

MASTER'S THESIS

From evaluating people to evaluating products: the effect of ascription versus achievement mind-set in consumer decisions

Wang, Zhi

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**From Evaluating People to Evaluating Products: The Effect of
Ascription Versus Achievement Mind-set in Consumer Decisions**

WANG Zhi

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for the degree of
Master of Philosophy**

Principal Supervisor: Dr. Henry FOCK

Hong Kong Baptist University

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ABSTRACT

Individuals typically acquire social status either by their inherent characteristics (e.g., gender, family background, and ethnic group) or by their efforts and performances (e.g., educational attainment and job performance). The former status is known as ascribed status (who one is), and the latter is called achieved status (what one does) in sociology literature. The present study applies the ascription versus achievement concepts to consumer behavior research. Specifically, the present study draws an analogy that products, similar to individuals, also have “ascribed status” given by products’ origin (e.g., country-of-origin and brand) and “achieved status” derived from the products’ performances (e.g., functional attributes). Based on theories of mind-set and more generally, on theories of knowledge accessibility, the present research suggests that drawing consumers’ attention to other people’s ascribed (versus achieved) status in a prior situation can induce an ascription (versus achievement) mind-set. The mind-set, in turn, increases consumers’ preference for products with favorable ascribed (versus achieved) attributes in a subsequent unrelated purchase situation. Moreover, these mind-sets can influence the preference of an alternative product over another without consciousness of the reason for doing so. The present study also ascertained the construal level of purchase (a situational factor) and consumer knowledge of the product (a personal factor) as boundary conditions of the effect of ascription versus achievement mind-set on consumer decisions.

A series of three experiments examines the hypotheses. Specifically, study 1 investigates how situationally induced ascription versus achievement mind-set

influences consumers' preference for products with favorable ascribed versus achieved attributes. Study 2 identifies the construal level of purchase as a boundary condition of the effect of ascription versus achievement mind-set on consumers' preference of products. The construal level of purchase is manipulated along the temporal construal dimension. Study 3 examines whether the effect of ascription versus achievement mind-set on preference of products may differ, depending on consumer knowledge of the target products.

The present research makes three major contributions to consumer research. First, while a great deal of previous research has focused on the role of conscious information processing in product evaluation, far too limited attention has been paid to testify the role of unconscious processing (for a review, see Wyer, Xu & Shen, 2012). The present study provides further empirical evidence that unconscious processes (mind-sets) can play a role in explaining the selection of strategies to evaluate choice alternatives. Specifically, the present study demonstrates that: 1) ascription mind-set increases consumers' attention to the ascribed attributes of products in product evaluation (hereinafter referred to as *ascription mind-set effect*); and that 2) achievement mind-set increases consumers' attention to the achieved attributes of products in product evaluation (hereinafter referred to as *achievement mind-set effect*). Once induced, these mind-sets will influence the product evaluation of individuals without consciousness. Second, the present study identifies a situational factor (the construal level of purchase) and a personal factor (consumer knowledge) as the boundary conditions of the ascription mind-set effect and achievement mind-set effect. Third, the present study contributes to product personality literature by offering a new classification

of product attributes. Specifically, ascribed attributes are those given by the origin of products (e.g., country-of-origin and brand). These attributes will be more influential for ascription mind-set consumers. On the contrary, achieved attributes include various functional attributes of products. These attributes will be more influential in an achievement mind-set situation. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the ascription versus achievement concepts have ever been introduced to consumer behavior research.

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