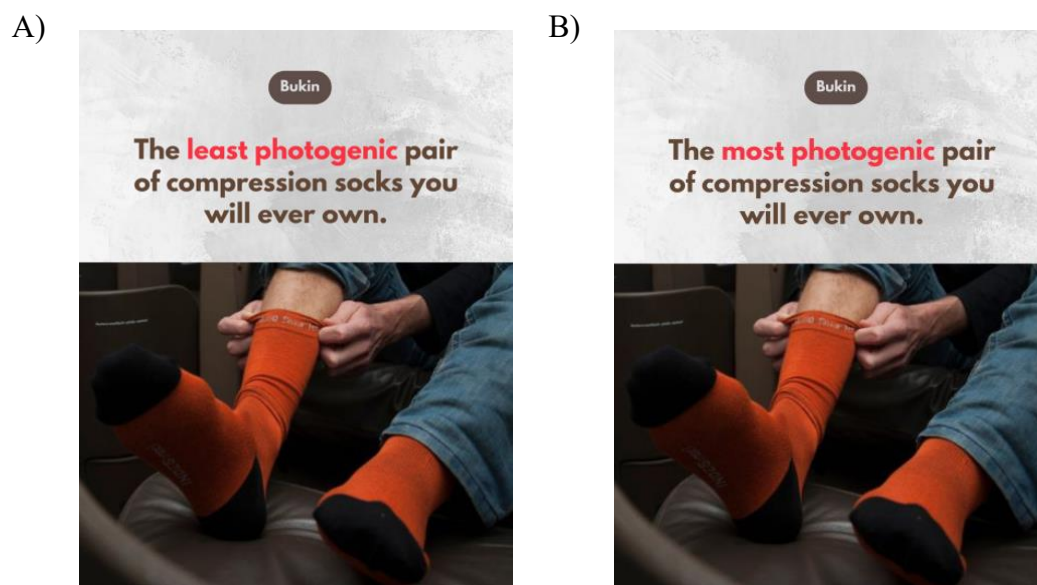
In Study 5, we replicated our findings for another product category and assessed a downstream consequence of brand trust: advertisement avoidance. We also measured participants' perceptions of novelty for the advertisements, as self-deprecating advertisements might be perceived as novel. Separate pretests ensured the effectiveness and equivalence of the advertisement types (See Appendix A.10).

2.7.1. Procedure.

210 participants (50% females, $M_{age} = 38.12$ years, USA residents recruited via Connect by CloudResearch) viewed either a self-deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement (See Figure 2.10) for a fictitious brand of compression socks. Five participants failed the attention check and were excluded from the analyses, leaving a final sample of

205. Brand trust and consumer skepticism were measured as in Study 1. Participants then rated their tendency for advertisement avoidance (scale in Appendix A.12) and advertisement's perceived novelty (1 = *not novel at all* to 9 = *extremely novel*; Eisend, 2006). After responding to a manipulation check (as in Study 1), participants reported their

Figure 2.27. Study 5 Stimuli: Self-deprecating (A) and Self-promoting (B) advertisement.
demographics.



2.7.2. Results and discussion.

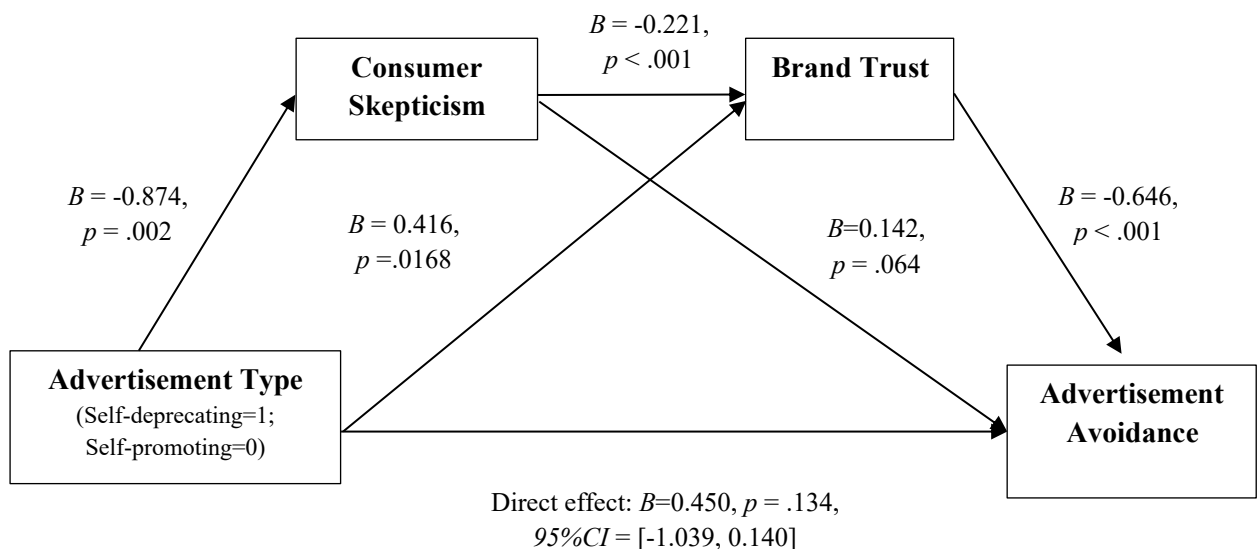
Independent samples t-tests showed that the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement was significantly more self-deprecating ($t(203) = 10.71, p < .001$). Further, the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement increased brand trust ($t(203) = 3.37, p < .001$) and lowered consumer skepticism ($t(203) = -3.09, p = .002$). Participants showed significantly less avoidance toward the self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement ($t(203) = -3.05, p = .003$). The self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement was perceived as significantly more novel ($t(203) = 3.68, p < .001$) (Means reported in Table 2.4). In Appendix A.7, we presented a parallel mediation analysis that ruled out novelty as an alternative explanation.

Table 2.4. Results - Study 5.

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Self-deprecating advertisement</i>	<i>Self-promoting advertisement</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
	N=101	N=104		
<i>Perceived self-deprecation</i>	6.95 (2.00)	3.71 (2.31)	<.001	1.50
<i>Brand trust</i>	6.90 (1.27)	6.29 (1.31)	<.001	.471
<i>Consumer skepticism</i>	3.03 (1.98)	3.90 (2.07)	.002	-1.431
<i>Advertisement avoidance</i>	3.88 (2.16)	4.85 (2.38)	.003	-.426
<i>Novelty</i>	6.89 (1.72)	5.93 (2.00)	< .001	.514

Note: Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

A serial mediation test (Process Model 6; Hayes, 2022; 10,000 samples) to explore the indirect effect of advertisement type on advertisement avoidance through consumer skepticism and brand trust was significant and negative ($B = -.125$, $se = .058$, $95\%CI = [-.035, -.258]$) (See Figure 2.11 for details). The results showed that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements reduced consumer skepticism, which increased brand trust, consequently reducing advertisement avoidance.

Figure 2.29. Study 5 – Serial Mediation Path Coefficients

2.8. General Discussion.

Self-deprecation is studied extensively in social psychology, organizational behavior, and political science (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; DelGreco & Denes, 2020), but has received little attention in marketing. Across six experiments (including one supplementary study, Appendix A.14), we demonstrate that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements targeted at low-importance attributes enhance a brand's social attractiveness, alleviate consumer skepticism, boost brand trust and reduce advertisement avoidance. We also showed that self-deprecation is perceived as a deliberate advertising strategy, and ruled out consumers' sentiment and advertisement engagement, perception of nonconformity and novelty as alternative explanations. Our results were robust across different price points, product categories (coffee, candles, orthopedic shoes, and compression socks), and samples (students and online panels) from diverse geographies (USA and Western-Europe), ensuring the reliability and generalizability of our findings.

2.8.1. Theoretical Contributions.

This research, by investigating whether, when, and, why consumers respond favourably to self-deprecating advertisements, offers several theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to advertising research which argues that advertisements primarily share positive information about brands (Hernandez et al., 2019; Mo et al., 2018). We show that self-deprecating advertising— introducing only negative connotations about a product or brand – can significantly boost brand trust and reduce advertisement avoidance. Second, literature on self-deprecation presents conflicting findings on whether it leads to positive or negative evaluations (Critcher et al., 2018; DelGreco & Denes, 2020). In responding to the 'whether' and 'when' questions, we reconciled these findings by identifying that self-

deprecation begets favorable responses when used deliberately on low-importance attributes. Third, in addressing the ‘why’ aspect, we found that self-deprecating advertisements enhance brand trust by elevating brand’s social attractiveness which diminishes skepticism. Extant research on skepticism-reduction focuses on the effects of holistic thinking (DeMotta et al., 2023) and curiosity-stimulating information disclosure (Hüttl-Maack et al., 2023). We contribute to this discourse by demonstrating that self-deprecating advertisements can reduce skepticism by enhancing a brand’s social attractiveness. Fourth, we contribute to extant research highlighting mistrust and skepticism towards advertisers (Ketelaar et al., 2015) and their persuasion tactics (Beak & Morimoto, 2012) as primary causes for advertisement avoidance. We identify self-deprecating advertising as a strategy that mitigates these causes, thereby reducing advertisement avoidance. Finally, we build on prior research in impression management, emphasizing the influence of elements like engaging brand narratives and celebrity endorsements (Spear & Roper, 2013) on consumers’ brand perceptions. We illustrate that self-deprecating advertisements enhance a brand’s social attractiveness, prompting positive brand impressions.

2.8.2. *Managerial and Practical Implications.*

Prior research and industry evidence indicate a concerning decline in consumer trust towards advertisers and brands (Ipsos, 2022; Rajavi et al., 2019). This presents a serious problem for marketers as brand trust enhances consumer loyalty, word-of-mouth, and market share expansion (Monahan & Romero, 2020). Our findings offer a potential solution to the declining trust. Brands can leverage self-deprecation across various contexts, including product packaging, social media engagement, customer service, and collaborations with influencers and celebrities, not just advertisements. For example, the brand-ambassador of eHarmony, actress Lindsay Lohan, self-deprecated her single status to promote the dating platform (TrendHunter, 2009). Self-deprecation on product packaging helps differentiate the

brand and establish an image that resonates with consumers. For instance, Oatly, the food company, included a self-deprecating message on their packaging, “*We could have written anything we wanted here, but instead we wrote this. At least what’s inside this package will feel like an upgrade.*” Oatly further employed self-deprecating names for their ice-cream (“*Pretty Average Vanilla*”; Wolfsohn, 2019).

Dwindling trust prompts advertisement avoidance, preventing brand messages from reaching their target consumers (Çelik et al., 2023; McDonald, 2018; Rojas-Méndez et al., 2009). This can create a rift between brands and consumers, resulting in missed opportunities for brands to convey information or address consumer needs, ultimately leading to lost sales (Knittel et al., 2016). Our findings show that self-deprecating advertisements may help advertisers to alleviate avoidance, foster stronger brand trust, and consequently build better communications with consumers.

2.6.3. *Limitations and Directions for Future Research.*

This research has a few limitations that present opportunities for future investigations. While self-deprecating advertisements are infrequently used so far, we contend that the dissemination of our findings might encourage a broader adoption to leverage their trust-boosting benefits. Our findings revealed that the brand trust enhancing effect of self-deprecating advertisements was serially mediated by increased social attractiveness and reduced consumer skepticism. The correlational nature of the relationship between the mediators allows for the possibility of alternative statistical models being significant (Engeler & Barasz, 2021; Pieters, 2017). In other words, when the order of the mediators is changed, the indirect effect remains significant (Hayes, 2022). Nevertheless, we assert the plausibility of our proposed model, as it is grounded in prior literature that suggests that social attractiveness causes skepticism-reduction (Alicke & Zell, 2009;

Edwards et al., 2015; Eisend, 2006) and consumer skepticism influences brand trust (Chari et al., 2016; Nam et al., 2020).

Our studies directly measured consumers' responses to self-deprecating advertisements. However, our methodology did not allow us to understand consumers' interpretations of the self-deprecation or their underlying thought processes. Consumers may perceive the self-deprecation message as humorous and ironic (Bitterly & Brooks, 2020), causing them to interpret the advertisement differently. Future research could employ qualitative methods to disentangle potential interpretations of self-deprecating advertisements. We find that self-deprecation consistently boosts the social attractiveness of brands across various samples, product categories, and country-contexts. This, in turn, leads to decreased consumer skepticism and heightened trust after a single exposure to the advertisement. Future investigations can explore their longitudinal effects, investigating whether the initial boosts in social attractiveness, brand trust, and reduced skepticism persist or diminish over time. We anticipate that the impact of a single exposure to self-deprecating advertisements would be more pronounced for new brands, as consumers are in the process of forming their attitudes toward the brand. However, for established brands, where consumers have already solidified their attitudes and opinions, a single exposure may not suffice to induce attitude change (Campbell & Keller, 2003). Future research could explore the effects of repeated exposure to self-deprecating advertisements for established brands.

Similarly, future research can explore how self-deprecating advertisements affect consumer reactions for various brand types (e.g., brands with distinct personalities), consumer segments (e.g., individuals with varying degrees of social status and self-enhancement needs), and situational contexts (e.g., brand crisis or service failure). Researchers may empirically investigate whether incorporating self-deprecation into charity appeals and public service announcements enhances organizations' social attractiveness and

trustworthiness, potentially reducing consumers' avoidance of such campaigns and encouraging participation in activities benefiting society, such as recycling, sustainable consumption, and supporting charitable causes. In Table 2.5, we outline directions for future research within consumer psychology and marketing.

Table 2.5. Directions for Future Research

<i>Research Domains</i>	<i>Future Research Questions</i>	<i>Theoretical and Practical Importance</i>
<i>Brand Types</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do consumers evaluate self-deprecating advertisements from established (vs. new) brands? • How will brand personality (e.g., sincere or sophisticated) interact with the use of self-deprecation and self-promotion in advertisements? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance our understanding of how brand types affect consumers' responses to self-deprecating advertisements. • Provide insights for marketers on how to effectively utilize self-deprecating advertisements.
<i>Consumers' Individual Differences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which dispositional consumer characteristics (e.g., need for status, self-enhancement needs, and self-construal) affect consumers' evaluation of self-deprecating advertisements? • Which situational characteristics (such as mood and cognitive load) interact with consumers' evaluation of self-deprecating advertisements? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how consumer characteristics affect their responses to self-deprecating advertisements. • Help advertisers identify suitable consumer segments for self-deprecating advertisements.
<i>Diverse Situations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will consumers perceive self-deprecating advertisements during a brand crisis? • How will a brand's self-deprecating response during situations of product and service failure affect repurchase intentions? • Can self-deprecating advertisements in social, cause-related, charity campaigns and public service announcements enhance organizations' social attractiveness and trustworthiness? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the contexts in which self-deprecating advertisements may benefit or harm brands.
<i>Downstream Consequences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How may self-deprecating advertisements affect consumers' word-of-mouth intentions? • What kind of consumer emotions would self-deprecating advertisements generate? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance our knowledge of how self-deprecating advertisements affect consumers' actual behavior or emotions

Appendix. – Supplementary Analyses

A.1. Study 1 - Pre-tests to Establish Attribute Importance

We conducted two pre-tests to identify an LIA. In the first pre-test, participants listed attributes they deemed important or unimportant for evaluating coffee as a product. We chose the most frequently mentioned HIA (“tasty”) and LIA (“fancy”) from the list. A second pretest ascertained the relative importance of these attributes for consumers.

A.1.1. Attribute Elicitation Task

Forty participants (50% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.53$, recruited from Connect by CloudResearch) were instructed to consider coffee as a product and list four important and four unimportant attributes influencing their purchase decisions. The order in which participants listed these attributes (important or unimportant) was counterbalanced. We gathered 320 open-ended responses, equally divided between important and unimportant attributes. Ranking the attributes by their frequency revealed ‘price’ (13.75%), ‘taste’ (9.38%), and ‘flavor’ (8.75%) as the most important attributes for evaluation of coffee. Conversely, ‘brand’ (11.25%), ‘packaging’ (7.50%), price (8.00%), and visual aspects like ‘packaging color’ (4.38%) were assigned less importance. Since ‘price’ ranked high in both important and unimportant attributes, we chose ‘tasty’ as the HIA. Further, as ‘brand’, ‘packaging’, and visual characteristics were considered LIA while evaluating coffee, we selected “fancy” as the designated LIA. Past research has established that consumers infer cues of “fanciness” from attributes such as brand name, packaging, and colour (Tom et al., 1987).

A.1.2. Attribute Importance Pre-test

This pre-test was conducted to verify “tasty” as the HIA and “fancy” as the LIA in the evaluation of coffee. Sixty participants (50% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 37.60$, recruited from Connect by CloudResearch) responded to an attribute-importance measure (“How important

is it for coffee as a product to be “tasty” (“fancy”)?”; 1 = *not important at all*, 9 = *extremely important*). A paired samples t-test showed that “tasty” was rated as a significantly more important attribute than “fancy” ($M_{\text{tasty}} = 8.17$, $M_{\text{fancy}} = 3.27$; $t(59) = 16.21$, $p < .001$). Further, a one-sample t-test suggested that the importance of the “fancy” attribute was significantly lower ($t(59) = -6.28$, $p < .001$), and that of the “tasty” attribute was significantly higher ($t(59) = 18.81$, $p < .001$) than the scale mid-point of 5.

A.2. Study 1 - Pre-tests for Advertisement Deliberateness

Advertisements are deliberate efforts to impress consumers (Houman Andersen, 2001). Therefore, we expected both self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements to receive equally high ratings on perceived deliberateness. Fifty participants (50% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.04$ years) recruited via Connect by CloudResearch were randomly assigned to view either the self-deprecating or the self-promoting advertisement, featuring the fictional coffee brand, “Nexo” (See Figure 2.1 in the manuscript). The stimuli were designed based on Carlsberg’s advertisement, “Probably not the best beer in the world.” Subsequently, participants responded to a 3-item 9-point Likert scale anchored on 1 = *not at all* and 9 = *to a great extent*: “To what extent is the message of this advertisement *deliberate / intentional / willful* ($\alpha = .887$, Caruso et al., 2016 and Yin, Jia, & Zheng, 2021).

As expected, a one-sample t-test showed that perceived deliberateness ratings of both self-deprecating ($M = 7.39$, $SD = 1.34$) and self-promoting ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 1.36$) advertisements were significantly above the scale mid-point of 5 ($t(24) = 8.89$, $p < .001$ and $t(24) = 10.29$, $p < .001$, respectively). There was no significant difference in perceived deliberateness between the advertisement types ($F(1, 49) = 1.16$, $p = .286$).

A.3. Study 1 - Pre-tests for Stimuli Equivalence

This pre-test ensured that there was no significant difference in aesthetic appeal or processing fluency between advertisement types. Fifty participants (48% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.70$ years) viewed either the self-deprecating or the self-promoting advertisement (Figure 2.1 in the manuscript) and evaluated its aesthetic appeal (aesthetically unappealing – aesthetically appealing) and processing fluency (difficult to read – easy to read) on 9-point semantic differential scales. Two independent-samples t-tests revealed no significant differences between self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements on aesthetic appeal ($M_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 7.00$ (1.35), $M_{\text{self-promoting}} = 7.62$ (1.17), $t(48) = -1.73$, $p = .091$) and processing fluency ($M_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 7.29$ (2.26), $M_{\text{self-promoting}} = 7.85$ (1.88), $t(48) = -0.964$, $p = .340$).

A.4. Study 1 - Pre-tests for Consumer Sentiment

Insights from our sentiment analyses of actual self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements (Appendix A.15) revealed that consumers possess a positive sentiment towards both self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements. To check the valence of consumers' sentiments towards our stimuli, we conducted a pre-test. One hundred participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.98$ years, 48% females) were randomly assigned to view either the self-deprecating or the self-promoting advertisement of the fictitious coffee brand, "Nexo." Afterward, they were presented with the following definition of consumer sentiments (adapted from Wang et al., 2023, p. 749): "Your sentiment depicts the positive, neutral, or negative emotions associated with your response to this advertisement. A positive sentiment indicates the presence of positive emotions, and a negative sentiment indicates the presence of negative emotions." Following the definition, in line with prior research on assessing consumer sentiments (Nakov et al., 2019; Rosenthal et al., 2019), participants were asked to

express their overall sentiment about the advertisement using a one-item 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *highly negative* to 5 = *highly positive*. Finally, to replicate the findings of the sentiment analyses reported in Appendix A.15, we collected qualitative responses by asking participants to share their thoughts about the advertisements.

Results from an independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference among participants' sentiments towards the self-deprecating ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.89$) and the self-promoting ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.99$) advertisements ($t(98) = -1.25$, $p = .218$). Additional one-sample t-tests showed that consumers' sentiment towards both the self-deprecating ($t(48) = 4.16$, $p < .001$) and the self-promoting ($t(50) = 5.51$, $p < .001$) advertisement were higher than the scale mid-point of 3. Thus, participants exhibited significantly more positive than negative sentiments toward both the self-deprecating and the self-promoting advertisements.

Next, we analyzed the sentiment of consumers' qualitative responses to the advertisements designed for the Study 1, using the "pysentimiento" natural language processing algorithm (Pérez, Giudici, & Luque, 2021). In the self-deprecating condition ($N = 49$), the response of 25 participants (51.02%) was assigned a positive sentiment, 7 responses (14.29%) were assigned a neutral sentiment, and 17 (34.69%) were negative. A chi-square test revealed that participants tend to respond to the self-deprecating advertisement with a positive rather than a neutral or negative sentiment ($\chi^2 = 9.96$, $p = .007$). Performing a similar analysis in the self-promoting condition ($N = 51$), we found that 35 responses (68.63%) had a positive sentiment, 4 responses (7.84%) were neutral, and 12 responses (23.53%) were assigned a negative sentiment. Results from a chi-square test showed that participants tend to respond to the self-promoting advertisement with a positive rather than a negative or neutral sentiment ($\chi^2 = 30.47$, $p < .001$). Our findings indicate that

consumers display positive sentiments toward both the self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements.

A.5. Study 2 – Pretest on Attribute Importance, Advertisement Deliberateness, Stimuli Equivalence

Fifty participants (48% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.08$ years, recruited from Connect by CloudResearch) viewed either a self-deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement for a fictitious candle brand, Glow (See Figure 2.3 in the manuscript). Then, they reported whether (1) the self-deprecated attribute is assigned low importance, (2) self-deprecation is perceived as deliberate, and (3) stimuli are perceived equivalent on aspects such as aesthetic appeal, fluency, and consumer sentiment valence, using the measures in the pre-tests for Study 1.

Independent sample t-tests showed that perceived importance of the “fancy” attribute was significantly lower than the scale mid-point of 5 (p 's < .001) for both self-deprecating ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 2.14$) and self-promoting advertisements ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 2.56$). Thus, “fancy” is an LIA for the product category of candles. Further, a one-sample t-test showed that the perceived deliberateness ratings for both self-deprecating ($M = 7.59$, $SD = 1.38$) and self-promoting ($M = 6.88$, $SD = 1.62$) advertisements were significantly greater than the scale mid-point of 5 (p 's > .001). A series of independent-samples t-test found that the advertisements did not significantly differ in their perceived deliberateness ($t(48) = 1.66$, $p = .104$, their aesthetic appeal ($M_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 4.64$ (2.18), $M_{\text{self-promoting}} = 4.68$ (2.27), $t(48) = -0.06$, $p = .950$) and processing fluency ($M_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 6.32$ (2.88), $M_{\text{self-promoting}} = 7.48$ (2.42), $t(48) = -1.54$, $p = .130$).

A.6. Study 2 – Pretest for Consumer Sentiment

We conducted this pre-test to ensure that consumers do not possess significantly varying sentiments toward the self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements employed in Study 2. One hundred participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.18$ years, 48% females) were randomly assigned to view either the self-deprecating or the self-promoting advertisement of the fictitious candle brand, “Glow.” Afterward, they were presented with the following definition of consumer sentiments (adapted from Wang et al., 2023, p. 749): “Your sentiment depicts the positive, neutral, or negative emotions associated with your response to this advertisement. A positive sentiment indicates the presence of positive emotions, and a negative sentiment indicates the presence of negative emotions.” Following the definition, in line with prior research on assessing consumer sentiments (Nakov et al., 2019; Rosenthal et al., 2019), participants were asked to express their overall sentiment about the advertisement using a one-item 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *highly negative* to 5 = *highly positive*.

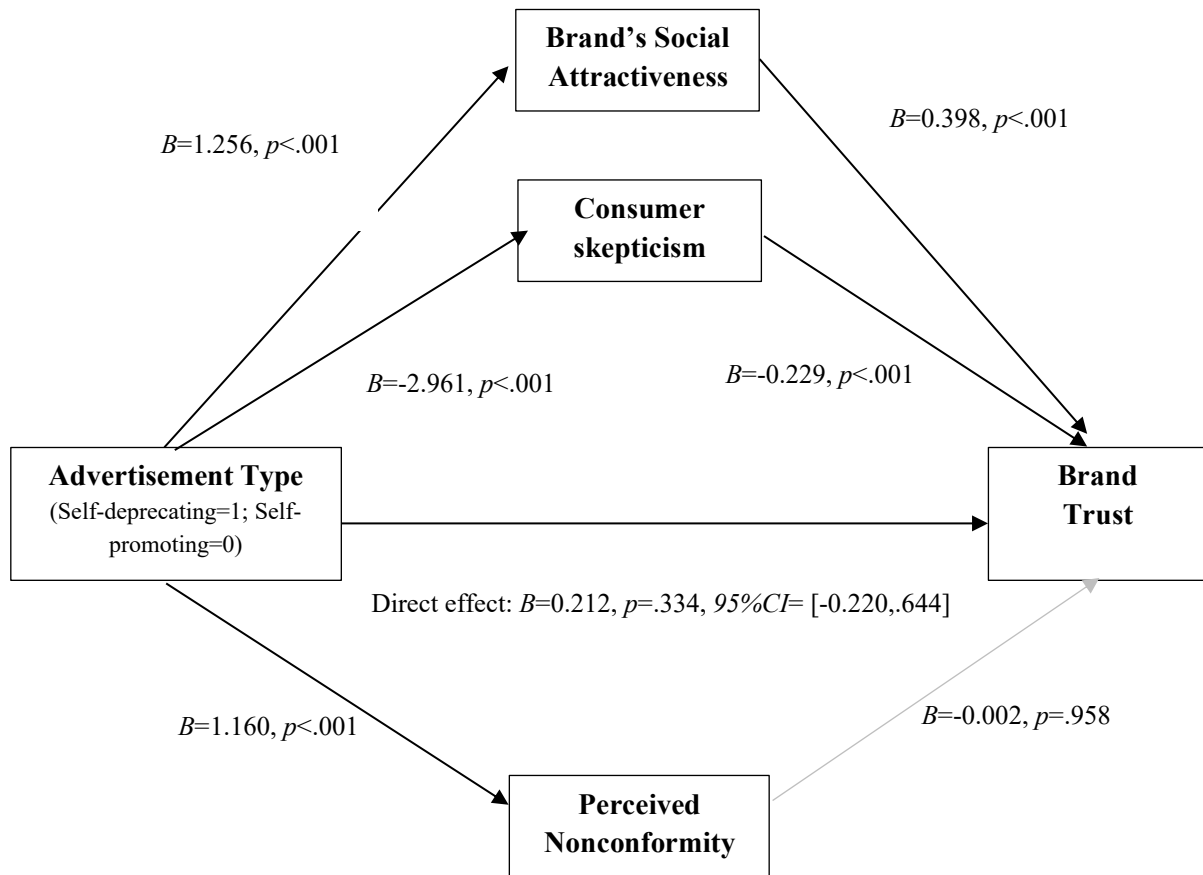
An independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference among participants’ sentiments towards the self-deprecating ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.76$) and the self-promoting ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.94$) advertisements ($t(98) = -0.82$, $p = .416$). A pair of one-sample t-tests showed that consumers’ sentiment towards both the self-deprecating ($t(49) = 2.04$, $p = .024$) and the self-promoting ($t(49) = 2.70$, $p = .005$) advertisement were higher than the scale mid-point of 3. Thus, participants exhibited significantly more positive than negative sentiments toward the self-deprecating and the self-promoting advertisements

A.7. Study 2 – Ancillary Analyses – Ruling out Nonconformity and Engagement as Alternative Explanations:

In Study 2, we measured the advertisement's perceived non-conformity alongside brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness. As reported in Table 2.1, the self-deprecating advertisement ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 2.22$) was perceived as significantly more nonconforming than the self-promoting advertisement ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 2.17$; $t(195) = 3.79$, $p < .001$). We conducted a parallel mediation test to rule it out as an alternative explanation.

A mediation test with advertisement type as predictor and brand trust as the outcome variable with perceived nonconformity, brand's social attractiveness and consumer skepticism as parallel mediators (PROCESS Model 4, Hayes, 2022, 10,000 samples) revealed a non-significant indirect effect through perceived nonconformity ($B = -.002$, $95\%CI = [-.105, .108]$), but significant indirect effects through brand's social attractiveness ($B = .500$, $95\%CI = [.251, .779]$) and consumer skepticism ($B = .677$, $95\%CI = [.336, 1.047]$) (See Figure 2.6 below). Thus, we ruled out perceived nonconformity as a potential explanation. Further, replicating Study 1, we found no significant difference in the time spent observing the advertisements ($p = .334$), eliminating engagement as an alternative explanation.

Figure 2.31. Study 2 Parallel Mediation Path Coefficients – Ruling out Perceived Nonconformity as an Alternative Explanation



A.8. Study 4 – Pretest on Attribute Importance and Advertisement Deliberateness

Forty female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.03$ years) residing in the United States were recruited from Connect by CloudResearch. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the four advertisements presented in Figure 2.7 of the manuscript. Thereafter, all participants reported whether (1) the self-deprecated attribute of “photogenic” is assigned low importance in the product assessment of orthopedic shoes, and (2) self-deprecation in the advertisement is perceived as deliberate using the same measures as in the pre-tests for Study 1.

We conducted one sample t-tests to check whether perceived importance of the “photogenic” attribute was significantly lower than the scale mid-point of 5. In the high-price condition, “photogenic” was perceived as LIA in both self-deprecating ($M = 3.00$; $SD = 1.94$, $t(9) = -3.25$, $p = .005$) and self-promoting ($M = 2.80$; $SD = 2.04$, $t(9) = -3.40$, $p = .004$) advertisement conditions. In the low-price condition, participants in the self-deprecating advertisement condition perceived “photogenic” as an LIA, but the effect was marginally significant ($M = 3.70$; $SD = 2.45$, $t(9) = -1.68$, $p = .064$). However, those in the low-price self-promoting advertisement condition did not perceive “photogenic” as an LIA ($M = 4.40$; $SD = 2.46$, $t(9) = -.772$, $p = .230$). Thus, participants in all but the self-promoting advertisement X low-price condition perceived “photogenic” to be an LIA for orthopedic shoes. We would like to note that even those in the self-promoting advertisement X low-price condition rated “photogenic” lower than the scale mid-point of 5, but not significantly so.

The ratings of perceived deliberateness were similar for both high- and low-price conditions. Specifically, within the high-price condition, one-sample t-tests showed that the perceived deliberateness ratings for both self-deprecating ($M = 7.37$, $SD = 2.00$, $t(9) = 3.74$, $p = .005$) and self-promoting ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 1.02$, $t(10) = 7.55$, $p < .001$) advertisements

were significantly greater than the scale mid-point of 5. Similarly, within the low-price condition, one-sample t-tests showed that the perceived deliberateness ratings for both self-deprecating ($M = 7.37, SD = 2.07, t(10) = 2.75, p = .023$) and self-promoting ($M = 7.83, SD = 1.37, t(10) = 6.53, p < .001$) advertisements were significantly greater than the scale mid-point of 5. A series of ANOVA tests showed that the advertisements did not significantly differ in their perceived deliberateness within both high price ($M_{self-deprecating} = 7.37 (2.00)$ vs. $M_{self-deprecating} = 7.43 (1.02); F(1, 19) = 0.01, p = .926$) and low price conditions ($M_{self-deprecating} = 6.80 (2.07)$ vs. $M_{self-deprecating} = 7.83 (1.37); F(1, 20) = 1.73, p = .205$). Hence, the self-deprecating and self-promoting received high ratings of perceived deliberateness which did not significantly differ from each other.

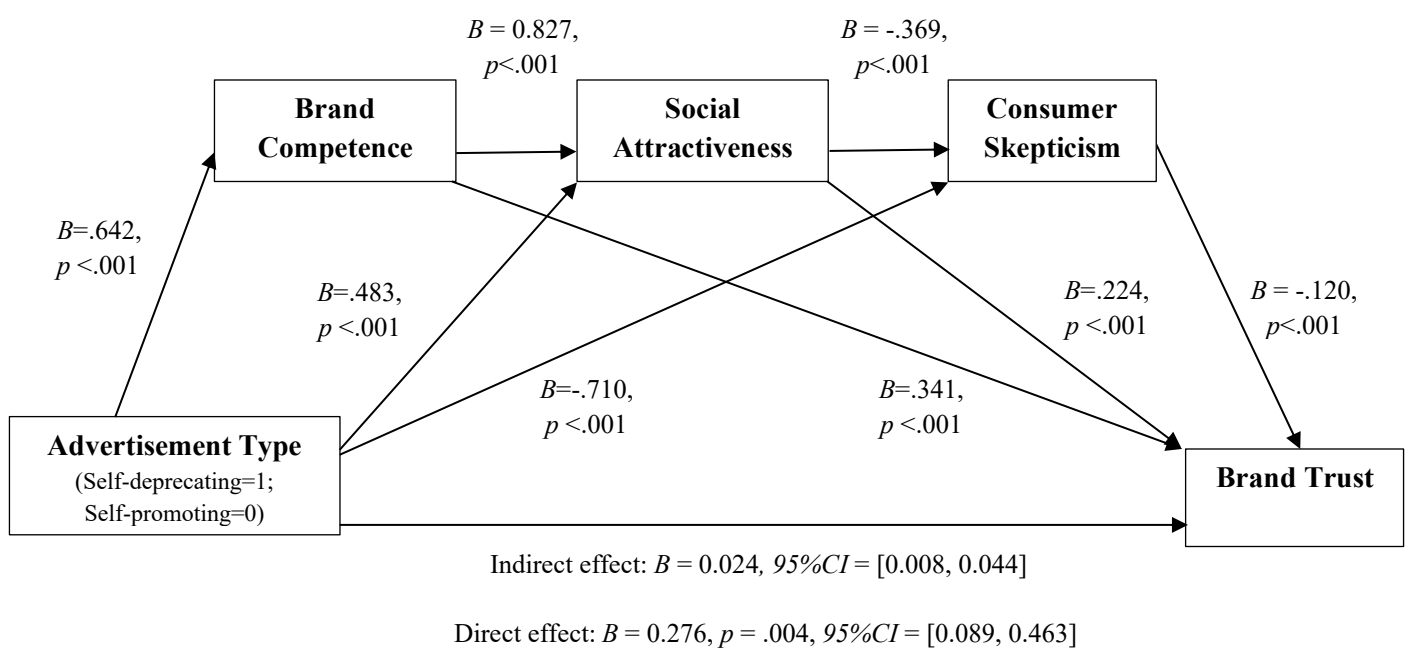
A.9. Study 4 – Ancillary Analyses with Brand's Perceived Warmth and Competence

Prior research suggests that an individual's social attractiveness hinges on their warmth and competence (Andersen & Guerrero, 1996; Chen & Guo, 2021). Research has consistently shown that individuals perceived as competent and effective are more likely to be considered socially attractive and likeable compared to those perceived as incompetent (Helmreich, Aronson, & LeFan, 1970; Rosenfield, Stephan, & Lucker, 1981; Singh & Tor, 2008). Montoya and Horton (2014) further suggest that warmth is a significant predictor of interpersonal attraction. In Study 4, we measured the brand's perceived warmth and competence to understand how these perceptions affect our hypothesized effects. The scales are presented in Appendix A.12.

ANOVA tests showed that advertisement type had a significant effect on brand's warmth and competence (warmth: $F(1, 487) = 8.68, p = .002$; competence: $F(1, 487) = 14.16, p < .001$) but price and their interaction did not (p 's $> .05$). This aligns with prior research showing that self-deprecation can boost warmth and competence (Bitterly & Schweitzer,

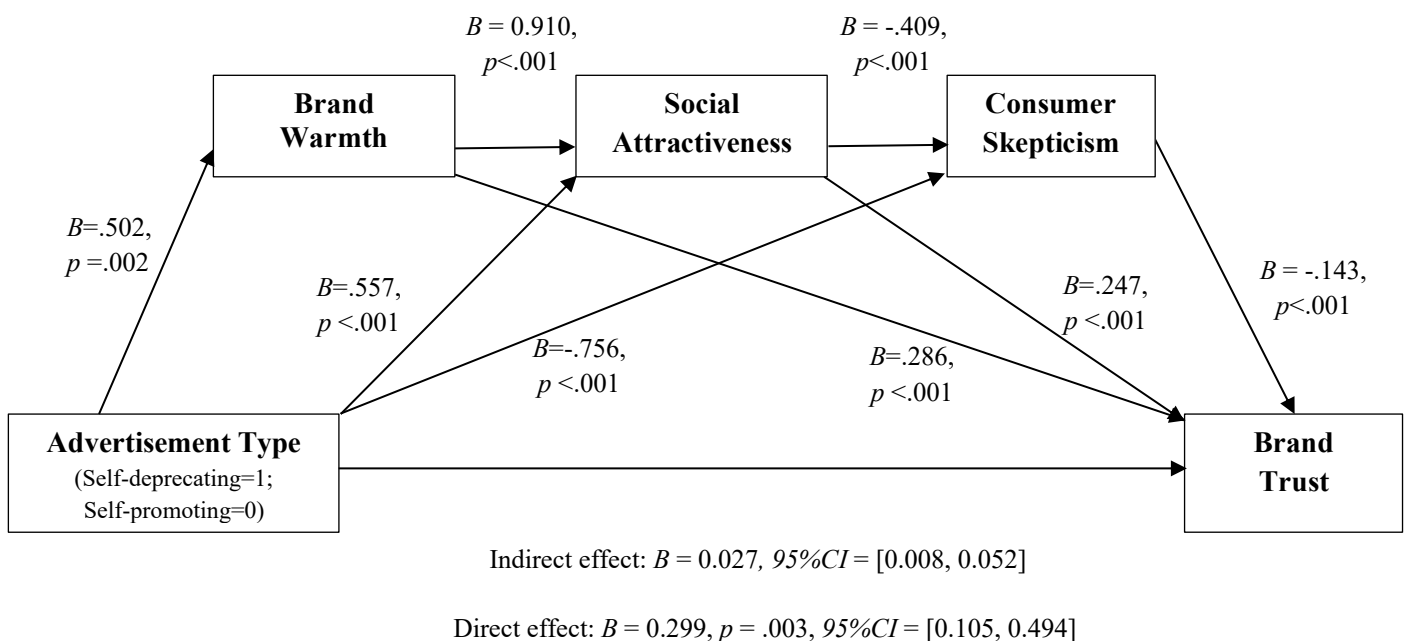
2019). Price did not have a significant effect on brands' warmth and competence, and neither did the interaction of advertisement type and product price. Only the main effect of advertisement type was significant on brand's warmth and competence, therefore, we collapsed the data and tested a serial mediation model (Process Model 6; Hayes, 2022; 10,000 bootstrapped samples) with advertisement type (1 = self-deprecating; 0 = self-promoting) as predictor, brand's perceived competence as mediator 1, brand's social attractiveness as mediator 2, consumer skepticism as mediator 3, and brand trust as outcome variable. The indirect effect of advertisement type on brand trust through brand's perceived competence, social attractiveness and consumer skepticism was significant and positive ($B = .024$, $se = .009$, $95\%CI = [.008, .044]$) (See Figure 2.13 for all path coefficients). Thus, self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements significantly increase the brand's perceived competence, which leads to an increase in social attractiveness, which then reduces skepticism, leading to higher brand trust.

Figure 2.33. Study 4 – Serial Mediation Analysis with Brand Competence, Social Attractiveness, and Consumer Skepticism as Mediators



Another serial mediation model (Process Model 6; Hayes, 2022; 10,000 bootstrapped samples) with advertisement type (1 = self-deprecating; 0 = self-promoting) as predictor, brand's perceived warmth as mediator 1, brand's social attractiveness as mediator 2, consumer skepticism as mediator 3, and brand trust as outcome variable. The indirect effect of advertisement type on brand trust through brand's perceived warmth, social attractiveness and consumer skepticism was significant and positive ($B = .027$, $se = .011$, $95\%CI = [.008, .052]$) (See Figure S2.14 for all path coefficients). Self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements significantly increase the brand's perceived warmth, which leads to an increase in social attractiveness, which then reduces skepticism, leading to higher brand trust. These analyses establish that brand's perceived warmth and competence are antecedents of brand's social attractiveness.

Figure 2.35. Study 4 – Serial Mediation Analysis with Brand Warmth, Social Attractiveness, and Consumer Skepticism as Mediators



A.10. Study 5 - Attribute Importance and Advertisement Deliberateness Pre-test

Sixty participants (50% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 40.1$ years) residing in the United States were recruited from Connect by CloudResearch. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the four advertisements presented in Figure 2.8 of the manuscript. Thereafter, all participants reported whether (1) the self-deprecated attribute of “photogenic” is assigned low importance in the product assessment of compression socks, and (2) self-deprecation in the advertisement is perceived as deliberate using the same measures as in the pre-tests for Study 1.

One sample t-tests showed that perceived importance of the “photogenic” attribute was significantly lower than the scale mid-point of 5 for both self-deprecating ($M = 2.97$; $SD = 2.19$, $t(29) = -5.09$, $p < .001$) and self-promoting ($M = 3.23$; $SD = 2.52$, $t(29) = -3.85$, $p < .001$) advertisements. Thus, “photogenic” is an LIA for the product category of compression socks. Further, one-sample t-tests showed that the perceived deliberateness ratings for both self-deprecating ($M = 7.76$, $SD = 1.28$) and self-promoting ($M = 7.92$, $SD = .99$) advertisements were significantly greater than the scale mid-point of 5 (p 's $> .001$). A series of independent-samples t-test found that the advertisements did not significantly differ in their perceived deliberateness ($t(48) = -.565$, $p = .574$).

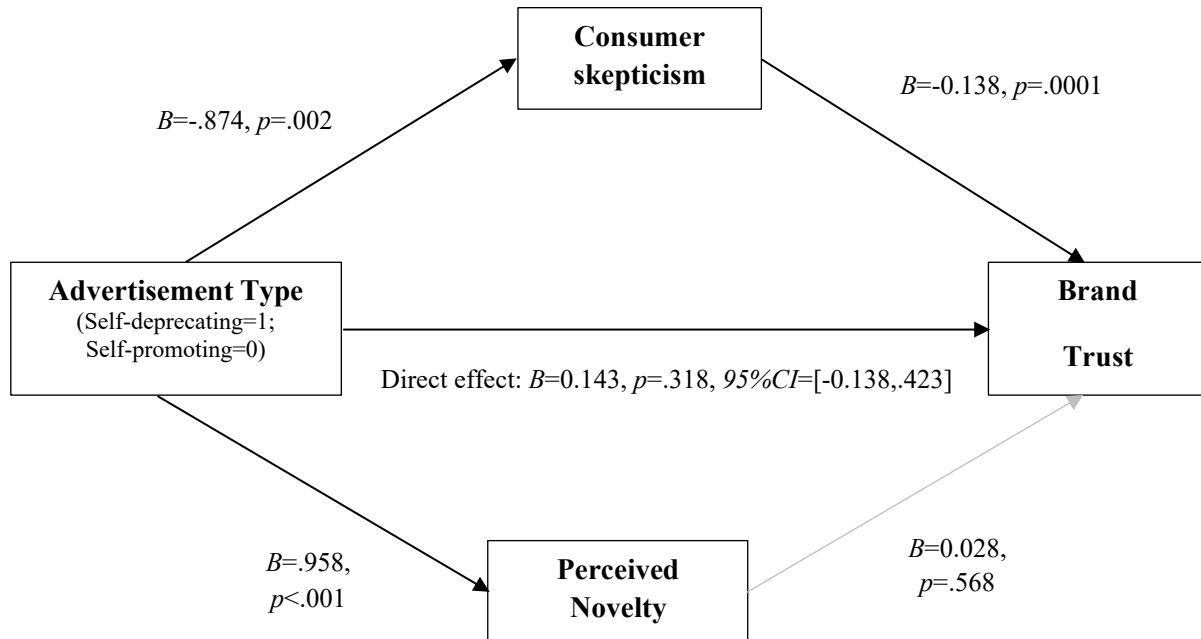
A.11. Study 5 - Ancillary Analysis with Novelty as an Alternative Explanation

In Study 5, we measured the advertisement’s perceived novelty alongside brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand’s social attractiveness. As reported in Table 2.1 of the main manuscript, the self-deprecating advertisement was perceived as significantly more novel ($t(203) = 3.68$, $p < .001$) than the self-promoting advertisement.

A parallel mediation test (Process model 4, Hayes, 2022, 10,000 samples) with advertisement type as the predictor, brand trust as the outcome, and consumer skepticism

and novelty as parallel mediation was conducted. The test revealed a non-significant indirect effect through perceived novelty ($B = .026$, $95\%CI = [.091,.149]$), but significant indirect effect through consumer skepticism ($B = .121$, $95\%CI = [.028,.250]$) (See Figure 2.15 below). Thus, we ruled out perceived novelty as a potential explanation.

Figure 2.37. Study 5 Parallel Mediation Path Coefficients - Ruling our Novelty as an Alternative Explanation



A.12. Measures and Reliability Coefficients.

Measures	Scale	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4	Study 5	References
Brand Trust (α)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a trustworthy brand. • This is a reliable brand. • This is an honest brand. 	.90	.95	.94	.94	.93	Adapted from Ohanian (1990)
Consumer Skepticism (α)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am skeptical about this advertising claim. • I think this advertising claim is not believable. • This advertising claim is deceptive. 	.82	.91	.92	.95	.93	Adapted from Kirmani & Zhu (2007)
Brand's Social Attractiveness (α)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like to have a friendly chat with this personified brand. • This personified brand could be my friend. • This personified brand is likeable. 	-	.94	.89	.94	-	Adapted from Aggarwal (2004)
Perceived Self-deprecation Manipulation Check (r)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This advertisement seems to be self-deprecating. • The brand seems to be making fun of itself in the advertisement. 	.72	.89	.93	.89	.89	Adapted from Zeng et al. (2020)
Warmth (r)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warm • Friendly 	-	-	-	.93	-	Adopted from Bitterly & Schweitzer (2019)
Competence (r)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competent • Capable 	-	-	-	.96	-	
Product Price Perceptions (α)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compared to its competitors, the prices of Bukin are higher. • I expect that the overall prices of Bukin are very high. • Bukin's prices are higher than average market prices of the same products. 	-	-	-	.94	-	Adapted from Kukar-Kinney & Grewal, 2007
Advertisement Avoidance (α)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would avoid this advertisement and scroll down the web-page. • I would intentionally ignore this advertisement. 	-	-	-	-	.92	Adapted from Cho & Cheon, 2004

- I would not pay attention to this advertisement.
 - It would be better if this advertisement did not appear on the web-page I was scrolling.
-

A.13. Discriminant Validity Tests

A13.1 - Study 1

To test the discriminant validity between measures of brand trust and consumer skepticism, we performed the Fornell-Larcker test (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We calculated the average variance extracted (AVE) for each scale. The AVE of brand trust scale was .783, and the AVE of consumer skepticism scale was .657 (the minimum threshold level is .50). Both AVEs exceeded the square of the correlation between the two factors ($r^2 = .298$). Thus, brand trust and consumer skepticism are distinct scales that measure distinct constructs.

A13.2 - Study 2

We performed the Fornell-Larcker test to ensure discriminant validity between the measures of brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We calculated the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct. The AVEs of brand trust (.712), consumer skepticism (.760), and brand's social attractiveness (.772) were above the minimum threshold level of .50. The three AVEs exceeded the square of the correlation between the brand trust and consumer skepticism ($r^2 = .319$), brand's social attractiveness and consumer skepticism ($r^2 = .190$), and brand trust and brand's social attractiveness ($r^2 = .461$). Thus, brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness are distinct scales that measure distinct constructs.

A13.3 – Study 3

We conducted another Fornell-Larcker test to ensure discriminant validity between the measures of brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The AVE (average variance extracted) for the brand trust scale was .782, the consumer skepticism scale was .842, and brand's social attractiveness scale was .831.

All three values were greater than the minimum threshold of .50 and exceeded the square of correlation between the scales of brand trust and consumer skepticism ($r^2 = .067$), brand's social attractiveness and consumer skepticism ($r^2 = .052$), and brand trust and brand's social attractiveness ($r^2 = .433$). Hence, the brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness are distinct and measure distinct constructs.

A13.4 – Study 4

The Fornell-Larcker test was performed to establish the discriminant validity between the measures of brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was measured. The AVE of the brand trust (.626), consumer skepticism (.762), and brand's social attractiveness (.531) were above the minimum threshold of .50. The AVE of brand trust (.626) was greater than the square of the inter-construct correlation between brand trust and consumer skepticism ($r^2 = .342$) and brand trust and social attractiveness ($r^2 = .507$). Similarly, the AVE of the consumer skepticism scale ($r^2 = .762$) was greater than the square of the inter-construct correlation between consumer skepticism and brand trust ($r^2 = .342$) and consumer skepticism and social attractiveness ($r^2 = .308$). The AVE of brand's social attractiveness (.531) was greater than the square of the correlation between brand trust and social attractiveness ($r^2 = .507$) and consumer skepticism and social attractiveness ($r^2 = .308$). These results suggest that brand trust, consumer skepticism, and brand's social attractiveness are distinct scales that measure distinct constructs.

A13.5. – Study 5

The Fornell-Larcker test was performed to establish the discriminant validity between the measures of brand trust, consumer skepticism, and advertisement avoidance

(Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was measured. The AVE of the brand trust (.298), consumer skepticism (.838), and advertisement avoidance (.718) were above the minimum threshold of .50. The three AVEs exceeded the square of the inter-construct correlation between brand trust and consumer skepticism ($r^2 = .142$), brand trust and advertisement avoidance ($r^2 = .194$), consumer skepticism and advertisement avoidance ($r^2 = .082$). Therefore, brand trust, consumer skepticism, and advertisement avoidance are distinct scales that measure distinct constructs.

A.14. Additional Experiment

In Study 3, we examined how the interaction between advertisement type and attribute type influences a brand's social attractiveness, consumer skepticism and brand trust. We used pretested attributes - being "tasty" as HIA and "fancy" as LIA. We acknowledge that these attributes might have led to different consumer inferences and perceptions. To account for potential variations in consumer inferences, we conducted this supplementary study in which we maintained the same attribute, "fancy," but manipulated the perceived importance of this attribute based on the product type. Specifically, we used the same product, a candle, but presented it as either a hedonic product (scented candle) or a utilitarian product (insect-repellent candle). We expected the attribute "fancy" would be perceived as low importance for the utilitarian product but high importance for the hedonic product. By employing this approach, we were able to control for any potential disparities in consumer perceptions that may arise due to the utilization of different attributes.

Pre-test 1

Participants ($N = 49$, 50% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.63$ years) were randomly assigned to view one of the four advertisements with varied taglines. Those in the self-deprecating advertisement and hedonic product condition read the tagline, "*Probably not the fanciest scented candle in the world*", while those in the self-promoting advertisement and hedonic product condition read, "*Probably the fanciest scented candle in the world.*" Similarly, participants in the self-deprecating advertisement and utilitarian product condition saw the advertisement with the tagline, "*Probably not the fanciest insect-repellent candle in the world*", while those in the self-promoting advertisement and utilitarian product condition read, "*Probably the fanciest insect-repellent candle in the world.*" To strengthen the hedonic/utilitarian manipulation, advertisements in the hedonic condition had a smaller text

mentioning, “*Enjoy life and float away on a gentle cloud of fragrance*”, while those in the utilitarian condition included the text, “*Feel protected – forget about mosquitos and bugs.*” The manipulation of hedonic and utilitarian product types was adopted from Klein and Melnyk (2016). Thereafter, participants were asked to rate their perception of the level of self-deprecation in the advertisements with the following items on a 9-point Likert (1 = *strongly disagree* and 9 = *strongly agree*); (1) “This advertisement seems to be self-deprecating,” and (2) “The brand seems to be making fun of itself in the advertisement” ($r = .962$). Finally, participants rated whether the product category was hedonic/utilitarian on a 3-item, 9-point semantic differential scale (useful-enjoyable; functional-fun; practical-pleasurable, $\alpha = .958$, adopted from Reich & Pittman, 2020).

A two-way ANOVA test showed that the participants in the self-deprecating advertisement condition ($M = 7.42$) perceived the advertisement as significantly more self-deprecating than those in the self-promoting advertisement condition ($M = 2.80$) ($p < .001$). The main effect of product type ($p = .114$) and the interaction effect of advertisement type and product type ($p = .972$) were not significant on perceived self-deprecation of the advertisement. Another two-way ANOVA test revealed that participants found the scented candle ($M = 6.30$) to be significantly more hedonic than the insect-repellent candle ($M = 2.20$) ($p < .001$). Further, the main effect of advertisement type ($p = .120$) and the interaction effect of product type and advertisement type ($p = .914$) were not significant on participants’ hedonic ratings of the product. Thus, our manipulations of advertisement type and product type were successful, and both manipulations were orthogonal to each other.

Pre-test 2

We expected the attribute ‘fancy’ to be perceived as less important for evaluating insect-repellent candles compared to scented candles. This distinction arises from the utilitarian nature of insect-repellent candles, which offer functionality-related benefits, as

opposed to scented candles, which are primarily decorative and provide pleasure-related benefits (Klein & Melnyk, 2016). To test this, we recruited 101 participants (49.5% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.28$ years) from Connect by CloudResearch. We employed a randomized within-subjects design and asked the participants to assess the importance of the attribute 'fancy' on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 9 (*very important*) for both scented (insect-repellent) candles and scented candles (hedonic product). A paired samples t-test revealed that the 'fancy' attribute held significantly less importance in the evaluation of the utilitarian product ($M = 2.72$) versus the hedonic product ($M = 5.38$; $t(100) = 10.68$, $p < .001$).

To further understand whether the 'fancy' attribute was indeed perceived as LIA for the utilitarian product and HIA for the hedonic product, we conducted separate one-sample pretests for each candle type. The analysis showed that for the insect-repellent candle (utilitarian product), the 'fancy' attribute was significantly below the scale mid-point of 5 ($t(100) = -10.47$, $p < .001$). However, participants did not perceive the 'fancy' attribute as HIA even when the candle was presented as a hedonic product with the slogan “Enjoy life and float away on a gentle cloud of fragrance.” While the importance score improved, it did not reach statistical significance above the scale mid-point of 5 ($t(100) = 1.54$, $p = .063$).

Main Study

This study examined the effect of advertisement type (self-deprecating vs. self-promoting) and attribute importance (mid-level importance: hedonic product vs. low importance: utilitarian product) on brand trust. We recruited 367 participants (49% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.20$ years, USA residents) from Connect by CloudResearch to participate in this study. The participants were randomly assigned to view one of the four advertisements displayed in Table S2.2. Thereafter, participants responded to the brand trust measure used in Studies 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 ($\alpha = .954$, scale items reported in Appendix A.12) and a perceived

self-deprecation manipulation check question ($r = .928$, measured as in Studies 1-5). Finally, they reported the whether the product category was hedonic/utilitarian on a 3-item, 9-point semantic differential scale (useful-enjoyable; functional-fun; practical-pleasurable, $\alpha = .946$) and reported their age and gender.

A two-way ANOVA with advertisement type and product type as fixed factors and perceived self-deprecation as the dependent variable tested the effectiveness of the advertisement type manipulation. As expected, advertisement type had a significant main effect on perceived self-deprecation, such that the self-deprecating advertisement ($M = 6.60$, $SD = 2.15$) was perceived as significantly more self-deprecating than the self-promoting one ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 2.14$, $F(1, 363) = 262.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .420$). The main effect of product type and its interaction effect with advertisement type were not significant (p 's $> .1$). Another two-way ANOVA test checked the effectiveness of the product type manipulation. Advertisement type and product type were fixed factors and product hedonicity was the dependent variable. The main effect of product type was significant, such that scented candle ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 2.00$) was perceived as a significantly more hedonic product category than insect-repellent candle ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 2.17$, $F(1, 363) = 255.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .413$). The effect of advertisement type and the interaction effect were not significant (p 's $> .1$). Thus, both advertisement type and product type were successfully manipulated, and the two manipulations were orthogonal to each other.

We ran another ANOVA test with advertisement type and attribute importance as fixed factors and brand trust as the dependent variable. Given that we are comparing an LIA with a mid-level importance attribute (not an HIA), neither the main effects of advertisement type nor attribute importance, nor their interaction, had a significant impact on participants' brand trust (p 's $> .05$). Pertinent to our hypotheses, simple contrasts revealed that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement led to significantly greater brand trust within

the LIA condition ($M_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 6.28 (1.78)$; $M_{\text{self-promoting}} = 5.66 (1.93)$, $F(1, 363) = 5.08$, $p = .025$, $\eta^2 = .029$). However, the effect disappeared when the attribute was no longer perceived as a LIA ($M_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 5.93 (1.83)$; $M_{\text{self-promoting}} = 5.86 (1.85)$, $F(1, 363) = .061$, $p = .805$). This study replicated the prior studies, by demonstrating the positive effect of self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) on brand trust within LIA condition and provided further evidence on the role of attribute importance in evaluation of self-deprecating advertisements.

Table 2.6. Stimuli– Self-deprecating vs. Self-promoting advertisements for Hedonic vs. Utilitarian Products

Self-deprecating Hedonic Candle	Self-promoting Hedonic Candle
 <p data-bbox="292 864 675 887">Enjoy life and float away on a gentle cloud of fragrance</p> <p data-bbox="284 1196 683 1301">NOT ^ PERHAPS THE FANCIEST SCENTED CANDLE</p>	 <p data-bbox="866 864 1249 887">Enjoy life and float away on a gentle cloud of fragrance</p> <p data-bbox="874 1216 1273 1283">PERHAPS THE FANCIEST SCENTED CANDLE</p>
Self-deprecating Utilitarian Candle	Self-promoting Utilitarian Candle
 <p data-bbox="308 1413 659 1435">Feel protected - forget about mosquitos and bugs</p> <p data-bbox="284 1744 683 1850">NOT ^ PERHAPS THE FANCIEST INSECT-REPELLENT CANDLE</p>	 <p data-bbox="882 1413 1233 1435">Feel protected - forget about mosquitos and bugs</p> <p data-bbox="874 1760 1273 1827">PERHAPS THE FANCIEST INSECT-REPELLENT CANDLE</p>

A.15. Sentiment Analyses on Real Advertisements

To gain insights into how consumers respond to real-world self-deprecating advertisements, we conducted sentiment analyses on consumer-generated comments made in response to three advertisements shared either on YouTube or Instagram. The initial analysis centred on a self-deprecating video advertisement posted on YouTube. In this advertisement, a website-builder company called Wix engaged in self-deprecation regarding their frequent advertising on social media. To ensure that consumers indeed perceived this advertisement as self-deprecating, we conducted a pre-test.

A.15.1. Pre-test to measure perceived self-deprecation of the YouTube Advertisement

Participants ($N = 30$, 50% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.93$ years) were exposed to the YouTube advertisement featuring the brand Wix. After viewing the advertisement, participants were asked to evaluate its perceived self-deprecation using a 2-item, 9-point Likert scale anchored on 1 = *strongly disagree* and 9 = *strongly agree* (adapted from Zeng et al., 2020) – (1) “The advertisement seems to be self-deprecating,” (2) “The brand seems to be making fun of itself in the advertisement” ($r = .848$). The results derived from a one-sample t-test showed that the perceived self-deprecation of the Wix advertisement ($M = 6.73$, $SD = 2.16$) was significantly higher than the scale mid-point of 5 ($t(29) = 4.39$, $p < .001$).

A.15.2. Sentiment analysis of users’ comments on the YouTube Advertisement

Employing “pysentimiento”, a natural language processing algorithm trained on user-generated social media content (Pérez, Giudici, & Luque, 2021), we assessed the sentiment of consumers’ comments to the self-deprecating advertisement posted on YouTube. The algorithm “pysentimiento” assigns a numerical value (1, 0, -1) to a given text input based on whether the sentiment conveyed is positive, neutral, or negative, respectively. The YouTube advertisement evoked 109 consumer comments (data extracted on

03/31/2023). The algorithm categorized 56 comments (51.37%) as positive, 27 comments (24.77%) as negative, and 26 comments (23.86%) as neutral. A chi-square test confirmed that consumers' sentiments toward the advertisement were significantly more positive than negative or neutral ($\chi^2 = 15.96, p < .001$). These results provide some initial insights on how consumers might exhibit positive sentiments toward self-deprecating advertisements.

Next, we aimed to explore consumer sentiment toward both self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements. To facilitate a meaningful comparison, we actively sought two actual advertisements—one self-deprecating and one self-promoting, preferably from the same brand and product category. Additionally, we strived to find advertisements shared on the same platform and adhering to the same format, such as a visual post or a video. Accordingly, we conducted web scraping of consumer comments on two Instagram posts from Oatly, a food company. Both posts were in the visual post format and advertised the same product, i.e., frozen ice cream bars. The [self-deprecating post](#) was shared on 08/25/2022 and garnered 2,246 likes and 122 user-generated comments. The final comment was posted on 04/24/2023. The caption of the self-deprecating post contained one hundred and twenty-five words. The [self-promoting post](#) contained a ninety-eight-word-long caption, was shared on 05/27/2022 and was liked by 1,690 users. It consisted of 57 user-generated comments, and the last comment was posted on 08/24/2022.

A.15.3. Pre-test to measure perceived self-deprecation of the Instagram posts

We conducted a pre-test to ensure that the self-deprecating (versus self-promoting) post was indeed perceived as more self-deprecating. Participants ($N = 50$, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.5$ years, 50% females) were randomly assigned to either the self-deprecating or the self-promoting Instagram post from Oatly. They rated the extent to which they perceived the advertisement to be self-deprecating using the same 2-item, 9-point scale ($r = .87$) mentioned in the pre-

test for the YouTube advertisement. Results from an independent samples t-test revealed that those who saw the self-deprecating post ($M = 6.90$, $SD = 1.61$) rated it as more self-deprecating than those who saw the self-promoting post ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 2.28$, $t(48) = 3.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.09$). Since the caption of the self-deprecating post consisted of more words than that of the self-promoting post, we measured how long participants spent observing the post (in seconds) as a proxy for their engagement. Another independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference in participants' engagement with the Instagram posts ($M_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 44.20$, $SD_{\text{self-deprecating}} = 42.40$ vs. $M_{\text{self-promoting}} = 49.01$, $SD_{\text{self-promoting}} = 109.99$, $t(48) = -.204$, $p = .840$).

A.15.4. Sentiment analysis of users' comments on the self-deprecating and self-promoting Instagram posts

We employed “pysentimiento” on the 122 user-generated comments on the self-deprecating Instagram post. 70 comments (57.38%) were categorized as having a positive sentiment, 26 (21.31%) were considered neutral, and 26 (21.31%) were deemed negative. A chi-square test demonstrated that consumer comments on the self-deprecating advertisement exhibited significantly more positive sentiments compared to negative or neutral ones ($\chi^2 = 31.74$, $p < .001$). Similarly, an analysis of the 57 user-generated comments on the self-promoting Instagram post revealed that 39 comments (68.42%) were associated with a positive sentiment, 10 comments (17.54%) were categorized as neutral, and 8 comments (14.04%) were considered negative. The results of a chi-square test revealed that consumer comments on the self-promoting post also leaned more towards positive sentiments than neutral or negative ones ($\chi^2 = 31.68$, $p < .001$).

These results suggest that consumers react to both self-deprecating and self-promoting advertisements with a positive sentiment, which aligns with the expectation that

brands aim to generate positive sentiments among consumers (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013). Results from these sentiment analyses offer preliminary insights that consumers possess positive sentiments towards self-deprecating advertisements. However, the underlying reasons why certain brands choose to deviate from the conventional self-promotion approach and opt for self-deprecation remain to be fully understood. These preliminary findings on the impact of self-deprecation in advertising inspired us to further explore its effects in controlled experimental settings

CHAPTER 3. SELF-DEPRECATING ADVERTISEMENTS ENHANCE CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF EXPERIENCE-RELATED PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES.

Abstract

Product attributes differ in how easily they can be evaluated. While search attributes can be assessed before purchase, experience attributes require direct use to be meaningfully evaluated. Brands must therefore craft advertising to persuasively convey attributes related to product experience. Traditional advertisements often rely on self-promoting claims to highlight these attributes. Such messages align with consumer expectations that advertisements emphasize positive features. In contrast, self-deprecating advertisements (e.g., Listerine's "*The taste people hate. Twice a day.*") violate these norms by deliberately highlighting a product or brand flaw. We suggest that this unconventional approach prompts consumers to rationalize why a brand would voluntarily reveal a weakness. In doing so, they may infer compensatory strengths, particularly in unobservable, experience-related attributes. Across four studies, we show that self-deprecating advertisements lead consumers to generate more positive inferences about product experience. Studies 1, 2, and 3 show that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements encourage consumers to generate more experience-focused inferences when brands highlight deficiencies in observable, search attributes. Study 4 directly measures consumers' experience perceptions and shows that self-deprecating advertisements on an unrelated search attribute enhance these perceptions. This research offers explains how consumers interpret self-deprecating advertisements and provides marketers a subtle way to signal quality without overt self-promotion.

Keywords: *self-deprecating advertisements, search and experience attributes, inference making*

3.1. Introduction

Advertisements serve as a critical tool for brands to communicate product information (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). They often highlight product benefits using cues such as performance metrics (e.g., “visible improvement in 7 days”), before-and-after visuals (Cian et al., 2020), testimonials (Shimp et al., 2007), and competitive comparisons (Grewal et al., 1997). These cues aim to persuade consumers about the product’s performance on attributes typically assessed through direct experience. However, as claims of superior performance become increasingly ubiquitous, their persuasive impact diminishes (Johnson, 2013). Consumers are more likely to perceive these messages as manipulative tactics, resulting in heightened skepticism (Wu & Geylani, 2020; Kale & Sayin, 2024). Consequently, we observe brands adopting alternative techniques, such as self-deprecating advertisements, which deliberately acknowledge product flaws or limitations. Examples include Citröen’s “Surprisingly, we haven’t fired the designer yet,” and Listerine’s “The taste people hate. Twice a day.” Recent marketing research suggests that self-deprecating advertisements can shape consumers’ brand-related perceptions by fostering social attractiveness and trust while reducing skepticism and advertisement avoidance (Kale & Sayin, 2024).

Self-promoting advertisements dominate the marketplace and align closely with consumers’ expectations of advertising, which is to highlight product strengths. Self-deprecating advertisements break these norms by deliberately drawing attention to negative aspects of a product or brand. We suggest that this unconventional approach can engage consumers in a unique way, prompting them to rationalize why the brand would voluntarily disclose its flaws. In doing so, consumers may infer that the brand possesses other strengths.

We propose that consumers would be more likely to make inferences about unobservable, experience-related attributes than about observable, search attributes. Experience attributes, such as comfort, durability, functionality, or taste, are inherently difficult to evaluate prior to use or purchase. Marketers often try to communicate these attributes in self-promoting advertisements through performance metrics, testimonials, or celebrity endorsements (Knoll & Matthes, 2017). However, consumers frequently respond with skepticism, perceiving such claims as less credible or overly polished (Wu & Geylani, 2020). We suggest that this context surrounding experience attributes renders them susceptible to inference-based judgments. In contrast, search attributes (e.g., brand name, price, size, or design) can be evaluated upfront based on readily available cues, reducing the need for inference-making.

Given this, we explore whether a different approach, i.e., using self-deprecating advertisements, might more effectively shape consumers' perceptions of experience-related product benefits. More specifically, this research investigates whether self-deprecating messaging about observable search attributes, can enhance consumers' perceptions of unobservable, experience-related attributes by prompting them to justify the brand's acknowledgment of flaws. Across four studies, we test whether such self-deprecating messages lead consumers to infer unmentioned product benefits that are not explicitly conveyed in the advertisement. In doing so, we contribute to extant research on self-deprecating advertising by showing its impact on product-level perceptions, not just brand- or ad-level responses. From a practical standpoint, this research offers insights into how consumers interpret, rationalize, and cognitively "fill in the gaps" in advertising messages, and provides marketers with a tool to subtly signal product attributes without incurring the penalties of overt self-promotion. A deeper discussion of these theoretical and practical implications is provided in the General Discussion section.

3.2. Conceptual Background

Advertisements serve as a crucial medium through which brands communicate their product attributes (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). These communications typically emphasize how the product addresses a consumer need by delivering specific benefits (Batra & Keller, 2016). Traditionally, advertising relies on self-promoting claims that highlight a brand's positive attributes to demonstrate value and persuade consumers (Kumar & Gupta, 2016; Liu & Viswanathan, 2014). Brands use a range of techniques to make such claims persuasive. For instance, advertisements visually depicting a clear 'before and after' process such as a consumer transitioning from unclear to clear skin after using a product are perceived as persuasive (Cian et al., 2012). Similarly, direct comparisons with competitors, such as Visa emphasizing its broader consumer acceptance over American Express, enhance perceptions of informativeness (Grewal et al., 1997). Brands also often rely on straightforward, memorable taglines to highlight specific product attributes or brand qualities. For example, Aldi promotes its affordability with the tagline "*Everyday low prices,*" while Heinz underscores its widespread recognition and brand familiarity with the slogan "*It has to be Heinz.*" However, the growing prevalence of such self-promoting claims in advertising has contributed to growing consumer skepticism (Wu & Geylani, 2020), particularly when brands highlight attributes that require direct experience to evaluate (Johnson, 2013). This skepticism can lead consumers to perceive brands as less credible and contributes to high levels of advertisement avoidance (McDonald, 2018), ultimately causing brands to miss valuable opportunities to connect with consumers.

To combat this, some brands have begun to adopt an unconventional strategy: self-deprecating advertising. These advertisements deliberately draw attention to product flaws or limitations. For instance, Citroën's tagline, "Surprisingly, we haven't fired the designer yet," criticizes the car's appearance, while Listerine's slogan, "The taste people hate. Twice

a day,” acknowledges the product’s unpleasant taste. Such communications violate typical advertising norms and can reduce skepticism and advertisement avoidance (Kale and Sayin, 2024). Kale and Sayin (2024) have shown that self-deprecating advertisements increase perceptions of brand’s trustworthiness and social attractiveness and decrease the degree of skepticism consumers feel toward the advertisement itself. These effects are particularly evident when the criticized attribute is of relatively low importance. While self-deprecating advertising has been shown to influence evaluations of the brand and the advertisement, it remains unclear how consumers interpret the product itself. What do consumers infer about the product when a brand voluntarily highlights one of its own shortcomings? Can brands self-deprecate on any type of attribute, or does self-deprecation on different kinds of attribute disclosures lead to different types of product-related inferences? Specifically, it remains unclear whether consumers’ interpretations are confined to the self-deprecated attribute or whether they extend their inferences to other, unmentioned attributes. To address this question, we turn to the literature on product attribute types and consider how different kinds of attribute may inform product-related inference-making processes.

Product attributes differ in their level of evaluability – some are observable, and therefore can be easily accessed through advertisements, while others require direct product experience for accurate evaluation because they are unobservable through advertising alone. Accordingly, extant literature distinguishes between two attribute types: search attributes and experience attributes (Gunasti et al., 2020; Nelson, 1970). Search attributes, such as brand name, price, or aesthetics, can be objectively evaluated before purchase (Wright & Lynch Jr, 1995), whereas experience attributes (e.g., taste, comfort, or durability) require actual use to be meaningfully assessed (Ford, Smith, & Swasy, 1990). This distinction presents a challenge for advertisers, particularly when the product’s value proposition lies in experience attributes that are inherently difficult to convey.

Because experience attributes cannot be verified in advance, they are inherently ambiguous at the time of purchase. Consumers lack direct evidence about how the product will function or feel in use, making it difficult to assess whether it will meet their expectations. To navigate this uncertainty, consumers often rely on inference-making processes that draw upon more accessible and observable cues. For example, they may use heuristics like “price equals quality” (where a higher price suggests better quality; Gneezy et al., 2014) or rely on brand reputation (Erdem et al., 2006). A consumer might believe that an expensive luxury perfume offers a richer, longer-lasting scent or assume that a reputable athletic brand like Nike offers more comfortable and higher performance gear. These inferences help consumers assess experience attributes, which are crucial to purchase decisions but challenging to evaluate before use (Ford et al., 1990).

3.2.1. Consumer Inference-making Processes

Consumers draw inferences not only from the explicit information that brands communicate, but also from what brands choose to omit or even openly criticize (see Kardes, Posavac, & Cronley, 2004, for a comprehensive review of consumer inference-making processes). According to Kardes and colleagues (2004), consumer inference-making is typically understood through two main processes: inductive and deductive inference. Inductive inferences occur when consumers use specific cues, such as product attributes, brand names, or observed features, to draw more general conclusions about a product or category. For example, after encountering several high-quality products from a particular brand, a consumer may infer that the brand overall is trustworthy. In contrast, deductive inference involves applying general principles or established beliefs to specific cases. For instance, a consumer who believes that “all organic products are healthy” may deduce that a particular organic snack is a healthy choice. While these two forms of reasoning dominate most models of consumer inference-making, they do not fully capture how consumers make

inferences about one specific attribute based on information about another. This gap becomes especially salient when consumers are presented with limited or partial product information.

Building on this established framework, we propose a third type of inference-making: *lateral inferences*. Unlike induction, which moves from the specific to the general, or deduction, which moves from the general to the specific, lateral inferences involve consumers making judgments about one specific attribute based on information provided about another specific attribute. For example, a consumer might infer a product's durability from its warranty length, even though durability and warranty are distinct attributes (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994). This type of inference is especially relevant in consumer perception, where product information is often incomplete and consumers are compelled to "fill in the blanks" making inferences about unmentioned attributes based on the those that are disclosed in the advertisement.

3.2.2. Compensatory Reasoning as a Foundation for Lateral Inferences

Compensatory reasoning refers to the idea that consumers believe that strengths in one attribute can offset and compensate for weaknesses in another (Chernev, 2007; Kramer et al., 2012). Specifically, Chernev and Carpenter (2001) demonstrated that when consumers are presented with two equally priced brands, they infer that the brand excelling on disclosed attributes must be lacking on undisclosed ones. This effect arises only when consumers hold market efficiency intuitions. That is, they believe brands at the same price should deliver comparable overall value. When one brand appears dominant on observable features, consumers experience a mismatch between expected value parity and observed superiority, prompting them to restore balance by inferring hidden weaknesses. However, when the superior brand is also priced higher, consumers do not make compensatory inferences, as the higher price is seen as justification for superiority across all attributes. Further, Chernev

(2007) showed that when comparing two brands or products, consumers generally perceive the given options as balanced. As a result, when one brand or product appears especially strong on a particular attribute, consumers often infer it must be weaker on a different attribute to maintain perceived balance between the options.

While this prior work has primarily examined compensatory reasoning in comparative contexts, where consumers evaluate multiple brands simultaneously, we propose that the same logic may also apply even in isolated evaluations, where a consumer assesses a single product or brand in the absence of direct comparisons. In such cases, a weakness in one domain may signal strength in another, or conversely, a strength may imply a corresponding weakness, reflecting a lateral form of compensatory inference. There is some evidence that consumers make these kinds of lateral inferences. For example, pharmaceutical products with severe side effects are perceived as more effective (Kramer et al., 2012), as the negative attribute (side effects) is seen as compensating for greater potency. Similarly, research on sustainability liability indicates that consumers infer lower effectiveness from eco-friendly products, as they are perceived to be made from weaker, less durable materials (Luchs et al., 2010).

Building on these findings, we argue that self-deprecating advertisements, which intentionally highlight a product flaw without offsetting it with any mention of a positive attribute, may encourage lateral compensatory inferences. When consumers encounter self-deprecating advertisements, they are likely to rationalize the brand's decision to reveal negative information by inferring that the product compensates for the criticized attribute through other attributes. For instance, Citroën's self-deprecating advertisement stating, "*Surprisingly, we haven't fired the designer yet,*" may lead consumers to infer that despite an unconventional design, the car must excel in other attributes such as convenience or reliability. Similarly, Listerine's tagline, "*The taste people hate. Twice a day,*" may invite

consumers to infer that the mouthwash's bad taste might be compensated by another product attribute. On the other hand, self-promoting advertisements, which emphasize a single attribute as the product's benefit, do not require consumers to make inferences about other unmentioned product attributes.

Hence, we propose that self-deprecating advertisements prompt consumers to make lateral inferences regarding compensatory strengths in other unobservable attributes. When brands self-deprecate on observable search attributes (e.g., design), consumers may rationalize the flaw by inferring superior performance in experience attributes (e.g., comfort). We hypothesize that consumers exposed to self-deprecating (versus self-promoting) advertisements on a search attribute will form stronger experience-related perceptions of the product, as they are encouraged to rationalize why the brand would disclose a negative attribute. This justification process leads consumers to infer that the product compensates for its flaw by excelling in other areas, such as experience-related benefits. Similarly, when brands self-deprecate on experience attributes, as in Listerine's tagline, "*The taste people hate. Twice a day,*" consumers may infer compensatory strengths in another experience attribute (e.g., germ-killing effectiveness).

In the sections that follow, we describe four studies that test our main hypothesis:


H₁: Consumers exposed to a self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement focusing on a search attribute will infer greater strength on experience attributes.

3.3. Study 1.

This study investigated whether consumers are more likely to make inferences about experience attributes of a product when exposed to a self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement focusing on a search attribute. 105 UK residents (51% females, $M_{age} = 46.8$ years) were recruited from Prolific and were randomly assigned to view either a self-

deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement for a fictitious brand of office chairs known as ‘Zenith’ (See Table 3.1). The tagline of the self-deprecating advertisement was, “*This office chair is not easy on the eye,*” while that of the self-promoting advertisement was, “*This office chair is so easy on the eye.*” Participants were asked to imagine they could add to the tagline and to write phrases to complete it (Refer to Table 3.1 for illustrative responses). To evaluate whether the advertisement type manipulation was effective, we asked participants to rate their agreement with two statements: “The advertisement seems to be self-deprecating” and “The brand seems to be making fun of itself in the advertisement” ($r = .83$; 9-point Likert scale anchored at 1 = *strongly disagree* and 9 = *strongly agree*). Participants also reported their age and gender.

Table 3.1. Study 1 Stimuli: Self-deprecating and Self-promoting advertisement and Illustrations of Participant-Generated Phrases in Response

<i>Advertisement Type</i>	<i>Stimuli</i>	<i>Illustrative Generated Phrases</i>
<i>Self-deprecating</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “But its easy on your body.” • “But your body will love it!” • “But we’ll make you comfier than ever.” • “But on the spine!” • “But easy on your comfort.” • “But your body will thank you for it.” • “It is however exceptionally easy on your back.” • “It’s easy on the thighs.”

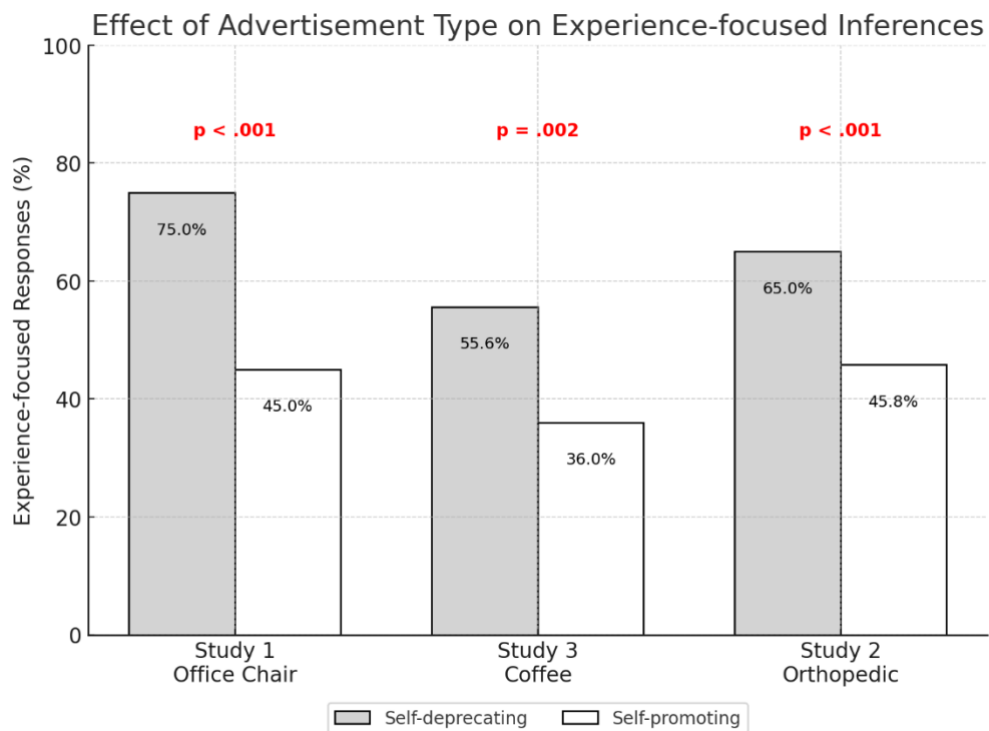
<p><i>Self-promoting</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It instantly elevates the look of my home office.” • “Bring the style to your workplace.” • “It’s totally awesome.” • “You will be the envy of the office.” • “You’ll fall in love with it.” • “IT IS A MASTERPIECE.” • “It makes your workspace look effortlessly stylish.” • “Aesthetically looking great.”
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The advertisement type manipulation was successful, as the self-deprecating advertisement ($M = 6.72$, $SD = 1.76$) was rated as significantly more self-deprecating than the self-promoting one ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.92$, $t(103) = 10.05$, $p < .001$). Three independent coders, blind to our hypothesis, first reviewed the definitions of search and experience attributes (Lee & Hosanagar, 2021). They then categorized the phrases completed by participants as search attributes, experience attributes, or neither. For example, a phrase that was coded as focused on an experience attribute was: “*it is however exceptionally easy on your back*”; and a phrase that was coded as focused on a search attribute would be: “*Bring the style to your workplace.*” A phrase coded as neither search nor experience would be: “*you’ll love it.*” Inter-coder reliability was high ($ICC(2,3) = .83$).

For each completed phrase, we calculated the percentage of coders identifying a focus on experience attributes. Higher percentage scores reflected a stronger emphasis on experience attributes in participant-generated phrases (protocol adapted from Alves et al., 2021; Mittelman et al., 2014). A Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) analysis was conducted to examine the likelihood of participants generating experience-focused phrases in response to self-deprecating versus self-promoting advertisements. The dependent variable was whether a phrase was experience-focused (1 = yes, 0 = no), and the independent variable was advertisement type (self-deprecating = 1, self-promoting = 0). Results showed

that participants exposed to self-deprecating advertisements were significantly more likely to generate experience-focused phrases to complete the tagline (75%) compared to those exposed to self-promoting advertisements (45%; $B = 1.31, \chi^2(1) = 80.75, p < .001$, See Figure 2). This effect stems from the compensatory reasoning process triggered by self-deprecation. While self-promoting advertisements focus consumer attention on a highlighted positive attribute (e.g., the “photogenic” nature of the chair), self-deprecating advertisements encourage consumers to rationalize the criticized attribute. In doing so, they infer that the product compensates for this flaw by excelling in other attributes—especially experience-related ones, such as comfort or performance.

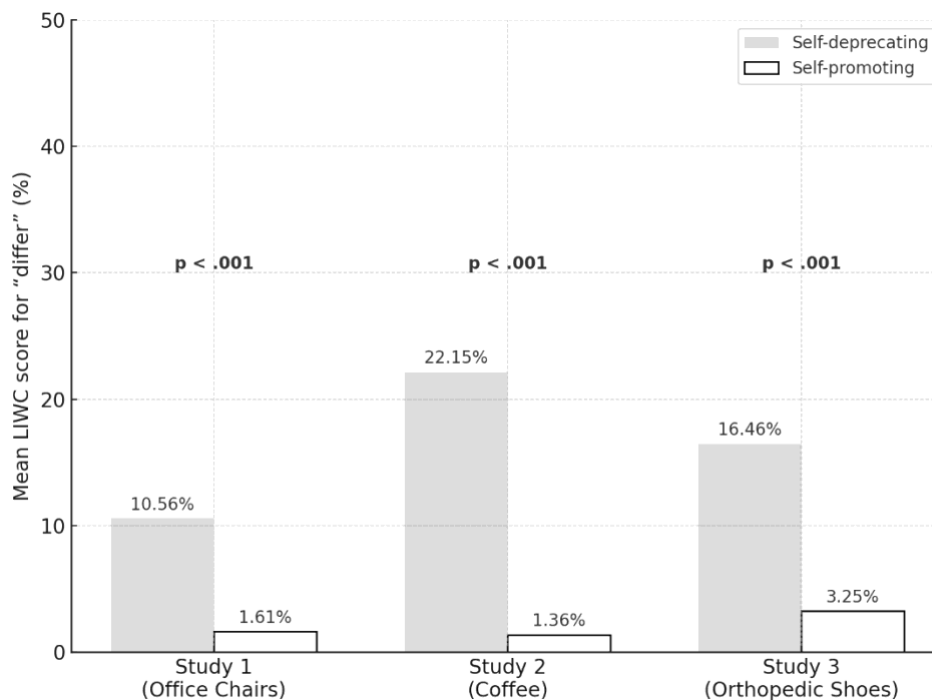
Figure 3.1. Results Studies 1-3: Experience-focused Inferences



To gain further insight into the responses elicited by different advertising types, participants' message completions were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC 2022) tool (Boyd et al., 2022). LIWC is a validated text analysis software that quantifies psychological and structural components of language by calculating the

percentage of words in a text that belong to pre-defined linguistic and psychological categories called “dictionaries” (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). One of the cognitive process categories analyzed was differentiation, which captures words that signal comparison or opposition, such as but, however, and whereas. These terms indicate differentiation, a subcategory of cognitive processes that signals evaluative thinking and mental reconciliation (Pennebaker, 2011). People often use this process when trying to “figure something out” (Vaughn, 2019, p. 9). This linguistic pattern is theoretically relevant because compensatory reasoning involves mentally reconciling a weakness in one attribute with a presumed strength in another (Chernev, 2007; Kramer et al., 2012). When prompted to complete a tagline following a self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement, participants may be more likely to engage in contrastive reasoning to justify and rationalize the brand’s disclosure of a flaw. As such, the use of differentiation words may signal the kind of contrastive thinking that underlies compensatory inference-making.

A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to compare the percentage of comparative words (differ) used in participants’ tagline completions for self-deprecating versus self-promoting advertisements. The results revealed a significant difference between conditions, with participants in the self-deprecating condition using a higher percentage of differ words ($M = 10.56$, $SD = 1.41$) compared to those in the self-promoting condition ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.56$), $U = 2069.5$, $p < .001$, See Figure 3.3). These findings suggest that self-deprecating advertisements prompt consumers to engage in more rationalization, reconciling brand flaws with some brand strengths (e.g., “not stylish, but ergonomic”).

Figure 3.3. Results Studies 1-3: LIWC analysis on “differentiation” cognitive process

To conclude, by prompting participants to add their own words to self-deprecating and self-promoting taglines, this study examines real behaviour related to how consumers rationalize self-deprecation through positive inferences about experience attributes. Conversely, self-promoting advertisements do not elicit such an inference-making process, as participants perceive the positive claims as the primary attribute the brand wants to highlight, leaving no need to rationalize the brand’s message.



3.4. Study 2.

This study aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 using a product from a less utilitarian category. One potential reason for our earlier findings is that participants inferred more experience-related benefits in Study 1 simply because the product, i.e., office chair is inherently functional. Consumers may naturally associate such products with comfort or utility, leading to stronger functional inferences when exposed to self-deprecating advertising. To rule out this alternative explanation, we selected coffee as the focal product in Study 2. Coffee is consumed for pleasure and sensory enjoyment, and extant consumer

research classifies it as a hedonic product (LaTour & Deighton, 2019). This allowed us to test whether self-deprecating advertisements continue to prompt compensatory inferences about experience attributes in a product category where functional benefits are less salient.

Two hundred UK residents (44.5% female, $M_{age} = 46.14$ years) were recruited from Prolific Academic and randomly assigned to view either a self-deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement for a fictitious coffee brand, 'Nexo' (See Table 3.2). The self-deprecating advertisement featured the tagline, "*Perhaps not the fanciest coffee,*" while the self-promoting advertisement featured the tagline, "*Perhaps the fanciest coffee.*" As in previous studies, participants were prompted to imagine completing the tagline and asked to provide additional phrasing (Refer to Table 3.2 for illustrative responses). They then responded to a manipulation check and reported their age and gender.

Table 3.2. Study 2 Stimuli: Self-deprecating and Self-promoting advertisement and Illustrations of Participant-Generated Phrases in Response

<i>Ad Type</i>	<i>Stimuli</i>	<i>Illustrative Generated Phrases</i>
<i>Self-deprecating</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "But the tastiest." • "But definitely the tastiest." • "But the most delicious." • "But by far the tastiest." • "But it tastes expensive." • "But certainly, the most eco-friendly." • "But certainly, the most desirable." • "But the taste is first class."
<i>Self-promoting</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You could ever dream of." • "On the market today." • "In all of the land." • "For coffee connoisseurs." • "Without the fancy price." • "This side of Italy." • "Fancy a cuppa?" • "You've ever laid eyes on."

Advertisement type manipulation was successful ($M_{self-deprecating} = 6.03$, $SD_{self-deprecating} = 1.86$; $M_{self-promoting} = 2.92$, $SD_{self-promoting} = 1.62$; $t(198) = 157.748$, $p < .001$). Three independent coders categorized the completed phrases as focusing on a search attribute, an experience attribute, or neither, with moderately sufficient agreement ($ICC(2,3) = .51$). Results from a GEE analysis revealed that participants were significantly more likely to generate experience-focused phrases in response to the self-deprecating advertisement (55.6%) compared to those exposed to the self-promoting advertisement (36%; $B = 0.79$, $\chi^2(1) = 9.92$, $p = .002$). Next, we employed LIWC to assess whether participants' message completions, written in response to the self-deprecating and self-promoting taglines, differed in their use of comparative language. A Mann–Whitney U test revealed that participants in the self-deprecating condition used significantly more differentiation words ($M = 22.15\%$) than those in the self-promoting condition ($M = 1.36\%$), $U = 9375.0$, $p < .001$).

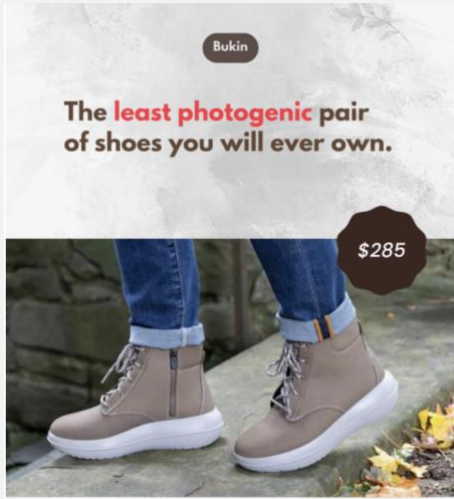
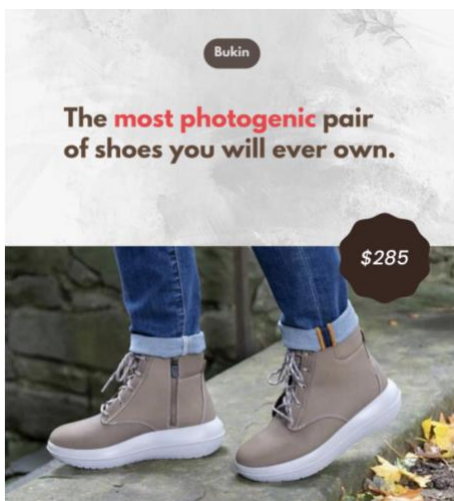
These findings replicate those of Study 1, further supporting the conclusion that self-deprecating advertisements prompt consumers to infer compensatory strengths in experience attributes when the advertisement highlights a deficiency in search attributes.

3.5. Study 3

This pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/6tzj-bgx8.pdf>) study aimed to replicate the findings of Studies 1 and 2 by using a different product category, orthopedic shoes. 200 UK residents (53.5% female, $M_{age} = 45.32$ years) were recruited from Prolific Academic and were randomly assigned to view either a self-deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement for a fictitious brand of orthopedic shoes known as 'Bukin' (See Table 3.3). The self-deprecating advertisement featured the tagline, "*The least photogenic pair of shoes you will ever own,*" while the self-promoting advertisement featured the tagline, "*The most photogenic pair of shoes you will ever own.*" Participants were prompted to imagine they could add to the tagline and were asked what they would specifically add to it. Then,

participants responded to a manipulation check (as in Studies 1 and 2) and reported their age and gender.

Table 3.3. Study 2 Stimuli: Self-deprecating and Self-promoting advertisement and Illustrations of Participant-Generated Phrases in Response

<i>Ad Type</i>	<i>Stimuli</i>	<i>Illustrative Generated Phrases</i>
<i>Self-deprecating</i>	 <p>The advertisement shows a pair of tan and white sneakers on a stone step. The text above the shoes reads "The least photogenic pair of shoes you will ever own." in red and black. A price tag in the bottom right corner says "\$285". The Bukin logo is in the top left.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “But the most comfortable.” • “But beautifully comfortable.” • “But the comfiest.” • “The most beneficial pair to your feet.” • “But the last pair of shoes you'll need.” • “But you will feel like you're walking on air.” • “But you will love the comfort they provide in everyday activities.” • “As you'll be so comfortable walking you won't have time to take their picture.”
<i>Self-promoting</i>	 <p>The advertisement shows the same pair of tan and white sneakers on a stone step. The text above the shoes reads "The most photogenic pair of shoes you will ever own." in red and black. A price tag in the bottom right corner says "\$285". The Bukin logo is in the top left.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Take a picture today!” • “Fit for any photoshoot.” • “Help your feet to shine!” • “Elevate your feet to a new standard.” • “Just waiting for the perfect moment to share.” • “They're, smart, casual and you'll be the envy of all your friends. Comfort for your feet.” • “Available in a choice of colours.” • “So stylish!”

An independent samples t-test revealed that the manipulation of advertisement type was successful, as the self-deprecating advertisement was perceived as significantly more self-deprecating ($M = 7.11$, $SD = 1.53$) than the self-promoting one ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 2.28$; $t(198) = 11.821$, $p < .001$). As in Study 1, three independent coders categorized the

completed phrases as focusing on a search attribute, an experience attribute, or neither, with sufficient agreement ($ICC(2,3) = .88$). A GEE analysis showed that participants exposed to self-deprecating advertisements were significantly more likely to generate experience-focused phrases to complete the tagline (65.05%) compared to those exposed to self-promoting advertisements (45.83%; $B = 0.79$, $\chi^2(1) = 49.20$, $p < .001$).

Next, we employed LIWC to assess the level of differentiation language in participants' message completions written in response to the taglines. A Mann–Whitney U test revealed that participants exposed to self-deprecating orthopedic shoe ads used significantly more differentiation words ($M = 16.46\%$) than those in the self-promoting condition ($M = 3.25\%$), $U = 7905.0$, $p < .001$. These finding replicates the results observed in Studies 1 and 2, further supporting the conclusion that self-deprecating advertisements prompt contrastive compensatory reasoning, likely as a way for consumers to reconcile modest claims with inferred strengths. Across Studies 1-3, participant-generated taglines revealed that consumers infer compensatory benefits in experience attributes when brands highlight deficiencies in search attributes. While Studies 1, 2, and 3 focused on participant-generated taglines to infer compensatory reasoning, Study 4 directly measures whether consumers' inferences about experience attributes are greater when brands self-deprecate (vs. self-promote) on a search attribute.

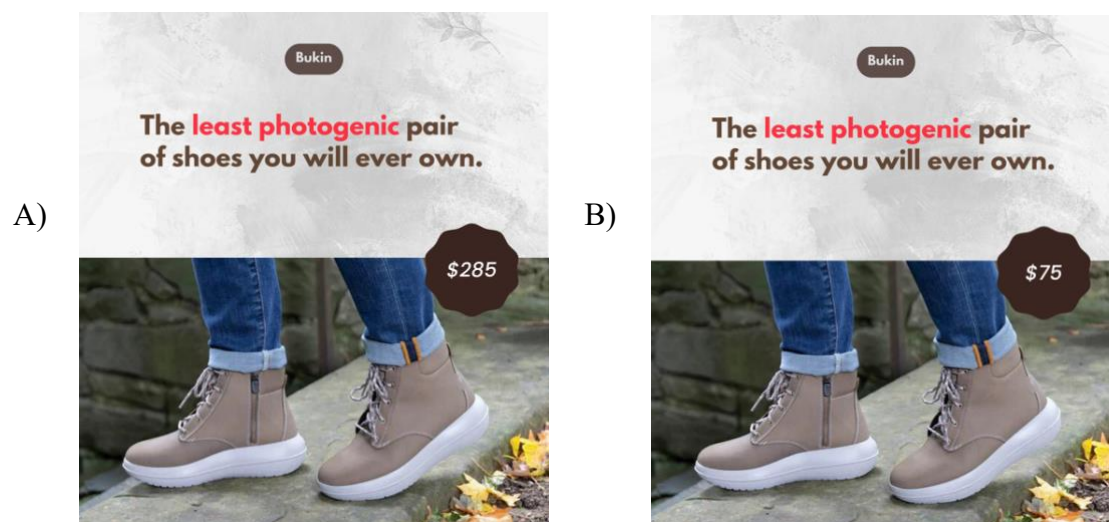
3.6. Study 4.

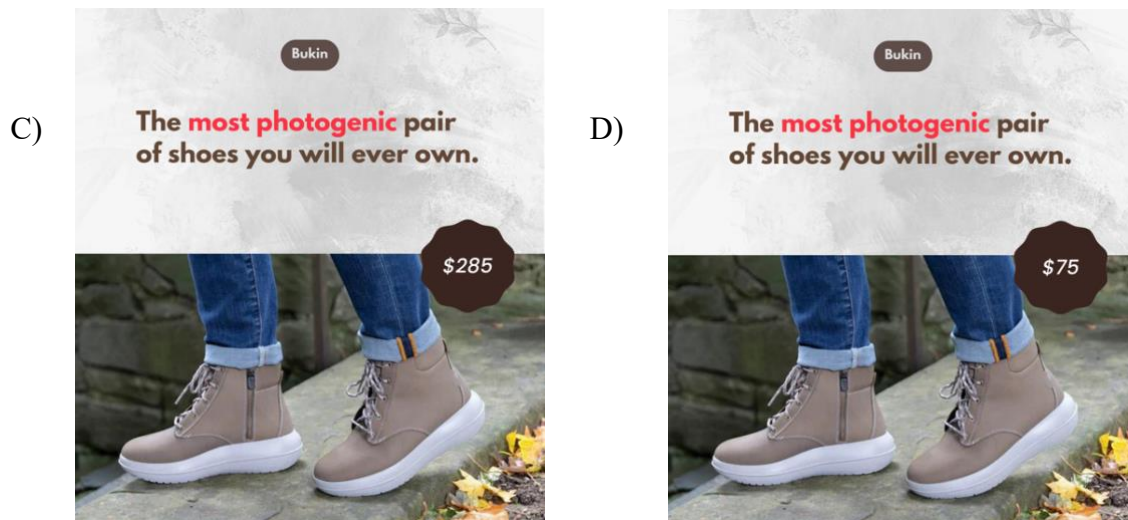
The objective of this study was to investigate whether viewing self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements focused on search attributes affects participants' perceptions of how well the product delivers on experience attributes. 500 female participants ($M_{age} = 42.45$ years; US residents) were recruited through Connect by CloudResearch. Twelve participants failed an attention check question ("If you are reading this, select 'Strongly

Disagree”)), resulting in a final sample of 488. We specifically recruited females, since the advertisement featured women’s shoes (To & Patrick, 2021).

To ensure the advertisements appeared as realistic as possible, we incorporated product price (another search attribute in addition to the appearance of the shoes) into the stimuli. Since price can influence product experience expectations (Kurz et al., 2023), we varied the product price across conditions, either \$285 or \$75, to explore the interaction between advertisement type and price on participants’ experience-related perceptions. We expected that participants exposed to self-deprecating advertisements for higher-priced item would infer even stronger experience-related benefits, as consumers typically expect high-priced products to deliver superior value (Gneezy et al., 2014). Thus, the study employed a 2 (advertisement type: self-deprecating vs. self-promoting) by 2 (price: low vs. high) between-subjects design, with participants randomly assigned to view an advertisement for a fictitious orthopedic shoe brand called ‘Bukin’ (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 3.5. Study 4 Stimuli: Self-deprecating ad with high-price (A), Self-deprecating ad with low-price (B), Self-promoting ad with high-price (C), Self-promoting ad with low-price (D)





After viewing the advertisement, participants rated the experience-related perceptions of the orthopedic shoes by stating their agreement with five statements - “Bukin shoes would be comfortable,” “Bukin shoes would stimulate brain activity and ability to learn,” “Bukin shoes would improve blood circulation,” “Bukin shoes would promote a better posture,” and “Bukin shoes would stimulate motoric development by using balance training.” ($\alpha = .874$; 9-point Likert scale anchored on 1 = *strongly disagree* and 9 = *strongly agree*). These attributes, sourced from the official website of the orthopedic shoe brand ‘Kybun,’ represent experience-related benefits typically associated with this product. Finally, participants responded to a manipulation check (as in previous studies, $r = .89$) and mentioned their age.

A two-way ANOVA test on perceived self-deprecation found only a significant effect of advertisement type such that the self-deprecating advertisement was perceived as significantly more self-deprecating than the self-promoting advertisement ($F(1, 484) = 648.91, p < .001$). The effects of product price and its interaction with advertisement type

were not significant (p 's > .05). Another two-way ANOVA test on price perception revealed only a main effect of product price. \$285 was perceived as a significantly higher price than \$75 ($F(1, 484) = 375.81, p < .001$).

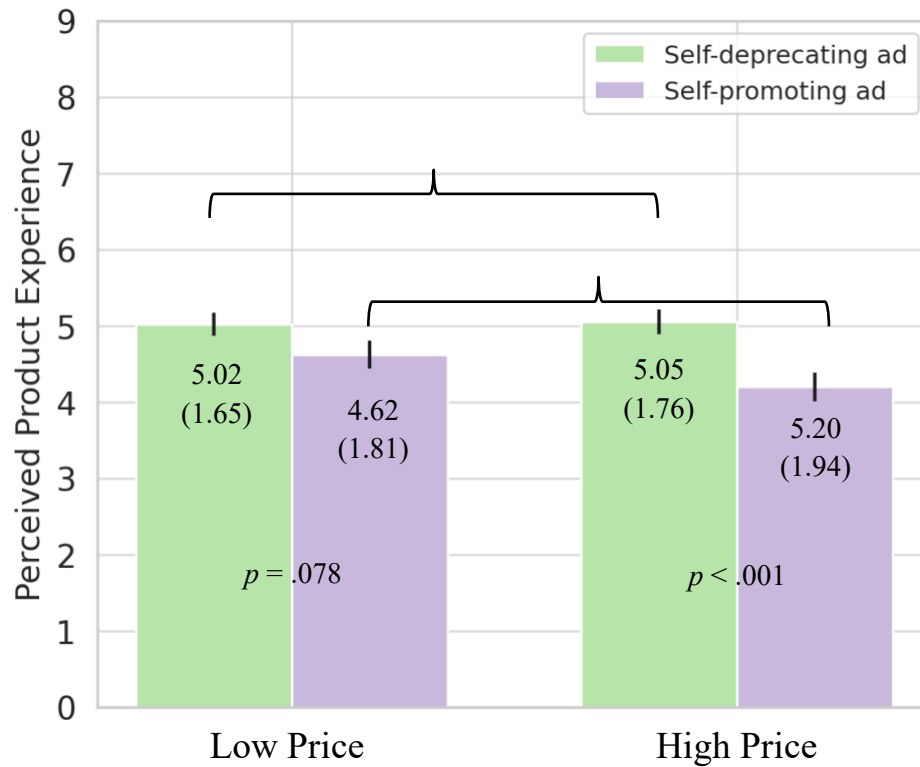
A series of two-way ANOVA tests showed that advertisement type significantly affected participants' experience-related perceptions ($F(1, 484) = 14.33, p < .001$). The main effect of price ($F(1, 484) = 1.44, p = .231$) and the interaction effect of advertisement type and price ($F(1, 484) = 1.86, p = .173$) were not significant (Means reported in Table 1). Across both price conditions, self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements increased experience-related perceptions, with a significant effect observed in the high-price condition ($F(1, 484) = 12.49, p < .001$) and a marginally significant effect in the low-price condition ($F(1, 484) = 7.13, p = .078$).

Table 3.4. Results – Study 4

<i>Measures</i>	<i>High-price</i>		<i>Low-price</i>		<i>Interaction Effect</i>		<i>Ad Type – Main Effect</i>		<i>Price</i>	
	Self-deprecating (N=124)	Self-promoting (N=121)	Self-deprecating (N=122)	Self-promoting (N=121)	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	<i>P</i>	η_p^2
<i>Perceived Self-depreciation</i>	6.99 ^a (2.23)	2.64 ^b (2.04)	7.19 ^a (1.94)	2.42 ^b (1.66)	.24 7	.00 3	<.00 1	.52 9	.932	.00 0
<i>Price Perceptions</i>	7.38 ^a (1.39)	7.67 ^a (1.29)	4.49 ^b (2.10)	4.60 ^b (1.88)	.55 5	.00 1	.195	.00 3	<.00 1	.43 7
<i>Perceived Product Experience</i>	5.05 ^a (1.76)	4.20 ^b (1.94)	5.02 ^a (1.65)	4.62 ^a (1.81)	.17 3	.00 4	<.00 1	.02 9	.231	.00 4

Note: Standard deviations reported in the parentheses. Cell means with different superscripts within the columns “High-price” and “Low-price” denote significantly different means (p 's < .05).

Figure 3.7. Results - Study 4



These findings extend previous work on compensatory inference-making, which suggests that such inferences are less likely when price differences signal clear value distinctions. For instance, when a product appears objectively better on stated attributes and is also more expensive, consumers may assume its superiority on the unmentioned attributes is already reflected in the price, reducing the need to infer hidden trade-offs (Chernev & Carpenter, 2001). Interestingly, in Study 4, even when the self-deprecating product was more expensive, participants inferred that it offered superior experience-related benefits compared to the self-promoting high-priced alternative. One possible explanation is that the combination of self-deprecation on a search attribute (design) and a high price creates a reinforcing signal. As Batra (2019) argues, the likelihood of inferring a particular meaning

increases when multiple cues consistently point in the same direction. In this case, both the brand's self-deprecation about the search attribute and the premium price implicitly suggest that the product must excel on more meaningful, less observable attributes, thereby strengthening lateral inferences about its underlying product experience benefits.

3.7. General Discussion.

Our findings across four studies provide compelling evidence that self-deprecating (versus self-promoting) advertisements prompt consumers to form stronger experience-related perceptions of products. This effect stems from the compensatory reasoning process triggered by self-deprecation. While self-promoting advertisements direct attention toward the highlighted positive attribute (e.g., the “photogenic” nature of shoes), self-deprecating advertisements encourage consumers to rationalize the criticized attribute. In doing so, consumers infer that the product compensates for its flaw by excelling in other and experience-related benefits, such as comfort or performance.

This research is ongoing and, as it stands, has some limitations. Most notably, we have primarily examined self-deprecation targeting search attributes (e.g., appearance), leaving open the question of how consumers respond when experience attributes themselves are the focus of self-directed criticism. Future studies are planned to investigate how self-deprecation on experience attributes, whether search-based or experience-based, shapes consumer responses. More studies are planned to empirically demonstrate the underlying mechanisms driving the compensatory reasoning process observed in self-deprecating advertisements. Further, we will explore the boundary conditions under which such reasoning may fail to emerge. One line of inquiry will investigate the role of consumers' cognitive resources. We propose that compensatory inferences require a degree of cognitive effort and reflection; therefore, cognitively depleted consumers, those with limited mental bandwidth, may be less likely to engage in this inferential process.

3.7.1. Theoretical Contributions.

Our findings contribute to extant research in several ways. First, we advance the growing literature on self-deprecating advertising by identifying its downstream effects on product-level outcomes, specifically, experience-related product perceptions. While prior work has largely focused on brand- and advertisement-related responses (Kale & Sayin, 2024), we show that self-deprecation can shape how consumers evaluate the product itself. Second, we extend the literature on consumer inference-making (Kardes et al., 2004) by introducing lateral inferences as a novel form of reasoning. Unlike inductive (specific to general) or deductive (general to specific) inferences, lateral inferences involve drawing conclusions about one specific attribute based on another distinct but related attribute, such as inferring comfort from a critique of design. Third, our results extend research on compensatory inference-making (Chernev & Carpenter, 2001) by showing that such inferences occur even in isolated, single-product evaluation contexts. Prior work has emphasized the importance of comparative settings in activating compensatory reasoning (Chernev, 2007). By contrast, we demonstrate that even without access to competing options, consumers infer tradeoffs when prompted by strategic brand communication. We further show that consumers make compensatory inferences about the benefits of the inferior (i.e., self-deprecating) option even when the superior (i.e., self-promoting) option is highly priced.

3.7.2. Managerial Implications.

This research offers actionable guidance for marketing managers aiming to influence consumer perceptions in subtle yet effective ways. First, our findings demonstrate that self-deprecating advertisements can enhance perceived product benefits, even in the absence of explicit positive claims. By drawing attention to a minor flaw (e.g., aesthetic design), managers can invite consumers to infer compensatory strengths (e.g., superior comfort or

quality), thereby enhancing consumers' product evaluations. Second, we show that this effect is especially strong for higher-priced products, where price itself serves as a quality cue. This suggests that premium brands can leverage self-deprecation to strengthen perceived value, as consumers use both the flaw and the price to "fill in the blanks." Third, our results align with Batra's (2019) assertion that inferred or implied meanings are often more persuasive than explicit ones. When multiple cues (e.g., high price and self-deprecation) together signal a particular meaning, such as superior product experience, they jointly strengthen consumer inference and brand image. Managers should therefore consider implication over overt self-promotion when designing brand messaging. Finally, understanding how consumers make inferences from advertisements helps marketers avoid unintended consequences, for example heightened consumer skepticism perceptions of lower credibility. Rather than overloading advertisements with benefits, marketers can guide how consumers think by choosing which attribute to criticize, trusting that consumers will "fill in the gaps" through compensatory reasoning.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation sought to advance understanding of a novel category of brand communications: Brand Communications with Self-Directed Negative Messages (BCSNMs). BCSNMs are brand messages that deliberately draw attention to the brand's own shortcomings. It comprises one conceptual chapter and two empirical chapters, and implements ten experimental studies and thirteen pre- and post-tests, with data from 3,482 participants across diverse geographies including Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The research employs a multi-method approach, combining controlled experiments with sentiment analysis of consumer reactions to real-world brand advertisements on social media platforms. It introduces a novel conceptual framework for classifying BCSNMs (Chapter 1), empirically demonstrates how self-deprecating advertisements influence brand-related perceptions (Chapter 2), and explores how these messages affect product-related inferences, especially around experience attributes (Chapter 3). Together, this dissertation offers a robust and interdisciplinary foundation for understanding self-critical brand communication strategies.

Chapter 1 established the theoretical foundation by defining and conceptualizing BCSNMs as a distinct set of communication strategies comprising self-deprecation, humblebragging, and two-sided messaging. Drawing on psycholinguistic theories and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the chapter differentiated these strategies based on their semantic structure, monosemic (single meaning) vs. polysemous (multiple meanings) and proposed how consumer involvement levels influence interpretation and effectiveness of the three types of BCSNMs. Chapters 2 and 3 offered empirical investigations of self-deprecating advertisements. Chapter 2 demonstrated that self-deprecation can reduce skepticism and increase brand trust, provided the criticized attribute is of low importance. This effect is driven by heightened perceptions of the brand's social attractiveness and

transparency. Chapter 3 extended this insight to product evaluations, showing that self-deprecating advertisements prompt consumers to engage in compensatory reasoning to rationalize why the brand would engage in deliberate self-criticism. Specifically, we find that brands disclose flaws in easily observable, search attributes (for e.g., aesthetics and design), consumers infer hidden strengths in unobservable, experience-related attributes such as comfort or durability.

This dissertation makes several theoretical contributions. It conceptualizes BCSNMs as a distinct and underexamined category of brand communication, offering a typology that captures their linguistic and persuasive differences based on consumers' involvement levels. It draws upon and integrates insights from multiple academic domains, including organizational behavior, interpersonal communication, political communication, and linguistics, to inform the conceptual distinctions and processing mechanisms underlying BCSNMs. It extends the Elaboration Likelihood Model and psycholinguistic theory into the study of brand communications, demonstrating how message structure and semantic complexity influence consumers' interpretation depending on their involvement level while processing the message. Furthermore, it contributes to research on self-deprecation in marketing, offering a systematic account of when and why such messages enhance trust and reduce skepticism. Finally, it advances the inference-making and compensatory reasoning literatures by introducing the concept of lateral inferences within single-brand contexts, highlighting that consumers may infer strength in unmentioned product domains based solely on the brand's willingness to disclose a weakness.

Managerially, the dissertation provides actionable guidance for brand managers seeking to connect with skeptical consumers. It suggests that self-deprecating advertisements, especially when aimed at low-importance, easily verifiable product features, can enhance likability, and trust, and reduce skepticism and advertisement avoidance.

Managers can leverage these findings and employ self-critical brand communication strategies across various brand touchpoints, from product packaging to social media campaigns and influencer collaborations. The findings also offer strategic insights for premium brands, which often rely on price and prestige cues: pairing these with subtle, self-critical messaging may foster stronger perceptions of product experience expectations. The research suggests that even in today's media environment saturated with ad-clutter, brands can establish strong consumer connections by acknowledging imperfections, thereby inviting consumers to generate their own, more favorable inferences.

Looking ahead, this work opens new avenues for research. Future studies can explore boundary conditions such as consumer traits (e.g., need for cognition, humor appreciation), brand personality, and cultural norms that moderate the effectiveness of BCSNMs. Moreover, while this dissertation focused on self-deprecation, other BCSNMs, namely, humblebragging and two-sided messaging, deserve systematic empirical attention. Longitudinal research could also uncover how repeated exposure to self-critical messages shapes consumer relationships over time. Notably, it proposes twenty-eight concrete future research questions for marketing, advertising, and consumer researchers to pursue, nineteen outlined in Chapter 1 and nine in Chapter 2, offering a clear roadmap for continued inquiry in this emerging domain. In sum, this dissertation invites scholars and practitioners alike to reconsider what constitutes effective brand communication. By challenging the long-standing emphasis on self-promotion, it discovers the power of humility and transparency in shaping consumer beliefs and behaviour.

CONCLUSIÓN

Esta tesis doctoral pretendía avanzar en la comprensión de una nueva categoría de comunicaciones de marca: Comunicaciones de marca con mensajes negativos autodirigidos (BCSNM). Los BCSNM son mensajes de marca que llaman deliberadamente la atención sobre los propios defectos de la marca. Comprende un capítulo conceptual y dos empíricos, y pone en práctica diez estudios experimentales y trece pruebas previas y posteriores, con datos de 3.482 participantes de diversas geografías, como España, el Reino Unido y Estados Unidos. La investigación emplea un enfoque multimétodo, combinando experimentos controlados con análisis de sentimientos de las reacciones de los consumidores a los anuncios de marcas del mundo real en plataformas de medios sociales. Introduce un novedoso marco conceptual para clasificar los BCSNM (capítulo 1), demuestra empíricamente cómo influyen los anuncios autodespreciativos en las percepciones relacionadas con la marca (capítulo 2) y explora cómo afectan estos mensajes a las inferencias relacionadas con el producto, especialmente en torno a los atributos de experiencia (capítulo 3). En conjunto, esta tesis ofrece una base sólida e interdisciplinar para comprender las estrategias de comunicación autocrítica de las marcas.

El capítulo 1 estableció la base teórica definiendo y conceptualizando las BCSNM como un conjunto distinto de estrategias de comunicación que comprenden el autodesprecio, la humildad y los mensajes de doble cara. Basándose en teorías psicolingüísticas y en el Modelo de Probabilidad de Elaboración, el capítulo diferenció estas estrategias en función de su estructura semántica, monosémica (significado único) frente a polisémica (significados múltiples) y propuso cómo influyen los niveles de implicación del consumidor en la interpretación y la eficacia de los tres tipos de BCSNM. Los capítulos 2 y 3 ofrecieron investigaciones empíricas sobre los anuncios autodespreciativos. El capítulo 2 demostró que el autodesprecio puede reducir el escepticismo y aumentar la confianza en la marca, siempre

que el atributo criticado sea de escasa importancia. Este efecto está impulsado por el aumento de las percepciones del atractivo social y la transparencia de la marca. El capítulo 3 amplió esta idea a las evaluaciones de productos, demostrando que los anuncios autodespreciativos incitan a los consumidores a realizar un razonamiento compensatorio para racionalizar por qué la marca realizaría una autocrítica deliberada. En concreto, descubrimos que cuando las marcas revelan defectos en atributos fácilmente observables y buscables (por ejemplo, la estética y el diseño), los consumidores infieren puntos fuertes ocultos en atributos no observables y relacionados con la experiencia, como la comodidad o la durabilidad.

Esta tesis realiza varias aportaciones teóricas. Conceptualiza las BCSNM como una categoría distinta y poco estudiada de la comunicación de marca, ofreciendo una tipología que capta sus diferencias lingüísticas y persuasivas en función de los niveles de implicación de los consumidores. Aprovecha e integra conocimientos de múltiples ámbitos académicos, como el comportamiento organizativo, la comunicación interpersonal, la comunicación política y la lingüística, para fundamentar las distinciones conceptuales y los mecanismos de procesamiento subyacentes a las BCSNM. Amplía el modelo de probabilidad de elaboración y la teoría psicolingüística al estudio de las comunicaciones de marca, demostrando cómo la estructura del mensaje y la complejidad semántica influyen en la interpretación de los consumidores en función de su nivel de implicación al procesar el mensaje. Además, contribuye a la investigación sobre el autodesprecio en el marketing, ofreciendo un relato sistemático de cuándo y por qué tales mensajes aumentan la confianza y reducen el escepticismo. Por último, hace avanzar las literaturas sobre la elaboración de inferencias y el razonamiento compensatorio al introducir el concepto de inferencias laterales en contextos de una sola marca, destacando que los consumidores pueden inferir la fortaleza en dominios de productos no mencionados basándose únicamente en la disposición de la marca a revelar una debilidad.

Desde el punto de vista de la gestión, la tesis ofrece orientaciones prácticas a los gestores de marcas que pretendan conectar con consumidores escépticos. Sugiere que los anuncios autodespreciativos, especialmente cuando se dirigen a características del producto de poca importancia y fácilmente verificables, pueden aumentar la simpatía y la confianza, y reducir el escepticismo y la evitación de los anuncios. Los directivos pueden aprovechar estos hallazgos y emplear estrategias de comunicación de marca autocrítica en diversos puntos de contacto de la marca, desde el envasado del producto hasta las campañas en las redes sociales y las colaboraciones con personas influyentes. Los hallazgos también ofrecen ideas estratégicas para las marcas premium, que a menudo dependen de las señales de precio y prestigio: emparejarlas con mensajes sutiles y autocríticos puede fomentar percepciones más sólidas de las expectativas de experiencia del producto. La investigación sugiere que, incluso en el actual entorno mediático saturado de anuncios, las marcas pueden establecer fuertes conexiones con los consumidores reconociendo sus imperfecciones, invitándoles así a generar sus propias inferencias más favorables.

De cara al futuro, este trabajo abre nuevas vías de investigación. Los estudios futuros pueden explorar las condiciones límite, como los rasgos del consumidor (por ejemplo, la necesidad de cognición, la apreciación del humor), la personalidad de la marca y las normas culturales que moderan la eficacia de las BCSNM. Además, aunque esta disertación se centró en el autodesprecio, otras BCSNM, a saber, el “humblebragging” y los mensajes de doble cara, merecen una atención empírica sistemática. La investigación longitudinal también podría desvelar cómo la exposición repetida a los mensajes autocríticos moldea las relaciones de consumo a lo largo del tiempo. En particular, propone veintiocho cuestiones concretas de investigación futura para los investigadores de marketing, publicidad y consumo, diecinueve esbozadas en el capítulo 1 y nueve en el capítulo 2, ofreciendo una hoja de ruta clara para la investigación continua en este ámbito emergente. En resumen, esta

tesis invita tanto a los académicos como a los profesionales a reconsiderar lo que constituye una comunicación de marca eficaz. Al poner en tela de juicio el énfasis que durante tanto tiempo se ha puesto en la autopromoción, descubre el poder de la humildad y la transparencia a la hora de moldear las creencias y el comportamiento de los consumidores.

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