NOT JUST THE BEST YEARS OF MY LIFE:
PERSONAL GROWTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Our conception of product affirmation depicts a product as "sculptor" of the consumer's ideal self, similar to how a relationship partner can help us achieve our aspirations and goals. We performed two studies to look at the role of higher education as a product in affirming a consumer's ideal self. We found that product affirmation for undergraduate students and alumni (with the university as the product that affirms the ideal self of the student/alumnus) leads to increases in the experience of various positive emotions, the acquisition of various positive traits, and positive evaluations of the university. Additionally, we found that product affirmation effects were more pronounced and robust in one's personal ideal-self domain than in one's professional ideal-self domain. Practical implications, study limitations, and future directions are discussed, as well as preliminary findings from a follow-up experiment using a sample of graduate students.

INTRODUCTION

Product affirmation describes the process in which a product brings out important aspects of a consumer's ideal self. Our conception of, and subsequent support for, product affirmation was a reaction to the mixed evidence regarding self-image congruence models in the current consumer behavior literature. We make the argument that products which affirm the consumer's ideal self (i.e., product affirmation) exert significantly more powerful effects on a consumer's emotions, personality, and product evaluations than products which verify or enhance one's self-concept (alternatively labeled as "product verification" and "product enhancement" respectively). That is, products that bring out a consumer's ideal self (product affirmation) have significantly more positive influences in that consumer's life and elicit significantly more favorable product evaluations than products that match a consumer's actual self (product verification) or products that a consumer's peers tend to favor (product enhancement). For example, I can buy one of three suits, each of which matches one of the three types of self-concepts mentioned above (ideal, actual, and enhanced selves). One expensive suit expresses and brings out my desire to be

elegant and sophisticated (my ideal self), a second cheaper suit matches my modest financial status (my actual self), and a third trendy suit lines up with what my friends prefer (my enhanced self). Our work suggests and supports the notion that the elegant and sophisticated suit that brings out my ideal self will have a more positive influence in my life and be evaluated much more favorably by me compared to the cheaper suit that reflects my actual modest financial status and the trendy suit that my friends prefer.

It does not seem to be a stretch at all to conceptualize a college or university as a "suit" that one presents to the rest of the world. We can select, pay for, and use a college or university as much as any other product, as higher education provides benefits for the money we pay. We show off our college or university in many ways, whether others see it on our resumes, on a t-shirt or sweatshirt we wear, or on a bumper sticker on the back of our cars. In many ways, a college or university represents the ultimate expression of our educational consumption. As such, we set out to apply the investigation and generalization of product affirmation effects in the consumption domain of higher education. Two studies were initially conducted to test such a proposition.

BACKGROUND

Affirmation Processes in the Context of Romantic Relationships

Our current research program regarding product affirmation is rooted in the close relationships research domain. Drigotas and his colleagues developed a model of partner affirmation in ongoing close relationships (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). These authors proposed that the process of behavioral confirmation (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Hilton & Darley, 1991; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977) is likely to be quite powerful in the context of ongoing close relationships, in that close partners exert strong and frequent impact on one another across diverse behavioral domains. Accordingly, over time in close relationships, each person is likely to exert considerable impact on the other's "self"—on the other's traits, values, and behavioral tendencies. To the extent that the confirmation process aligns with each person's ideal self, each is likely to enjoy movement toward his or her ideal self, and the relationship will flourish. Affirmation describes the extent to which the partner's perception of the self and his/her behavior aligns with the individual's ideal self. Such affirmation is termed the "Michelangelo Phenomenon." Affirmation has been shown to yield enhanced personal well-being and couple well-being (Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas et al., 1999; Kumashiro, Rusbult, Wolf, & Estrada, 2006; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, in press; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2006).

Empirical Evidence for Affirmation in Consumer Behavior

The process of affirmation seems more intuitive in the context of a romantic relationship than in the context of consumer behavior. In order to make such a conceptual and contextual jump, one must be willing to accept that a consumer and a product or brand can have an interdependent relationship in which each exerts powerful effects on the other. Indeed, Susan Fournier in her prominent 1998 Journal of Consumer Research article put out such a call to researchers to use close relationship theories in psychology to understand the dynamic relationship between consumer and brand, conceptualizing the brand as an animated and active partner to the

consumer. To this extent, substantial research has demonstrated insightful application of close relationship theories to consumer behavior (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Aggarwal, 2004; Coolsen, 2005; Coolsen, Brandt, & Herbst, 2006; Coulter, Price, & Feick, 2003; Park & Macinnis, 2006).

Directly related to the concept of product affirmation previously mentioned, this program of research recently pitted product affirmation effects on a consumer's emotions, personality, and product evaluations against product verification effects and product enhancement effects through a series of experimental designs (Coolsen & Kumashiro, 2009; Coolsen & Pitek, 2007). Results of these experiments yielded strong and consistent support for product affirmation effects on a consumer's emotions, personality, and product evaluations and decidedly weaker and inconsistent product verification and product enhancement effects. That is, products aligned with the consumer's ideal self were evaluated more favorably and brought about more positive changes in the consumer's emotions and personality (e.g., feeling confident, attractive, and happy as a result of owning/using the product) compared to products aligned with the consumer's non-ideal self. Alternatively, analyses did not exhibit parallel support for products aligned with the consumer's actual self (product verification) or products aligned with the consumer's enhanced self (product enhancement).

STUDIES 1 & 2: PRODUCT AFFIRMATION EFFECTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Generalization of Product Affirmation Effects to Higher Education

The studies presented here in this paper served to test and generalize our concept of product affirmation to a specific consumer setting—higher education in which potential students, current students, and alumni represent the "consumers" and the university, college, etc. provide the service of higher education. That is, we conceptualize a relationship between consumer (e.g., current student) and product (e.g., university) in the context of higher education, and thus, we propose that product affirmation would exist between student and university. Higher education is obviously branded and marketed just like other products. We often talk about being proud alumni of universities and colleges, we purchase branded clothes, key chains, flags and license plates, and we secure higher educational credit cards. For many people the university or college they attend becomes a part of their identity and affects how they perceive themselves and others view them. Alumni groups share personal and professional experiences that define and unify members. Again, we propose that the university or college that appears on one's resume, sweatshirt, or car can serve to affirm the ideal self.

To initially test the existence of product affirmation in higher education, we conducted two studies. One study used a sample of undergraduate students and the second study used a sample of university alumni. In line with previous product affirmation findings, we hypothesized that consumers' perceptions of movement toward their ideal selves facilitated by the service of higher education would be associated with positive changes in the consumer's emotions, personality, and self-concept and favorable product evaluations of the institution of higher education.

Participants

For Study 1, thirty-four participants (25 men, 9 women) in undergraduate business administration classes at a university in Pennsylvania satisfactorily completed the study. These participants were 21.41 years old on average, had completed an average of 3.32 years as an enrolled student of the university, and most were Caucasian (97% Caucasian, 3% other). For Study 2, forty participants (21 men, 19 women) who were alumni from the same university in Pennsylvania satisfactorily completed the study. These participants were 46.90 years old on average and all were Caucasian.

Questionnaires

All participants in Studies 1 and 2 completed questionnaires describing themselves, their attitudes regarding their ideal selves and respective movement, their respective university in (from) which they were enrolled (graduated), and the association between the two. Because previous research regarding affirmation processes has taken into account the perspective of different ideal-self movement domains (Coolsen, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2008), we included two self-ideal domains specific to consumers of higher education: professional ideal self and personal ideal self.

Professional Ideal-Self Movement

Participants were first asked to complete questions about their professional ideal selves. First, they answered the following essay-format question: "In this part of the questionnaire, you are going to think about your professional aspirations, such as obtaining and being successful in your ideal profession (e.g., a doctor, writer, an executive, a social worker, etc.). Using the space below to describe in your own words, how do you see your ideal self in terms of professional aspirations?" They then answered the following question using a nine-point categorical scale ("-4" = I have moved further from my ideal self, "0" = I have not changed, "+4" = I have moved closer to my ideal self): "Indicate whether you've moved closer to, or have moved further away from, your ideal self (or not changed at all) in terms of your professional aspirations as a result of the time you have spent at [their respective university]."

Personal Ideal-Self Movement

After the professional ideal self questions, participants then answered similar questions about their personal ideal selves: "In this part of the questionnaire, you are going to think about your personal traits, such as becoming kinder to people, being more socially active, being very athletic, being more supportive in relationships, adhering to moral/religious values, etc. Using the space below to describe in your own words, what does your ideal self look like in terms of personal traits?" They then answered a nine-point categorical scale (similar to the one described above for the professional ideal self) measuring personal ideal self movement as a result of the time spent at their respective university.

Attitudes Regarding the Respective University

After completing basic demographic questions, participants finished the questionnaire by completing a series of Likert-type scales ("0" = do not agree at all, "4" = agree somewhat, "8" = agree completely). Using the measures in our previous product affirmation work and findings, participants were asked to rate their agreement of the extent to which they would feel more confident, lovable, attractive, excited, anxious, relaxed, disappointed, happy, annoyed, and successful as a result of their time at their respective university (e.g., "Overall, I believe my time at [my university] has made me more confident"). The final set of Likert-type scale items measured agreement to the following questions: "I am proud to be a student/graduate of [my university]"; "In general, I speak well about [my university] to others"; and "I often recommend [my university] to others as a school to attend."

Operational Hypotheses

As previously mentioned, we have found that product affirmation of a consumer's ideal self exerts powerful effects on a consumer's emotions, personality, and self-concept. In particular, products aligned with the consumer's ideal self bring about positive changes in the consumer's emotions, personality, and self-concept and are evaluated favorably. In Studies 1 and 2, product affirmation was operationally measured as a student's/alumnus' movement closer to his/her ideal self (professional and personal ideal selves) as a result of the time spent at his/her respective university. Therefore, we offered the following hypotheses for these two studies:

Hypothesis #1

Movement closer to one's ideal self (for both the professional and personal ideal selves) as a result of the time spent at his/her respective university would exhibit significantly positive correlations with agreement ratings that a student/alumnus feels more positive emotions/personality traits/self-concept traits as a result of the time spent at his/her respective university (i.e., more confident, lovable, attractive, excited, relaxed, and happy).

Hypothesis #2

Movement closer to one's ideal self (for both the professional and personal ideal selves) as a result of the time spent at his/her respective university would exhibit significantly negative correlations with agreement ratings that a student/alumnus feels more negative emotions/personality traits/self-concept traits as a result of the time spent at his/her respective university (i.e., less anxious, disappointed, and annoyed).

Hypothesis #3

Movement closer to one's ideal self (for both the professional and personal ideal selves) as a result of the time spent at his/her respective university would exhibit significantly positive correlations with agreement ratings for the following three product evaluation items: being proud of the university, speaking well about it to others, and often recommending it to others as a school to attend.

Results: Descriptive Statistics and Simple Correlational Analyses

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for: (a) the measures of professional and personal ideal-self movement, (b) agreement ratings that a student/alumnus feels more emotions/personality traits/self-concept traits as a result of the time spent at his/her respective university, and (c) agreement ratings for being proud of the university, speaking well about it to others, and often recommending it to others as a school to attend. Table 2 summarizes the zero-order correlations of professional/personal ideal-self movement with the remaining measures listed in Table 1. (It should be noted that the zero-order correlations of professional self-ideal movement with personal self-ideal movement in Studies 1 and 2 were significantly positive; for Study 1: $r = .53$, $p < .01$; for Study 2: $r = .58$, $p < .01$.)

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS (STUDIES 1 AND 2)

	Undergraduate Sample		Alumni Sample	
	M	SD	M	SD
Professional ideal-self movement	2.03	1.38	1.78	1.72
Personal ideal-self movement	2.06	1.41	1.69	1.36
[My university] has made me more confident	5.71	1.31	5.77	1.90
[My university] has made me more lovable	4.09	1.85	3.30	2.74
[My university] has made me more attractive	3.82	2.19	2.94	2.43
[My university] has made me more excited	4.74	2.26	3.84	2.77
[My university] has made me more anxious	5.50	2.00	1.53	1.83
[My university] has made me more relaxed	3.62	1.94	3.65	2.72
[My university] has made me more disappointed	3.18	1.70	1.03	1.60
[My university] has made me more happy	4.85	1.72	4.74	2.95
[My university] has made me more annoyed	3.62	1.99	0.95	1.87
[My university] has made me more successful	6.06	1.67	5.97	2.01
I am proud to be a student/graduate of [my university].	5.47	1.66	6.89	1.71
In general, I speak well about [my university] to others.	5.44	1.94	7.26	1.63
I often recommend [my university] to others as a school to attend.	4.56	1.94	5.39	2.64

Measures of professional and personal ideal-self movement employed a nine-point categorical scale; "-4" = I have moved further from my ideal self, "0" = I have not changed, "+4" = I have moved closer to my ideal self. All remaining measures above employed a nine-point Likert-type scale; "0" = do not agree at all, "4" = agree somewhat, "8" = agree completely.

TABLE 2. ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS (STUDIES 1 AND 2)

	Undergraduate Sample		Alumni Sample	
	Professional Ideal-Self Movement	Personal Ideal-Self Movement	Professional Ideal-Self Movement	Personal Ideal-Self Movement
[My university] has made me more:				
Confident	.51**	.60**	.30	.49**
Lovable	.19	.18	.22	.48**
Attractive	.45**	.34	.19	.51**
Excited	.50**	.46**	.26	.61**
Anxious	.37*	.26	-.13	.25
Relaxed	.53**	.63**	.26	.56**
Disappointed	-.22	-.26	-.28	.03
Happy	.41*	.52**	.16	.53**
Annoyed	-.34	-.46**	-.40*	-.05
Successful	.58**	.68**	.30	.59**
I am proud to be a student/graduate of [my university].	.26	.42*	.30	.52**
In general, I speak well about [my university] to others.	.29	.58**	.25	.25
I often recommend [my university] to others as a school to attend.	.25	.47**	.47**	.52**

**p < .01. *p < .05.

Support for Hypothesis #1

Assessing support for Hypothesis #1, Study 1 yielded significantly positive correlations of both professional ideal-self movement and personal ideal-self movement with most (five of the seven total) of the positive emotions/personality traits/self-concept traits as a result of the time spent at the respective university. Study 2 yielded significantly positive correlations of personal ideal-self movement with all of the seven positive emotions/personality traits/self-concept traits; however, Study 2 did not yield significantly positive correlations of professional ideal-self movement with any of the seven positive emotions/personality traits/self-concept traits.

Support for Hypothesis #2

Assessing support for Hypothesis #2, Studies 1 and 2 yielded significantly negative correlations of professional ideal-self movement (in Study 2 only) and personal ideal-self movement (in Study 1 only) with only one ("more annoyed") of the three total negative emotions/personality traits/self-concept traits. (It should be noted that Study 1 (only) yielded a significantly positive correlation of professional ideal-self movement with feeling more anxious).

Support for Hypothesis #3

Assessing support for Hypothesis #3, Study 1 yielded significantly positive correlations of personal ideal-self movement with all three of the product evaluation items, and Study 2 yielded significantly positive correlations of personal ideal-self movement with two of the three of the product evaluation items. Alternatively, only one of the six possible correlations assessed across Studies 1 and 2 for professional ideal-self movement was significantly positive (with the "often recommend" item in Study 2 only).

Results: Exploratory Simultaneous Regression Analyses

During the design of these studies, we did not create any specific hypotheses regarding substantial differences in product affirmation effects between one's professional-self movement and one's personal-self movement—we simply attempted to take into account the perspective of different ideal-self movement domains in previous work regarding affirmation processes the Michelangelo Phenomenon (Coolsen, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2008). However, upon discovering our findings mentioned above, it seemed appropriate to probe in an exploratory fashion the apparent pattern of product affirmation effects in the context of these studies (i.e., higher education as a product category). That is, the simple correlational analyses across both studies suggested stronger product affirmation effects for personal ideal-self movement compared to professional ideal-self movement. Such potential implications would seem profound for marketing strategies in higher education, so we performed a series of exploratory simultaneous regression analyses to ascertain the unique contribution of each domain of movement in predicting both the positive changes in the consumer's emotions, personality, and self-concept and favorable product evaluations.

Tables 3 (for Study 1) and 4 (for Study 2) present a summary of simultaneous regression analyses using the two domains of ideal-self movement (professional and personal) to predict the various emotions/personality traits/self-concept trait items and the product evaluation items. (Because of the exploratory nature of these regression analyses, no interaction effects were examined.) Scanning the two tables, it becomes readily evident that the number of significant associations of ideal-self movement with the various emotions/personality traits/self-concept trait items and the product evaluation items is significantly greater in the domain of one's personal ideal self (with fifteen significant associations) compared to the professional ideal-self domain (with only two significant associations). Thus, it would seem that product affirmation effects may be more pronounced and robust in the domain of one's personal ideal self compared to the domain of one's professional ideal self among consumers of higher education.

TABLE 3. SIMULTANEOUS REGRESSION ANALYSES FOR STUDY 1

	Predictor Variables		
	Professional Ideal-Self Movement	Personal Ideal-Self Movement	
	β	β	R^2
Outcome Variables			
[My university] has made me more:			
Confident	.26	.46**	.41**
Lovable	.13	.12	.05
Attractive	.37	.15	.21*
Excited	.35	.27	.30**
Anxious	.32	.09	.14
Relaxed	.27	.49**	.45**
Disappointed	-.12	-.19	.08
Happy	.18	.43*	.30**
Annoyed	.14	-.39*	.22*
Successful	.30*	.52**	.53**
I am proud to be a student/graduate of [my university].	.06	.39	.18
In general, I speak well about [my university] to others.	-.02	.59**	.33**
I often recommend [my university] to others as a school to attend.	.01	.47*	.22*

**p < .01. *p < .05.

TABLE 4. SIMULTANEOUS REGRESSION ANALYSES FOR STUDY 2

| | Predictor Variables | | |
| | Professional Ideal-Self Movement | Personal Ideal-Self Movement | |
	β	β	R^2
Outcome Variables			
[My university] has made me more:			
Confident	.04	.46*	.24**
Lovable	-.04	.50**	.23*
Attractive	-.15	.60**	.28**
Excited	-.08	.65**	.37**
Anxious	-.37	.45	.16
Relaxed	-.04	.58**	.31**
Disappointed	-.42	.27	.13
Happy	-.17	.62**	.30**
Annoyed	-.54**	.25	.21*
Successful	-.04	.61**	.35**
I am proud to be a student/graduate of [my university].	.01	.51**	.27**
In general, I speak well about [my university] to others.	.15	.17	.08
I often recommend [my university] to others as a school to attend.	.32	.34	.34**

**p < .01. *p < .05.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Practical Implications

Given our simple correlational analysis and exploratory regression analysis findings, the practical implications for product affirmation seem significant and far-reaching in the product

category of higher education. In particular, such product affirmation findings may have profound implications for marketing and brand positioning strategies. Both professional and personal ideal-self domains indicated beneficial associations of consumer ideal-self movement with favorable product experiences and evaluations, supporting our original hypotheses for product affirmation effects in a higher education setting. These findings indicate that messages and images promoting the school should focus on the ideal-self traits of their students, alumni, and potential applicants. Traditionally, one might associate such messages and images with consumers being studious, receiving academic recognition, and ultimately gaining successful professional careers. But when our exploratory regression analysis findings are taken into account, an interesting implication is revealed that seems to contradict traditional assumptions about higher education communications.

An important practical insight comes from the stronger effect indicated in the personal ideal-self domain compared to the professional ideal-self domain. This is somewhat counter-intuitive to popular opinion that schools are chosen on the strength of their academic programs and their ability to prepare students for the professional ranks. If our exploratory findings are valid and reliable (which future research efforts could attempt to support), they seem to indicate that students may be more interested in how they can grow and develop personally at a school. Everyone may have anecdotal evidence of this when his/her own child, or a friend's child, is accepted into different schools. One school may clearly be stronger in academics, yet the student chooses the other school because it fits better with his/her personal aspirations.

Such an insight would seem to have many direct marketing strategy implications for all consumers of higher education: potential applicants, current students, and school alumni. Schools of higher education should consider a more balanced approach in marketing communications, emphasizing both the professional and the personal growth opportunities for consumers. For example, in addition to professional messages, images of groups of friends enjoying themselves in student centers, showing school pride and spirit at a sporting event, attending a concert or show at the school performing arts center, etc. could pay significant dividends among various higher education consumer groups. Beyond marketing communications, this balance between personal and professional ideal-self movement could also apply to university publications, announcements, press releases, Web sites, etc. For example, a concerted effort should be taken to balance announcements and press releases between professional/academic achievement and personal offerings and improvements. Personal ideal-self messages may actually hold more impactful, emotional appeal in higher education—instead of typical vignette-style advertisements emphasizing academic accreditation and credentials, perhaps institutions of higher education need to bring to life the friendships and mentor relationships people develop in college that last a lifetime.

The importance that consumers attach to personal ideal-self growth can be seen in the recent rise in popularity of social media on the internet. According to a recent Pew Internet study (Jones & Fox, 2009), users ages 12-32 are more likely than older users to read other people's blogs and to write their own; they are also considerably more likely than older generations to use social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. These younger generations use personal blogs to update friends on their lives, and they use social media websites to keep track of, and communicate with, friends. Alternatively, older generations use the internet less for

socializing and entertainment and more as a tool for information searches, emailing, and buying products. This trend in integration of personal and professional lives can be seen in the corporate sector as more and more businesses are seeking ways to market their products via social media Web sites. Higher education could also leverage these new media vehicles to communicate their personal growth opportunities. In the same way that Zappos.com has employees on Twitter, colleges and universities could designate student leaders that "tweet" about the campus activities, relationships and other personal growth opportunities.

Additionally, Search Engine Marketing (SEM) strategies could be adjusted to include search terms that emphasize the personal ideal-self growth consumers may be looking for in a college or university. Google Ad words could be purchased for search terms such as "dorm life" as well as "academic excellence." Click-through rates could then be monitored—lower performing search terms can be weeded out and new search terms could be added in an effort to optimize the search-term purchases. Dividing the search-term purchases in half between personal and professional terms would set up a situation where you could compare the performance of each ideal-self domain. In a similar way, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies could add personal ideal-self growth terms to college or university Web site front pages and meta-tags to improve search engine performance.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

There do seem to be many various future directions for this program of research. Because we drew from samples at one specific university, there is the distinct possibility that product affirmation effects in the different self-concept realms (e.g., personal vs. professional ideal self) could be moderated by the type of university/college or even the type of degree program. That is, variables such as prestige of the school and the curriculum/level of degree program could affect the influence and strength of product affirmation effects in various ideal-self domains. For example, it is possible that we found comparably stronger product affirmation effects in the domain of one's personal ideal self due to the type of school from which we obtained our sample. The institution at which we ran our studies is state-funded and has a wide variety of degree programs for students. Would students at private institutions and/or "specialty" schools renown for a particular curriculum or degree program (e.g., engineering schools) yield stronger product affirmation effects in the domain of personal ideal self?

A related direction to explore would seemingly involve a sample of students that we did not include in our two studies mentioned above—namely, graduate students. Generally, graduate students are in a different stage of life compared to undergraduate students and may have already achieved significant movement towards their ideal personal selves. A smaller percentage of the general population enters graduate school and their motivations could likely be more oriented towards professional ideal-self growth. Graduate students are, by definition, older and many have established careers and even families. Even for the younger demographic, the rigorous academic and financial demands of graduate school may place personal growth on hold while professional development requires a greater focus. Alternatively, alumni may benefit from a perspective of having achieved significant movement towards both their ideal personal and professional selves. Alumni may have the ability to look fondly on their undergraduate

experience and remember the professional and personal growth they achieved at their alma mater.

Preliminary Results: Follow-Up Experiment with Graduate Student Sample

Such sampling considerations facilitated our design of a follow-up study. Considering the findings in Studies 1 and 2, we designed a third study to experimentally pit personal ideal self affirmation effects against professional ideal self affirmation effects in higher education among graduate students. Employing a 2 X 2 between-subjects factorial design, with personal ideal-self movement (no movement vs. movement) as the first factor and professional ideal-self movement (no movement vs. movement) as the second factor, a total of 68 participants were asked to consider one of four different fake advertisements for a fictitious school ("Lindon University"): (1) "Move toward your ideal personal life—Lindon University, Move Personally" (personal ideal-self movement condition); (2) "Move toward your ideal professional life—Lindon University, Move Professionally" (professional ideal-self movement condition); (3) "Move toward your ideal personal and professional life—Lindon University, Move Personally & Professionally" (personal and professional ideal-self movement condition); (4) "Stay who you are—Lindon University, Stay" (no ideal-self movement condition). Each fake advertisement was designed to experimentally prime the perception of each ideal-self movement condition in the 2 X 2 factorial design. After priming participants to consider a university that helps (or does not) students move toward their personal or professional (or both) ideal self (i.e., product affirmation), they then completed measures of their attitudes about the fictitious Lindon University similar to the dependent variables used in our initial two studies above involving undergraduate students and alumni (see "*Attitudes Regarding the Respective University*" section above).

Preliminary findings of this experiment seem to indicate somewhat less pronounced and robust product affirmation effects across the various dependent measures; there were significant product affirmation effects (main effects and interaction effects) for approximately half (five out of ten) of the measures for the experience of various positive emotions and the acquisition of various positive traits (as a result of attending Lindon University), but there were no significant product affirmation effects for any of the product evaluation measures. In characterizing the significant product affirmation effects among this graduate student sample, such effects seemed more pronounced in the professional ideal-self domain compared to the personal ideal-self domain.
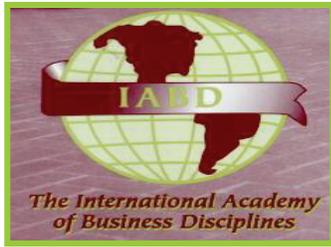
Considering such preliminary findings of our follow-up experiment, the moderating effects of different variables (such as type and level of higher education degree sought) in each ideal self domain on product affirmation would need to be investigated to achieve "a full picture" for marketing strategy. For example, results across our studies mentioned here might suggest that advertising and promotional strategy should be different for undergraduate students and alumni vs. graduate students. As we have suggested, personal ideal-self movement may be more influential to undergraduate students and alumni than to graduate students, whereas professional ideal-self movement might be more of the goal for graduate students.

In conclusion, product affirmation seems to be "alive and well" within the higher education setting. The challenge for marketers of such schools is to promote and bring out their consumers' personal and professional ideal selves. Our findings indicate that such efforts can substantially benefit and enhance the relationship between school and consumer.

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