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Does This Mug Make Me Look Taller?: Seeing Ourselves Through Our Possessions

Could an ad for a fancy Mont Blanc pen make you feel less sophisticated? Could a longtime owner of a Volkswagen (suddenly a symbol of dishonesty) inadvertently begin lying? According to a recent study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), we define ourselves through the “things” around us—whether we own them or not.



“Everything we own—whether it’s a gift, hand-me-down, or purchase—affects how we perceive ourselves; we absorb its traits into our identity and behavior. Furthermore, exposure to a product we *don’t* own can make us feel we *lack* its traits,” write authors Liad Weiss (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Gita Venkataramani Johar (Columbia University).

In one study, participants given tall thin mugs as a gift (implying ownership) reported feeling taller and even having higher self-esteem after drinking from them, while participants given shorter, wider mugs felt shorter and worse about their appearance. Other participants allowed to temporarily use the same tall thin mugs (but not to keep them, implying non-ownership) actually felt *shorter* afterward, while non-owners using the shorter mugs felt taller.

In another study, participants were either given headphones said to reproduce sound exactly as it was recorded (implying the device is honest and sincere) or headphones said to artificially enhance the sound (portraying the device as somewhat dishonest and insincere). Later, while observed playing a game, people given the unenhanced headphones played more honestly, whereas those given the enhanced headphones actually cheated more. Once again, participants who used (but did not own) the headphones followed the opposite pattern.

“The material goods surrounding us, whether owned or not, clearly affect our self-perception. Aside from providing important psychological insights into identity formation, these findings could have profound implications for product marketing and advertising strategy,” the authors conclude.

Liad Weiss and Gita Venkataramani Johar. “[Products as Self-Evaluation Standards: When Owned and Unowned Products Have Opposite Effects on Self-Judgment.](#)” *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2016. DOI: [10.1093/jcr/ucv097](#).



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