

The Effect of Consumers' Self-Congruence with Brand Endorsers on  
Consumer Responses

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## **Abstract**

The Effect of Consumers' Self-Congruence with Brand Endorsers on Consumer Responses

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Self-congruence is the degree to which consumers perceive brands to be similar to themselves. It is measured in terms of either actual self-congruence, where consumers feel the brand is similar to their current self, or ideal self-congruence, where consumers feel the brand represents their personal aspirational values. The objective of this paper is to explore how perceived self-congruence with a brand's spokespersons or spokes-characters affects consumer responses, measured in terms of emotional brand attachment, purchase intent, and brand recall. Furthermore, this thesis explores the moderating role of implicit self-theory. The results indicate that actual (versus ideal) self-congruence has a more positive significant effect on emotional brand attachment and purchase intent. Actual self-congruence also has a significant and negative relation with recall. Implicit self-theory did not emerge as a significant moderator.

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## Introduction

Many brand endorsers have stood the test of time, such as the *Canadian Tire* Guy (Gary), the *Old Spice* Man, and the Energizer Bunny. However, before selecting brand endorsers, brand managers need to consider the impact of such endorsers on consumer responses to their brands. Should consumers see themselves reflected in the endorser to connect more strongly to the brand, or is it beneficial to have the endorser represent consumers' aspirational ideals?

Consider this example: Canadian Tire's Gary is friendly, humorous, and most importantly, relatable. He represents the typical Canadian in everyday situations. It is clear that the strategy behind Gary is to make consumers see him as they see themselves doing everyday tasks, such as gardening, painting a house, and so on. On the other hand, when selecting David Beckham as an endorser for their brands (such as Adidas and Emporio Armani), marketers aimed to tap into universal human aspirations. Beckham represents an attractive, successful, and talented ideal, which draws consumers towards the brands he is associated with. However, while the efficacy of both strategies is apparent through countless examples, it begs the question: which strategy is more effective?

The use of endorsers (i.e., spokes people or spokes-characters) is an increasingly popular advertising strategy (Shimp, 2003). A spokesperson is "anyone who communicates the advertising message of a personal opinion, believe, finding, experience, etc. to the target market" (Pilelienė & Grigaliūnaitė, 2017, p. 2) whereas a spokes character is simply a non-human spokesperson (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). A considerable amount of research shows that the use of endorsers can lead to improved perceptions of advertisements, product evaluations, brand attitudes, and brand relationships (Dean & Biswas, 2001; Garretson & Niedrich, 2004; Mize &

Kinney, 2008; Ogilvy & Raphaelson, 1982; Petroschius & Crocker, 1989). However, some critical questions are not being asked by brand managers, namely should they aim to portray everyday consumers, or would it be more effective to show what the consumer would ideally want to be? This is the question this paper aims to tackle.

Regarding consumer congruence with spokespeople or spokes characters endorsing the brand, research has mainly focused on congruence with *celebrity* spokespersons. There exists a gap in consumer psychology literature regarding the relationship between consumers' perceived self-congruence with endorsers, and how this affects their response towards the brand. This leads to the first objective of the paper, which is to examine how perceived self-congruence with an endorser affects consumer responses towards the brand. For the purpose of this research, in an effort to encompass the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of consumer behavior, consumer responses are captured by three constructs: emotional brand attachment, purchase intent, and brand recall.

Self-congruence is generally operationalized in terms of two separate but related dimensions: actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence, both of which have been shown to have distinct yet meaningful impacts on consumers (Sirgy, 1982; 1986). Actual self-congruence in this context is defined as a person perceiving a brand to be similar to their current selves, while ideal self-congruence is achieved when a person perceives a brand to similar to how they would like to ideally perceive themselves. This leads to the second objective of this paper, which is to explore which dimension of self-congruence (i.e., *actual* versus *ideal*) has a stronger impact on consumers. A third objective is to explore any differences between human and cartoon brand endorsers in terms of consumer responses.

It is unclear how brand managers decide on the nature of brand self-congruence to reflect when selecting endorsers, although the nature of the product itself arguably plays an important role (e.g., products related to beauty are arguably more likely to evoke aspirational desires). However, for the majority of products, brand managers have the potential to choose between actual and ideal self-congruence. Therefore, the results of this research could serve as guidance to brand managers interested in engaging with consumers in a more meaningful way.

The hypotheses tested in this thesis are based on the literature in marketing as well as social and consumer psychology. It is important to note that this paper will leverage *both* spokespersons and spokes-characters in order to establish whether they affect consumer responses differentially. To the best of my knowledge, this has not been done before, but the rationale behind it is simple: the psychological mechanisms behind, as well as the eventual outcomes, of self-congruence with either a spokesperson or a highly humanized spokes-character should be similar, if not the same. Therefore, both types of endorsers are included to potentially uncover any meaningful differences between the two types of endorsers.

### **Literature Review**

A spokesperson is a “person who spreads information for firm’s profit or nonprofit goals” (Peng, Bo, & Hong-wei, 2010, p. 576). A spokes *character* is a “nonhuman character used to promote a product or a brand” (Callcott & Alvey, 1991; Callcott & Lee, 1995; Garretson & Niedrich, 2004, p. 25). Popular examples of spokes-characters include Mr. Clean, the Michelin Man, Snuggle Bear, Pillsbury Doughboy, and Aunt Jemima. It is important to point out an important distinction between two types of endorsers: celebrity versus non-celebrity. Non-

celebrity endorsers refer to endorsers who are specifically designed and utilized for the purposes of promoting a particular brand or product. Conversely, a celebrity endorser is popular and thus familiar to consumers before their endorsement of a product. In fact, advertising agencies specifically recruit the celebrity endorser because of their existing popularity, since this has been shown to increase advertising effectiveness (Erdogan, 1999). As mentioned, this research focuses on non-celebrity endorsers.

The foundation of this research is self-concept, which can be defined as the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1986, p. 7) and usually takes on two forms: the actual self and the ideal self. The “actual self refers to how a person perceives herself” while “the ideal self refers to how a person would like to perceive herself” (Sirgy, 1982, p. 287). Self-concept has been studied extensively in a variety of contexts, but has received the most attention in psychology and consumer behavior. In consumer research, the self-concept has been studied in conjunction with product preferences, purchase intentions, loyalty, usage and many other consumer behaviors (Sirgy, 1982). One way consumers can feel congruence with a brand is based on the brand’s perceived personality (Aaker, 1999; 1997), which is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Consumers can feel that a brand is similar to who they really are or who they would like to be. Self-congruence has been studied quite thoroughly (Sirgy, 1982; Malhotra, 1988) and its importance is well documented. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to extend knowledge about the impact of consumers’ self-congruence into the domain of non-celebrity spokespeople and characters representing brands.

The proposed psychological mechanism when evaluating the effect of self-congruence on consumers' responses to the brand applying a spokesperson or character is Construal-Level Theory (CLT) by Liberman and Trope (1998). According to CLT, the psychological distance between an individual, using him or herself as a reference point, and an object (e.g., a brand, an event) influences the individual's thoughts and behaviors towards that object (Trope, Liberman & Wakslak, 2007). Objects that are psychologically distant are known as higher-level construals, and result in broader and more abstract mental representations. On the other hand, lower-level construals are objects that are psychologically closer, resulting in more concrete and less ambiguous details. Psychological distance can be defined not just as time but also in terms of "space, social distance and hypotheticality" (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 1). Additionally, it is possible to integrate more than one type of psychological distance. In this paper, psychological distance will be used in terms of psychological proximity or similarity with oneself.

Research conducted on CLT in the consumer behavior context has highlighted its importance: Lynch and Zauberan (2007) reviewed the importance of CLT in consumer psychology, particularly in decision making. They discussed several decision-making scenarios and how perceived psychological distance influences the decision-making process as well as outcomes. Thomas, Chandran, and Trope (2006) studied the effect of product information on purchase intention. They found that feasibility related information (e.g., price discounts) had a stronger effect on purchase intention for purchases in the near future, as opposed to the distant future. Conversely, desirability information (e.g., addition of features) had a stronger effect on purchase intentions for purchase in the distant future, as opposed to the near future. Kim and John (2008) used construal level as a moderator of the relationship of perceived fit with a brand

extension and consumer response, which was measured by judgment and decision making. The results of three separate studies confirmed the moderating effect of construal level; they found that consumers who generally perceive stimuli at higher construal levels, place more value on perceived fit when evaluating brand extensions (Kim & John, 2008). These papers highlight the critical role of psychological distance in consumer behavior.

Consumers generally perceive their actual selves as closer in terms of psychological distance than their ideal self (Liberian, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). This is because the actual self is perceived in the present, whereas the ideal self is not only perceived as being in the future, it is also separated by effort and is shaped by aspiration and imagination, making it seem more distant. This view is shared by Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger (2011).

#### *Self-congruence and emotional brand attachment*

Emotional brand attachment, based on the work of Bowlby (1979, 1980) is defined as an emotional bond between a person and a specific object. In the marketing context, research shows that consumers are able to develop strong emotional bonds with brands (Belk, 1988) which result in higher levels of commitment, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Thomson, Macinnis, & Park, 2005). Malär et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between consumers' actual and ideal self-congruence with a brand's personality and emotional brand attachment. They hypothesized that self-congruence, both actual and ideal, will have a positive effect on emotional brand attachment, while actual self-congruence was hypothesized to have a more pronounced effect. Their results show that brands with actual self-congruence evoked

greater emotional brand attachment, while brands with ideal self-congruence were less successful towards this goal (Malär et al., 2011). The authors then explored three moderators for these relationships: product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness, all of which were found to be significant. They state that high levels of these moderators can increase the importance of self-congruence as an antecedent of emotional brand attachment (Malär et al., 2011). They do however point out that aspirational branding could still work in certain situations.

Alex and Joseph (2012) hypothesized that the hedonic or utilitarian nature of the product would moderate the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. Their results confirm that self-congruence leads to a positive impact on emotional brand attachment. However, the nature of the product (hedonic or utilitarian) did not have a significant impact on the relationship. They justify this by claiming that a product's hedonic and utilitarian values are not mutually exclusive. In other words, both these hedonic and utilitarian values could coexist in the same product despite attempts to differentiate the product as one or the other (Alex & Joseph, 2012). However, this finding is yet to be further validated.

Govers and Mugge (2004) examined the influence of self-congruence between product personality and consumer personality. Specifically, they chose to study extroversion and conscientiousness, claiming that out of the five dimensions of (human) personality (McCrae & John, 1992), these two characteristics are most relevant to products and brands. Based on this, they conducted a 2 (personality of the person: extrovert vs. conscientious) x 2 (product personality: extrovert vs. conscientious) experiment and confirmed that high product – personality congruence compared to low product – personality congruence resulted in increased product attachment (Govers & Mugge, 2004). There are some limitations of this paper, however.

First, the authors used a single product (i.e., toasters) to test their hypotheses. Secondly, the authors only explore two personality characteristics (i.e., extroversion and conscientiousness). Consumer personality is a broad and complex construct, therefore self-congruence with a brand can be achieved using any personality characteristic as a point of congruence. Moreover, self-congruence can be achieved through more than one personality characteristic at a time, which was not explored (e.g., this product is sincere *and* competent, just like I am). Finally, the authors studied self-congruence as a single dimension, and not in terms of actual and ideal self-congruence.

Japutra, Ekinci and Simkin (2014) investigated several determinants and antecedents of brand attachment. They identified that, among other constructs (i.e., experience, responsiveness, quality, reputation, and trust), self-congruence was an important determinant of consumers' brand attachment. When a brand reflected who consumers thought they were, respondents reported greater brand attachment (Japutra et al., 2014). Based on the literature, one can predict that self-congruence enhances emotional brand attachment. Formally stated:

*H1a: Perceived self-congruence with an endorser will have a positive relationship with emotional brand attachment.*

Regarding the differential effect of the dimensions of self-congruence, it is hypothesized that for emotional brand attachment, actual self-congruence has a more pronounced effect than ideal self-congruence. This is because when a consumer perceives ideal congruence with a brand, the brand is still psychologically more distant compared to a consumer who is *actually*

self-congruent with a brand. In terms of CLT, the ideal congruence is considered a higher-level construal than actual congruence. Furthermore, this proposition is in line with the findings of Malär et al. (2011). Formally stated:

*H1b: Actual self-congruence with an endorser will have a stronger positive relationship with emotional brand attachment, than ideal self-congruence.*

### *Self-congruence and purchase intent*

The relationship between self-congruence and purchase intent has previously been studied. Sirgy (1982, 1986) found that the effect of both actual and ideal self-congruence and purchase intention has generally been supported. Landon (1974) reviews literature on self-congruence and purchase intentions and came to similar conclusions. Furthermore, he also conducted a study on self-concept and purchase intentions, the results of which further confirmed the relationship. Interestingly however, he found that self-concept had differential effects on purchase intentions based on individual differences such as sex (Landon, 1974); in other words, for some individuals, actual self-congruence is more important than ideal self-congruence.

Belch (1978) studied how individual belief systems and self-congruence determine purchase intent. Specifically, he explored the differential effect of the self-concept on purchase intent for four belief systems: system 1 individuals who have the most concrete and rigid perceptions of the world around them; system 2 individuals are characterized by negativism, anti-rule and are generally low in self-esteem and high in cynicism; system 3 individuals who are

the second highest level of abstractedness in terms of their thinking; and system 4 individuals, those who have the highest tolerance for ambiguity, and think in the most abstract terms.

His findings suggest actual self-image has the most significant effect among respondents classified as system 4 individuals, while ideal self-image has the most significant effect on purchase intent among respondents classified as system 3 individuals.

In the celebrity spokesperson literature, Fleck, Korchia and Roy (2009) conducted a thorough investigation on the impact of consumers' self-congruence with a celebrity spokesperson on brand beliefs and purchase intention, using a mixed factorial design that included two brands, four celebrity endorsers, and measurements at two points in time. Their findings highlight that congruence between celebrity and the brand itself is a significant determinant of consumers' brand beliefs, attitude, and purchase intent. (Fleck et al., 2009).

Finally, Zinkhan and Hong (1991) developed a comprehensive theoretical model of self-congruence and advertising effectiveness, conceptualized as brand recall, attitude, evaluation, and purchase intent. In their model, they studied the differential impacts of the two dimensions of self-congruence (i.e., actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence). They propose that advertising expressions that are congruent with the consumer are more likely to lead to purchases. Based on this literature, it is proposed that consumers' self-congruence will positively affect their purchase intentions towards a branded product. Therefore:

*H2a: Perceived self-congruence with an endorser will have a positive relationship with purchase intention.*

Regarding the differential impact of actual and ideal self-congruence, Zinkhan and Hong (1991) proposed that ideal self-congruence has a stronger effect on purchase intention than actual self-congruence. They suggest that consumers try to reduce the discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves by choosing products that are similar to their ideal selves (Zinkhan & Hong, 1991). Therefore, consumers who perceive a spokes endorser to be more congruent with their ideal self will likely display higher purchase intent.

*H2b: Ideal self-congruence with an endorser will have a stronger positive relationship with purchase intent, than actual self-congruence.*

#### *Self-congruence and brand recall*

Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker (1977) studied individuals' information processing and the degree to which the self is involved in this process. Specifically, they conducted two experiments in which participants were instructed to list adjectives based on structural, phonemic, semantic, and self-reference categories, after which a recall test was conducted. The results from both experiments demonstrated that adjectives in the self-reference category had the highest probability of being recalled. This implies that self-reference influences memory and cognition, which in turn leads to increased incidental recall.

Misra and Beatty (1990) studied congruence between celebrity spokespersons and products, and its impact on recall and affect. Their findings demonstrate that congruence between the endorser and the product resulted in higher levels of recall. Additionally, they also

found that affect towards the brand was higher in the spokesperson-brand congruence (vs. incongruence) conditions.

In line with Rogers and colleagues (1977), Zinkhan and Hong (1991) propose that advertisements that are self-congruent with consumers should lead to improved product recall. They state that if external stimuli are congruent with consumers' self-schema, the processing of information is facilitated, resulting in improved memory (Zinkhan and Hong, 1991). Based on this literature, it is hypothesized that:

*H3a: Perceived self-congruence with an endorser will have a positive relationship with brand recall.*

Regarding the differential impact of actual and ideal self-congruence on recall, there is limited literature to clearly develop hypotheses. Nonetheless, in line with the proposition presented in Zinkhan and Hong (1991), the actual (vs. ideal) self-schema is better developed, and consumers are therefore more likely to store and retrieve knowledge that is congruent with their actual self-schema (Zinkhan and Hong, 1991). Hence:

*H3b: Actual self-congruence will have a stronger positive relationship with product recall, than ideal self-congruence.*

#### *The moderating role of implicit self-theory*

The proposed relationships between self-congruence and brand attachment, purchase

intention, and recall are likely to be moderated by several factors. One potential moderator is implicit self-theory. This refers to individuals' beliefs regarding how malleable their personalities are (Dweck, 2000), and encompasses entity theory and incremental theory (Park & John, 2010). Entity theorists believe that their personalities, personal attributes, and qualities are stable and permanent. They believe that they are not capable of experiencing any personal improvement despite any effort. Incremental theorists, on the other hand, believe that they are capable of self-improvement, as they view themselves as malleable, and therefore improvable (Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Legget, 1988).

Entity theorists perceive themselves as unchangeable and unable to improve (Dweck, 2000), so consequently one can argue that they are less concerned or familiar with their ideal selves, and more fixated on their actual selves. An individual's ideal self is seen as aspirational, necessitating some struggle and accomplishment. However, entity theorists believe that effort cannot lead to any improvement. Another way to look at this is through the lens of CLT. For entity theorists, there is greater psychological distance between themselves and their ideal selves, as compared to their actual selves. This means that for these individuals, their ideal self could be considered a higher-level construal, and their actual self is a lower-level construal. Therefore:

*H4a: Entity theorists will display a more positive response (i.e., emotional brand attachment, brand recall and purchase intent) towards actual self-congruent spokes endorsers, compared to incremental theorists.*

For incremental theorists, the argument is somewhat reversed. These individuals believe that they *can* experience genuine and meaningful improvement through direct effort (Dweck, 2000). Hence, they believe that their ideal self is something that they *could* achieve. Coming back to CLT, it is conceivable that for these individuals (compared to entity theorists), the ideal self is not as psychologically distant. Therefore, endorsers perceived as ideally self-congruent should elicit a greater, positive responses from incremental theorists, as opposed to entity theorists.

*H4b: Incremental theorists will display a more positive response (i.e. emotional brand attachment, brand recall and purchase intent) towards ideal self-congruent spokes endorsers, compared to entity theorists.*

Regardless of the beliefs an individual may hold about themselves, the ideal self is *still* relatively more psychologically distant in comparison to the actual self. Therefore, while it is possible that depending on their particular beliefs, individuals could see their ideal selves as more or less psychologically distant, it is unlikely to be psychologically proximal enough to be considered a lower-level construal. Secondly, regardless of whether an individual is an entity theorist or an incremental theorist, their perception of whether or not an endorser is actually or ideally self-congruent should not differ significantly. This is because Implicit Self Theory focuses on entity and incremental theorists' beliefs regarding their own personality's malleability, so it stands to reason that their perceptions about who they are (actual self) and who they would ideally be (ideal self) should not be different.

Finally, there is some research that could contradict the above propositions. Park and John (2010) studied entity and incremental theorists' responses to using brands with appealing personalities (i.e., Victoria's Secret bag, MIT pen). They found that entity theorists felt more positively about themselves (i.e., more feminine, glamorous, intelligent) after using such brands, while incremental theorists were unaffected. This could imply that it is in fact entity theorists who prefer ideal self-congruence, and incremental theorists who prefer actual self-congruence. The authors support their findings by stating that for incremental theorists, using brands to portray their qualities does not match their approach to self-enhancement. On the other hand, entity theorists use these brands in order to self-signal (Park & John, 2010). However, the key difference between their findings and this paper's propositions lies in *brand experience*. In the current research, consumers considered brand advertisements featuring brand endorses, and were not required to have used, or experienced, the brand. Instead, they were simply evaluating their perceived self-congruence with the spokesperson or character and the brand.

The conceptual framework tested in this research is summarized below:

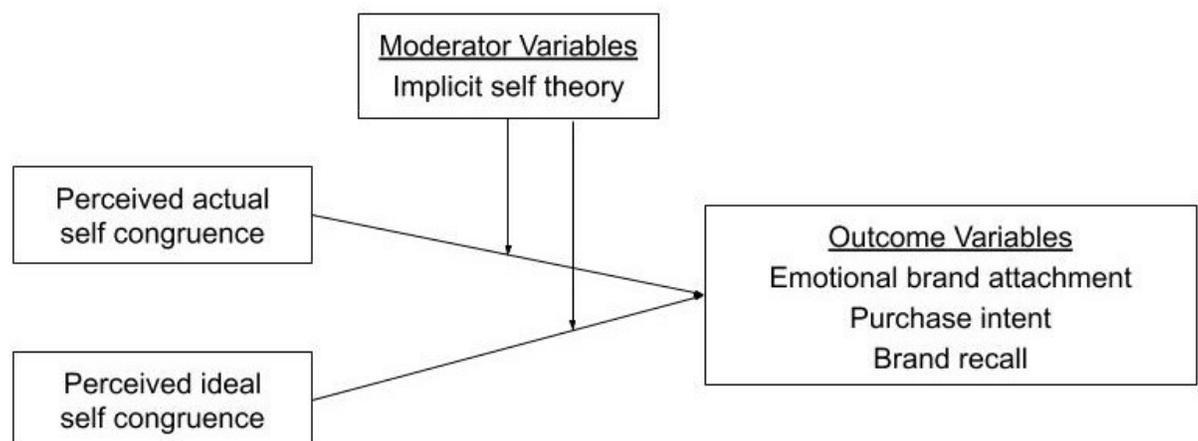


Figure 1 – Theoretical Framework

## Methodology

### *Stimuli*

To accurately measure the impact of varying degrees of self-congruence, it was critical to eliminate the effects of confounding variables, such as familiarity, experience with a specific brand, or level of product involvement. Therefore, the stimuli, in the form of fictitious print ads, were designed for the purposes of this study.

The ads were based on three frequently consumed products, which were liquid hand soap, breakfast cereal and laundry detergent. These products were chosen because respondents would be quite familiar with them, and consume them frequently. Note however, that the low involvement nature of the products chosen is discussed later as a limitation of this research.

Additionally, there were two possible taglines for each ad, one designed to be more aspirational in nature, while the other represented convenience and simplicity. For each product, an advertisement featured an aspirational or convenience-oriented tagline, a male or female endorser to control for gender effects, and a human or cartoon spokesperson to explore whether the spokesperson type would influence consumer responses to the brand. Therefore, for each product, there were ten conditions: actual/ideal tagline, male/female endorser, human/cartoon endorser, as well as a control condition for each product which involved no endorser at all. In total, 30 manipulations were used.

### *Pretest*

*Sample, procedure, and measures.* Prior to the main study, a pretest was conducted to test and confirm the humanization of the spokes characters involved in the manipulations, while also ascertaining the degree of actual and ideal self-congruence generated by the experimental

conditions. A total of 100 respondents (48 male and 52 female) were recruited from ResearchNow's consumer panel to complete the questionnaire. In the pre-test, each respondent was randomly exposed to one ad per product type (i.e., liquid hand soap, breakfast cereal, and laundry detergent) for a total of three ads. The measures consisted of perceived level of humanness of the endorser (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007) and consumers' perceived ideal and actual congruence (Malär et al. 2011). The pretest concluded with demographic measures (age, sex). All measures are described in detail in the appendix.

Researchers have utilized a diverse range of methods to measure self-congruence (Sirgy, 1982). The Q-sort method is not only one of most commonly used, but it is also one of the oldest (Sommers, 1964). It involves participants grouping products on several dimensions such as 'most like me' to 'least like me.' Another frequently used method to measure self-concept is using the semantic differential scale, which involves having the participant rate their actual or ideal self-congruence along several opposing adjectives (e.g., extrovert and introvert). These methods represent the two most popular measures for measuring self-concept. Other measures have also been used, such as the adjective check list, self-report measures as well as manipulations. A comprehensive list of papers that have employed various methods can be found in Sirgy (1982). Research has also used a variety of congruence models, which refers to the "method used in measuring the degree of match or mismatch between the product image and the self-concept" of a participant (Sirgy, 1982, p. 292). The two most prominently used models are the Euclidean distance model and the absolute difference model. Maheswari (1973) compared the predictive validity of both of these models and found no significant difference between the two models in

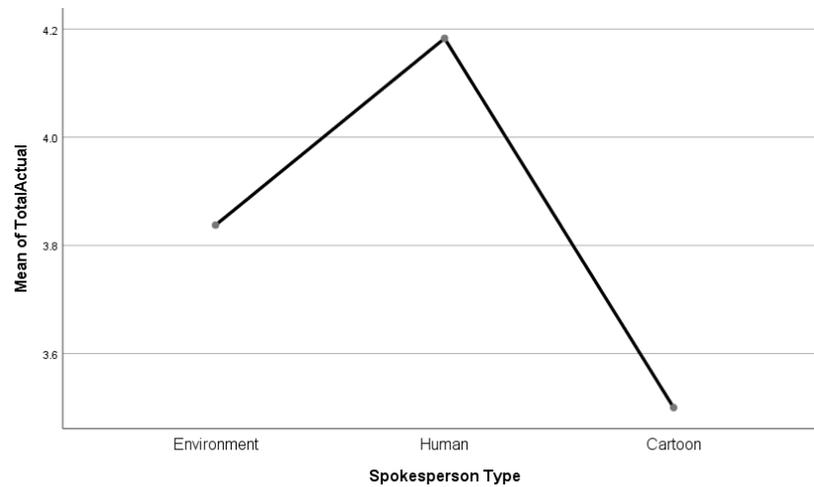
predicting consumer preferences. For the purpose of this research, measuring congruence as Malär and colleagues (2011) was sufficient.

*Results.* The analysis began by testing the reliability of the multi-item measures (actual congruence, ideal congruence, and humanization). Cronbach's Alphas were found to be high (actual congruence  $\alpha = .938$ ; ideal congruence  $\alpha = .933$ ; humanness  $\alpha = .934$ ). A factor analysis was also conducted on the same variables to successfully confirm that each loaded onto a single factor.

To understand the effect of the experimental conditions on humanness a MANOVA was run with humanness as the DV and the experimental conditions (product type, spokesperson type, spokesperson sex, and tagline type) as the independent variables. The results indicate that there were no significant differences in terms of perceived humanness across all cartoon conditions (all  $ps > .422$ ). There were also no significant interaction effects (all  $ps > .214$ ).

Next, the correlation between actual and ideal congruence was calculated ( $r = .869, p < .001$ ). A MANOVA was run with the experimental conditions (product type, spokesperson type, spokesperson sex, and tagline type) as the independent variables and the congruence measures the dependent variables. The results show that there was a significant main effect of spokesperson on actual self-congruence ( $F(1, 252) = 9.42, p = .002$ ) and on ideal self-congruence ( $F(1, 252) = 9.437, p = .002$ ). There was also a significant effect of the interaction between product type and spokesperson sex on ideal congruence ( $F(2, 252) = 3.406, p = .035$ ). To further explore this, two one-way ANOVAs were run, with spokesperson type as the independent variable, and actual and ideal self-congruence as the dependent variables. The

results show that for both actual and ideal congruence, the human endorser conditions result in the highest measured congruence while the cartoon conditions resulted in the weakest congruence (Actual congruence: human endorser:  $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ; cartoon endorser  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.81$   $F(2,279) = 4.683$ ,  $p = .010$ ; Ideal congruence: human endorser:  $M = 4.419$ ,  $SD = 1.6464$ ; cartoon endorser:  $M = 3.738$ ,  $SD = 1.7829$   $F(2,302) = 5.053$ ,  $p = .007$ ).



*Figure 2 – Plot of Means (Actual Congruence)*

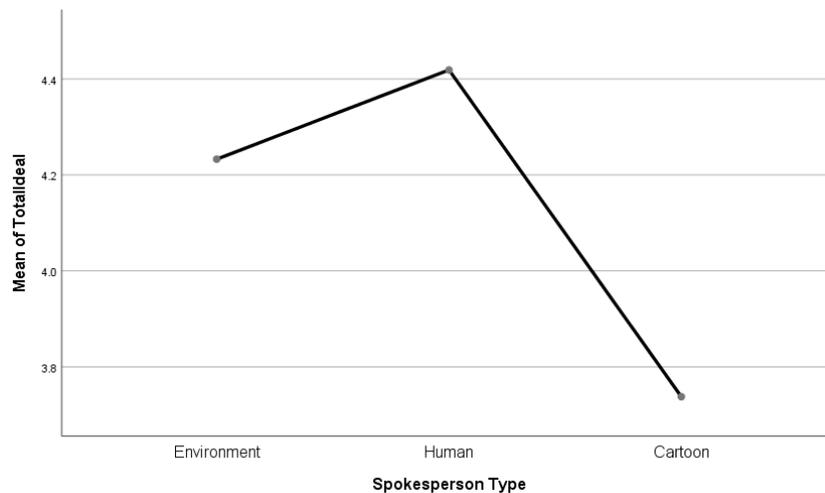


Figure 3 – Plot of Means (Ideal Congruence)

#### Pre-Test Means/SDs

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
ActualCongruence	280	3.848	1.7509
IdealCongruence	303	4.109	1.7315
Humanization	122	3.721	1.7357

Figure 4 – Pre-Test Means/SDs

Therefore, based on the results of the pretest, all stimuli were included in the following main experiment.

#### Main experiment

*Sample, procedure and measures.* In the main study, 279 respondents (137 male and 142 female) were recruited from ResearchNow's consumer panel. Similar to the pretest, participants were

randomly exposed to one ad per product, with a total of three product advertisements shown. Respondents were first asked to indicate their level of perceived congruence (actual and ideal) for each endorser they were exposed to. The outcome variables, namely emotional brand attachment, purchase intent, and brand recall were also measured. Furthermore, product involvement, frequency of product usage, ad credibility and brand familiarity were also measured as control variables, and Implicit Self Theory was measured as a moderator. In addition to these, several control variables were included, which were product use, ad credibility and brand familiarity.

Perceived self-congruence (actual and ideal) and perceived humanness were measured similarly to the pre-test. Emotional brand attachment was measured using the scale provided by Thomson et al. (2005). Purchase intent was measured using a single item, adopted from Fleck et al. (2009). Product recall was measured by asking participants to recall and write down the names of the brands they came across in the survey (Liquid hand soap: Medex; Cereal: Barbara's Puffins; Laundry Detergent: Fairy; Srull & Wyer, 1984). This was done at the end of the experiment and was coded as either correct or incorrect. The participants' Implicit Self-Theory (incremental or entity) was measured using the Implicit Persons Theory Measure (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998). Furthermore, several control variables were included: the degree of product involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1994), ad credibility, brand familiarity (Martí-Parreño, Bermejo-Berros, & Aldás-Manzano, 2017) and frequency of product use (S. Ram and Hyung-Shik Jung, 1991). All measures and their items are available in the appendix.

*Results.* The analysis began by testing the reliability of the multi-item measures, by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha for each variable. The reliability scores were high (actual congruence  $\alpha = .925$ , ideal congruence  $\alpha = .938$ , emotional brand attachments  $\alpha = .976$ , humanized  $\alpha = .942$ , implicit self-theory  $\alpha = .847$ ). The only exception was product involvement (dimension 1  $\alpha = .602$  and dimension 2  $\alpha$  of  $.348$ ).

Next, a factor analysis was conducted to find any underlying unobservable (latent) variables. The results are positive for all variables, except product involvement. This is noted as a limitation in further discussion.

Following this, potential effects of the experimental manipulations (product type, endorser type, endorser sex, and tagline type) on the control variables (product involvement, product use, ad credibility, and brand familiarity) were examined in a MANOVA with experimental manipulations as independent variables and the control variables as the dependent variables. The results show that product type has significant effects on product involvement ( $F(2, 804) = 8.451, p < .001$ ), frequency ( $F(2, 804) = 112.040, p < .001$ ) and ad believability ( $F(2, 804) = 18.488, p < .000$ ). Other significant results are the interaction between spokesperson and spokesperson sex on product involvement ( $F(1,804) = 5.412, p = .02$ ), product type  $\times$  spokesperson  $\times$  spokesperson sex ( $F(2, 804) = 3.369, p = .035$ ), and spokesperson  $\times$  spokesperson sex  $\times$  tagline ( $F(1,804) = 4.834, p = .028$ ).

Main Study – Control Variables Means/SDs

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
ProductInvolvement	833	3.444	.6106

Frequency	833	3.09	1.645
Believable	833	4.20	1.796
Familiarity	833	2.57	1.975

Figure 5 – Control Variables Means/SDs

The effect the manipulations had on the congruence measures and the outcome variables (i.e., emotional brand attachment, purchase intent, and recall) was tested in a MANOVA using product type, human/cartoon character, sex of endorser, and tagline as independent variables, and actual/ideal self-congruence and outcome variables as dependent variables.

In a MANOVA with actual and ideal self-congruence as the DVs, believability was a significant covariate towards actual ( $F(1,802) = 162.800, p < .001$ ) and ideal self-congruence ( $F(1,802) = 213.645, p < .001$ ). Familiarity was also a significant covariate with regard to actual ( $F(1,802) = 174.619, p = .00$ ) and ideal self-congruence ( $F(1,802) = 120.077, p < .001$ ). Finally, the interaction between product type and spokesperson sex has a significant effect on ideal congruence ( $F(2,802) = 5.470, p = .004$ ).

The results indicate that believability had significant covariate effects on emotional brand attachment ( $F(1, 802) = 204.374, p < .001$ ), purchase intent ( $F(1, 802) = 299.037, p < .001$ ) and recall ( $F(1,802) = 127.165, p < .001$ ). Product type has a significant effect on purchase intent ( $F(2,802) = 7.808, p < .001$ ) and on recall ( $F(2,802) = 27.586, p < .001$ ). Finally, spokesperson  $\times$  spokesperson sex  $\times$  tagline has significant effects on recall ( $F(1,802) = 6.200, p = .013$ ).

In order to test hypotheses 1a/b, 2a/b and 3a/b, regression analyses were run with actual/ideal congruence as predictors and the outcome variables (i.e., emotional brand attachment, purchase intent and brand recall) as criteria. First, it was found that both actual and

ideal self-congruence have significant effects on emotional brand attachment, explaining 61% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.610$ ,  $F(2,830) = 648.312$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Actual congruence significantly predicted emotional brand attachment ( $\beta = .489$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as did ideal congruence ( $\beta = .315$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the results confirm that actual self-congruence had a stronger relationship with emotional brand attachment than ideal self-congruence. Additional checks were conducted to ensure absence of multicollinearity (actual congruence: tolerance = .224, VIF = 4.460; ideal congruence: tolerance = .224, VIF = 4.460). The results support H1a and H1b; perceived self-congruence has a positive relationship emotional brand attachment, and actual self-congruence has a stronger relationship than ideal self-congruence.

Actual and ideal congruence also has significant effects on purchase intent, explaining 47% of the variance ( $R^2 = .477$ ,  $F(2,830) = 381.055$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Actual congruence significantly predicted purchase intent ( $\beta = .411$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as did ideal congruence ( $\beta = .302$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, the data shows that actual congruence has a stronger relationship with purchase intent than did ideal congruence. Furthermore, multicollinearity was ruled out (actual congruence: tolerance = .224, VIF = 4.460; ideal congruence: tolerance = .224, VIF = 4.460). Based on these findings, H2a was supported, while H2b was not; perceived self-congruence has a positive relationship with purchase intent, however, actual self-congruence was found to have a stronger relationship than ideal self-congruence.

Finally, congruence was also found to have significant effects on recall, explaining 7% of the variance ( $R^2 = .070$ ,  $F(2,830) = 31.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, only actual congruence significantly predicted recall ( $\beta = -.168$ ,  $p = .018$ ). Multicollinearity was also ruled out (actual congruence: tolerance = .224, VIF = 4.460; ideal congruence: tolerance = .224, VIF = 4.460)

These results do not support hypothesis 3a or 3b, as only actual had a relationship with brand recall, and that too was negative.

To address the next set of hypotheses (H4a and H4b) regarding the moderator variable, Implicit Self-Theory was included in the regression (actual/ideal congruence as predictors and emotional brand attachment, brand recall and purchase intent as outcome variables). The only significant effect found was that of actual self-congruence on emotional brand attachment. The model explained 61% of the variance ( $R^2 = .619$ ,  $F(5,827) = 269.116$ ,  $p < .001$ ); actual self-congruence ( $\beta = .429$ ,  $p = .014$ ); ideal congruence ( $\beta = .290$ ,  $p = .100$ ); implicit theory ( $\beta = .043$ ,  $p = .365$ ); implicit  $\times$  actual ( $\beta = .076$ ,  $p = .727$ ); implicit  $\times$  actual ( $\beta = .024$ ,  $p = .914$ ). In other words, Implicit Theory itself was not found to have significant effects, and therefore, H4a/b were not supported.

### Summary of Results

Hypothesis #	Hypothesis	Supported/Not Supported
H1a	Perceived self-congruence will have a positive relationship with emotional brand attachment	Supported
H1b	Actual self-congruence will have a stronger relationship with emotional brand attachment, than ideal self-congruence	Supported
H2a	Perceived self-congruence will have a positive relationship with purchase intention	Supported

H2b	Ideal self-congruence will have a stronger relationship with purchase intention, than actual self-congruence	Not supported
H3a	Perceived self-congruence will have a positive relationship with brand recall	Not supported
H3b	Actual self-congruence will have a stronger relationship with product recall, than ideal self-congruence	Not supported
H4a	Entity theorists will display stronger response towards actual self-congruent spokes endorsers, compared to incremental theorists	Not supported
H4b	Incremental theorists will display stronger response towards ideal self-congruent spokes endorsers, compared to entity theorists	Not supported

*Figure 6 – Summary of Results*

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The purpose of this research was to examine the effect of self-congruence with a brand on consumers' emotional brand attachment, brand recall and purchase intent, and the moderating role of implicit self-theory. Furthermore, spokespersons and spokes characters were used in order to evoke differing levels of actual or ideal self-congruence.

To summarize the findings of this paper, Hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported; results show that perceived self-congruence has a positive relationship with emotional brand attachment, and that actual self-congruence is a better determinant. Hypothesis 2a was also supported, as

results indicated that perceived self-congruence had a positive relationship with purchase intent. H2b was not supported, however, as actual self-congruence was found to have a more meaningful impact on purchase intent than ideal self-congruence. Finally, H3a and H3b were not supported; perceived congruence had a significant effect on recall, but actual self-congruence had a significant, but negative effect on recall, while ideal had no significant effect. In other words, when participants felt that the stimuli was similar to their actual selves, they were less likely to remember the stimuli. It is possible that advertisements associated with high levels of actual self-congruence are less likely to catch consumers' attention or create any cognitive dissonance, and therefore, recall is reduced. In terms of the moderators, the hypotheses (H3a/b) were not supported; implicit self-theory was not found to have significant effects.

Additionally, in testing it was subsequently discovered that advertisements with human endorsers were able to generate significantly higher levels of perceived self-congruence than advertisements including cartoon spokes characters. Advertisements without human or cartoon endorsers produced self-congruence levels that were between the human and cartoon conditions. In other words, adding a human endorser increased perceived self-congruence, while adding a cartoon endorser decreased it, compared to a control condition.

### *Theoretical contributions*

Extant literature had not adequately explored self-congruence between consumers and endorsers; relevant research is on self-congruence with celebrity spokespersons, but not other types of spokes endorsers (i.e., non-celebrity endorsers and humanized cartoon characters). The problem with this is that celebrity spokespersons are employed by and related to a relatively small subset

of products. Despite their efficacy, it is not feasible to use a celebrity spokesperson for all types of products; not only is that far more expensive for brand managers, the use of a celebrity to endorse certain products could be detrimental, due to a mismatch between the product and the spokesperson (Misra & Beatty, 1990).

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first paper of its type; one that explores actual and ideal self-congruence with both spokespersons and spokes-characters. Additionally, consumer response is measured using three critical constructs: emotional brand attachment, purchase intent, and recall, which provides a substantial amount of insight into consumer psychology. The reason for choosing specifically these three constructs is that they represent the emotional, behavioral and cognitive aspects of the consumer, respectively, which provides holistic and comprehensive insight. Furthermore, for academics, this paper represents a platform on which to build additional research into an area that is in desperate need of attention.

A final point is that while existing literature has proposed that congruence with a spokes endorser is beneficial for the brand, lack of congruence does not *always* have to be detrimental. There could possibly be some situations in which the intentional use of incongruence lead to some benefits (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), but this is beyond the scope of this research.

### *Managerial contributions*

This research's most direct impact is arguably for brand managers and advertisers. Not only does this highlight the important of self-congruence when managing brands or creating advertising content, it goes a step further and provides evidence for the differential effect of the two dimensions (actual and ideal) of self-congruence on key consumer responses (i.e., brand recall,

emotional brand attachment, and purchase intent). Therefore, before selecting an endorser, it is critical for brand managers to thoroughly evaluate their target market's level of self-congruence with the endorser and ensure the intended self-congruence is created.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that according to literature, self-congruence is relevant to *all* types of consumers, regardless of age, sex or culture. Additionally, consumers can feel that they are congruent with *any* type of product, regardless of their level of involvement, familiarity or usage. Therefore, brand managers should always evaluate self-congruence, regardless of the nature of the product, the brand or even the target market.

#### *Limitations and future research*

The findings of this paper make way for further research. First, the products chosen (i.e., liquid hand soap, laundry detergent and cereal) are every day, low involvement products. It would be interesting to explore the nature of self-congruence consumers would feel towards a brand when dealing with high involvement products, such as a television or a car. Also, it stands to reason that low involvement products, such as the ones chosen, are more likely to elicit actual self-congruence in consumers, as opposed to ideal self-congruence. This is because these everyday products are frequently bought and consumed, making them, in terms of CLT, proximally closer than a high-involvement, less frequently purchased product. Furthermore, one could also argue that high involvement products are more likely to create ideal self-congruence. For incremental theorists, this could potentially mean that self-congruence with a high involvement product, would perhaps lead to Implicit Self Theory as a significant moderator of

the relationship. Future research could explore these directions by leveraging products with different levels of involvement.

Secondly, perceived self-congruence is generally measured at the pre-purchase, evaluation stage, and it would be interesting to explore how the consumption of a product affects perceived self-congruence. It would be best to explore this using a longitudinal methodology. Participants would be asked to evaluate several products at the same time. Next, participants will be free to select whichever product they wish to take with them, recreating a realistic purchase situation. After some length of time, say two weeks, participants will be called back, and once again the evaluation process will be repeated. The difference between the two measures of congruence would indicate the change in perception. One could argue that prolonged interaction with a product would make a consumer more ‘actual’ congruent with the product. From this, brand managers would get meaningful insight into how (differently) existing customers and potential customers perceive their products.

Additionally, another direction of future research could be to explore how the degree of anthropomorphisation of a spokes-character could potentially influence consumers; in other words, can consumers experience some sort of self-congruence with a spokes-character that is not very humanlike, and instead more animalistic in appearance? There are two possible methods of conducting such an experiment. The first would involve presenting participants with several spokes-characters, pre-tested to represent different degrees of humanization, after which they would indicate their actual or ideal self-congruence, as well as their attitude towards the product. However, a more controlled method of conducting this experiment would be to create fictional spokes-characters for fictional products. This would not only give the researcher more variation

in terms of the degrees of humanization of the spokes-characters, but would also control for any confounding variables such as brand or product familiarity and previous experiences.

Additionally, the nature of the animal, predatory or prey, would be an interesting variable to consider. The findings would once again be of great value to brand managers, particularly when designing new spokes-characters.

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### Appendix 1 - Measures

Measure	Source	Items
Congruence	Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger (2011)	<p>Take a moment to think about the above image. Describe this brand to yourself using personality characteristics, such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you see yourself (your actual self). What kind of person are you? How would you describe your personality?</p> <p>Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following two statements:</p> <p>The personality of the brand shown above is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self)</p> <p>The personality of the brand shown above is a mirror image of me (my actual self)</p> <p>Once again, take a moment to think about the above image. Describe this brand to yourself using personality characteristics, such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you would like to see yourself (your ideal self). What kind of person would you like to be?</p> <p>Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following two statements:</p> <p>The personality of the brand shown above is consistent with how I would like to be (my ideal self)</p> <p>The personality of the brand shown above is a mirror image of the person I would like to be (my ideal self)</p>
Brand Recall	Martí-Parreño, Bermejo-Berros, & Aldás-Manzano (2017)	Please list as many brand names as you can remember that you came across in this survey.

Purchase Intent	Fleck, Korchia, & Roy (2012)	If I had to buy [product category], I would buy [brand] [product category]
Emotional Brand Attachment	Thompson, MacInnis, & Park (2005)	Describe the extent to which the following words describe your feelings towards the brand.  Affection, love, connection, passion, delight, captivation
Implicit Self Theory	Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck (1998)	For the next statements, please indicate your level of agreement.  The kind of person someone is, is something basic about them, and it can not be changed very much.  People can do things differently but the important parts of who they are can not really be changed.  Everyone is a certain kind of person, and there is not much that they can do to really change that.
Product Involvement	Zaichkowsky (1994)	To me [product category] is... Important/unimportant Boring/interesting Relevant/irrelevant Exciting/Unexciting Means nothing/means a lot Appealing/unappealing Fascinating/mundane Worthless/valuable Involving/uninvolving Not needed/needed
Humanness	Aggarwal & McGill (2007)	To what extent does this the character shown above feel like a person?  To what extent has this character shown above come alive?
Ad Credibility		“How believable do you perceive this ad to be?” 1 = not at all believable, 7 = highly believable
Brand familiarity	Martí-Parreño, Bermejo-Berros, & Aldás-Manzano (2017)	How much do you agree with the following statement?

Frequency of product use	Ram & Jung (1991)	"[Brand] is a brand that I am familiar with." At present, how often do you use laundry detergent?
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## Appendix 2 – Stimuli



Figure 7 Soap, Human, Male, Tagline 1



Figure 8 Soap, Human, Male, Tagline 2

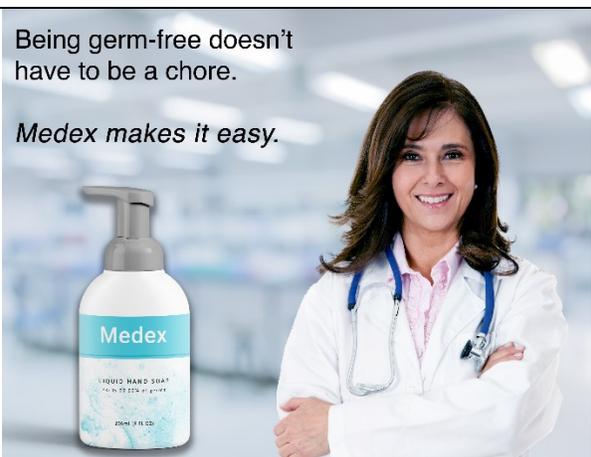


Figure 9 Soap, Human, Female, Tagline 1



Figure 10 Soap, Human, Female, Tagline 2



Figure 11 Soap, Cartoon, Male, Tagline 1



Figure 12 Soap, Cartoon, Male, Tagline 2



Figure 13 Soap, Cartoon, Female, Tagline 1



Figure 14 Soap, Cartoon, Female, Tagline 2

Being germ-free doesn't have to be a chore.

*Medex makes it easy.*



The image shows a white bottle of Medex liquid hand soap with a grey pump dispenser. The label is light blue and white, featuring the brand name 'Medex' in a bold, sans-serif font. Below the name, it says 'LIQUID HAND SOAP' and 'KILLS 99.9% OF GERMS'. The bottle is set against a blurred background of a hospital or clinic with white tables and chairs.

Figure 15 Soap, Environment, Tagline 1

Never compromise on your health.

*Medex gives you absolute protection.*



The image shows a white bottle of Medex liquid hand soap with a grey pump dispenser. The label is light blue and white, featuring the brand name 'Medex' in a bold, sans-serif font. Below the name, it says 'LIQUID HAND SOAP' and 'KILLS 99.9% OF GERMS'. The bottle is set against a blurred background of a hospital or clinic with white tables and chairs.

Figure 16 Soap, Environment, Tagline 2

Always in a rush?

*Get a complete breakfast every morning!*



The image shows a young man with short dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt, smiling as he eats from a blue bowl of Barbara's Puffins cereal. He is holding a spoon to his mouth. To his left is a box of Barbara's Puffins cereal. The background is a bright, modern kitchen.

Figure 17 Cereal, Human, Male, Tagline 1

Want to look your best?

*Get a perfect, healthy start every day!*



The image shows a young man with short dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt, smiling as he eats from a blue bowl of Barbara's Puffins cereal. He is holding a spoon to his mouth. To his left is a box of Barbara's Puffins cereal. The background is a bright, modern kitchen.

Figure 18 Cereal, Human, Male, Tagline 2

Always in a rush?

*Get a complete breakfast every morning!*



The image shows a young woman with long brown hair, wearing a white tank top, smiling as she eats from a white bowl of Barbara's Puffins cereal. She is holding a spoon to her mouth. To her left is a box of Barbara's Puffins cereal. The background is a bright, modern kitchen.

Figure 19 Cereal, Human, Cereal, Tagline 1

Want to look your best?

*Get a perfect, healthy start every day!*



The image shows a young woman with long brown hair, wearing a white tank top, smiling as she eats from a white bowl of Barbara's Puffins cereal. She is holding a spoon to her mouth. To her left is a box of Barbara's Puffins cereal. The background is a bright, modern kitchen.

Figure 20 Cereal, Human, Cereal, Tagline 2



Figure 21 Cereal, Cartoon, Male, Tagline 1



Figure 22 Cereal, Cartoon, Male, Tagline 2



Figure 23 Cereal, Cartoon, Female, Tagline 1



Figure 24 Cereal, Cartoon, Female, Tagline 2



Figure 25 Cereal, Environment, Tagline 1



Figure 26 Cereal, Environment, Tagline 2



Figure 27 Laundry, Human, Male, Tagline 1



Figure 28 Laundry, Human, Male, Tagline 2



Figure 29 Laundry, Human, Female, Tagline 1



Figure 30 Laundry, Human, Female, Tagline 2



Figure 31 Laundry, Cartoon, Male, Tagline 1



Figure 32 Laundry, Cartoon, Male, Tagline 2



Figure 33 Laundry, Cartoon, Female, Tagline 1



Figure 34 Laundry, Cartoon, Female, Tagline 2



Figure 35 Laundry, Environment, Tagline 1



Figure 36 Laundry, Environment, Tagline 2