

Assertive or non-assertive? How self-concept clarity influences customers' responses to advertising messages

Luqi Wang

Nankai University, Tianjin, China

Ye Chen*

Nankai University, Tianjin, China

Yuanyi Xu

University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

Zhibin Lin

Durham University, Durham, UK

*Corresponding author: .chenye@nankai.edu.cn

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Abstract

The effectiveness of assertive advertising in the travel and hospitality industry remains unclear, despite its prevalence. This study investigates the role of customers' self-concept clarity (SCC) and brand perception in their response to assertive ads across various contexts, including hotels, restaurants, and tourism destinations. Five studies reveal that high-SCC customers prefer assertive ad messages, while low-SCC customers favor a gentler approach, as they seek to verify their self-concepts. Additionally, brand perception moderates this relationship: high-SCC customers prefer assertive ads for competence or neutral brands, while low-SCC customers prefer them for warmth brands. These findings contribute to the understanding of advertising effectiveness in the travel and hospitality industry and provide valuable insights for marketers to develop targeted campaigns based on SCC and brand personality.

Keywords: Self-concept clarity; Assertive advertising; Self-verification; Assertive advert; Brand perception; Advertising effectiveness

1. Introduction

In today's oversaturated advertising landscape, marketers face the challenge of not only capturing customers' attention but also truly connecting with them. To achieve this, advertisers must deliver the right message to the right person at the right time. As customer preferences and advertising trends evolve, marketers must adapt their strategies accordingly (Hodges et al., 2024; Kim & Jang, 2019; Seo et al., 2021; Song et al., 2023). One prevalent advertising strategy is the use of assertive language in ads, characterized by direct and compelling words that prioritize products or services (Choi et al., 2024; Kronrod et al., 2012a; Milfeld, & Pittman, 2024). Zemack-Rugar et al. (2017) noted that 72% of ads feature assertive language. In the travel and hospitality industry, assertive ads promoting products have become increasingly common (e.g., "Destinations to Visit In Your Lifetime," "X Hotel, your first choice for vacation"). In contrast, non-assertive ads employ a gentler, more subdued tone.

Prior research has shown that the success of assertive ads depends on various factors, such as the product's nature (desire vs. necessity) (Wang & Zhang, 2020), issue gravity (Kronrod et al., 2012a), language tone (commendation vs. critique) (Grinstein & Kronrod, 2016), and time perspective (immediate vs. future) (Huang et al., 2022). However, one particularly noteworthy but under-investigated dimension in the area of tailoring advertising to suit individual needs to enhance their resonance and appeal is consumers' self-concept clarity (SCC, Kim et al., 2017). SCC refers to the extent to which one's self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996). People with high SCC have a clear sense of who they are, while those with low SCC

may have a more fragmented or uncertain self-concept (Wang & Yu, 2023; Jiang et al., 2023). According to the self-verification theory (Swann & Buhrmester, 2012), a clear and consistent self-concept, when affirmed by external validation, can bolster psychological well-being. We believe that by recognizing this, marketers have the opportunity to align their message strategies with customers' SCC, offering meaningful validation and fostering a deeper connection.

Beyond customers' self-concept clarity, there is the brand's projected persona or brand perception. Consider Homeinn, whose warmth exudes trust and care, versus Hilton, synonymous with competence and competitiveness. Here's the challenge: how do these brand perceptions, when paired with assertive ad strategies, strike a chord with customers of different levels of SCC? For brands that champion competence, assertiveness might amplify their promise of performance. Yet, for brands radiating warmth, a balancing act is key: being assertive can either magnify their caring message or, if off-target, come off as indifferent. The warmth and competence dimensions of the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) provide a valuable lens for understanding consumer behavior (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020). In various contexts, consumers' decisions are influenced by their perceptions of warmth and competence (Hoang et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2022). Thus, exploring the intricate relationship between brand perception, advertising assertiveness, and customers' self-concept clarity is critical for marketers seeking to develop more effective campaigns.

The major aim of the present research is to address the research gap by exploring the matching effect between assertive ads and customers' SCC. We posit that SCC and ad type may influence customers' preferences, mediated through the need for self-verification.

Additionally, we examine the boundary condition of brand perception, specifically warmth versus competence. We argue that the impact of SCC and ad type on customers' preferences may vary depending on their perceptions of the brand (warmth versus competence). To test our hypotheses, we conducted five experiments using both fictional and real brands.

This research advances the hospitality marketing field in several ways. First, it builds upon prior research (Grinstein & Kronrod, 2016; Huang et al., 2022; Kronrod et al., 2012a; Sarial-Abi et al., 2016; Zemack-Rugar et al., 2017) by examining the role of customers' SCC in shaping their responses to assertive versus non-assertive advertising, an area that has been relatively unexplored. Second, this research applies self-verification theory to advertising research, offering a clearer theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between SCC and assertive advertising on customers' preferences. Lastly, by considering the joint effects of SCC, ad type, and brand perception on customers' preferences, we provide a more comprehensive explanation of the factors affecting the effectiveness of assertive ads, a dimension that has been under explored in previous research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Assertive advertisement

Assertive advertisements employ assertive, conclusive, and persuasive language, making audacious claims about the features or benefits of a product or service and issuing a forceful and direct call to action, among other strategies (Kronrod et al., 2012a). In contrast, non-assertive advertisements utilize more polite and less direct statements to promote a product. Previous studies have demonstrated that assertive advertisements are particularly effective in

promoting prosocial behaviors. For instance, assertive slogans have been shown to enhance compliance in environmental protection campaigns (Kronrod et al., 2012b) and hygiene practices aimed at preventing the spread of diseases (Grinstein & Kronrod, 2016). In addition, assertive messages are also effective in advocating for pro-self activities. When encouraging employees to engage in financial planning, such as investing in retirement plans, assertive language is perceived as more encouraging and, therefore, more persuasive (Grinstein & Kronrod, 2016).

However, assertive ads can backfire in some situations. For instance, Kronrod et al. (2012b) discovered that individuals interpret assertive language as aggressive when they perceive the problem at hand as not imperative, which leads to resistance. Zemack-Rugar et al. (2017) observed that assertive ads generate pressure among loyal consumers, resulting in reduced compliance. Additionally, Grinstein and Kronrod (2016) discovered that using assertive language to scold individuals can increase psychological stress and frustration, leading to negative behavioral outcomes. Huang et al. (2022) found that tourists respond to online reviews with assertive language negatively when they anticipate traveling shortly as opposed to in the distant future.

Overall, assertive ads can be interpreted differently depending on the specific usage scenarios. However, how ad recipients' individual characteristics influence the effectiveness of assertive ads has not received sufficient attention. We argue that whether assertive ads are effective depends on the potential individuals' personal characteristics, particularly, their SCC.

2.2. Self-concept clarity and the self-verification theory

SCC, initially introduced by Campbell (1990), refers to how clearly and cohesively individuals understand their self-identity, including their values, beliefs, abilities, and identities. As suggested by Sarial-Abi et al. (2016), individuals with high SCC tend to have stable and consistent self-perceptions, demonstrating a clear awareness of their values, beliefs, and self-identity. In contrast, those with low SCC might experience more fluctuating self-perceptions, leading to confusion and inconsistency in their self-identity.

People who possess high SCC often align with their expressive style (Rios Morrison & Wheeler, 2010). Their clear understanding of who they are serves as a foundation for authentically expressing their thoughts, opinions, and emotions. As a result, they are more likely to exhibit decisiveness, directness, and openness in expressing their views (Wilson & Rapee, 2006). Conversely, people who possess low SCC often have vague and uncertain self-perceptions. They tend to rely on interpersonal relationships to define themselves and guide their behaviors (Wang & Yu, 2023). In situations where they are unsure of how others perceive them, they tend to seek group approval through cautious, friendly, and gentle self-expression (Mittal, 2015). In addition, low SCC often accompanies feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt (Campbell, 1990). Individuals with low SCC often struggle with decision-making (Mittal, 2015). Dixon, Darcie, and Sven Mikolon (2021) contend that individuals with lower SCC tend to derive greater value from choices that resonate with their self-concept, especially valuing positive self-signals more than those with higher SCC.

Self-verification theory posits that individuals seek external validation to reinforce their self-beliefs (Swann & Buhrmester, 2012). This drive for self-verification extends to product

choice, use, interaction, and presentation (Leung et al., 2022; Reeves et al., 2012; Stuppy et al., 2020). Importantly, self-verification motives can also influence responses to advertising, as individuals prefer stimuli that align with their self-concepts. When a product, service, or advertisement is consistent with an individual's self-concept, it elicits positive attitudes and behaviors by providing an opportunity for self-verification. For example, Escalas & Bettman, (2005) found that consumers tend to choose brands that are consistent with their self-concept in some aspect. These positive associations can be transferred from the reference brand to the consumer, resulting in a more positive attitude towards the brand. Stuppy et al. (2020) showed that individuals prefer products that are consistent with their self-views when purchasing products. That is, when consumers find that the product is more able to confirm their self-views (i.e., self-verification), they will show a stronger desire to buy. Yao et al. (2015) found that the higher the self-consistency between consumer personality and brand personality, the easier it is to improve consumers' positive attitudes towards the brand. Agrawal & Maheswaran, (2005) showed that consumers' attitudes are related to the consistency of self-image and advertising image. Consumers have a more positive attitude towards advertisements that help them express themselves. When the advertising appeal is consistent with the consumer's self-concept, the persuasiveness of the advertisement is significantly improved. These studies highlight the importance of consistency between self-concept and advertising appeal as well as the role of self-verification in shaping consumer responses to advertising and suggest that assertive and non-assertive advertising messages may have different effects depending on an individual's SCC.

People who possess high SCC possess a clear and stable understanding of their identity, values, and beliefs (Sarial-Abi et al., 2016), and they may be more inclined to purchase the

products promoted with assertive language. This preference arises because assertive ads deliver a clear and direct message (Kronrod et al., 2012a), aligning with the communication style of individuals who articulate their self-knowledge clearly and directly (Rios Morrison & Wheeler, 2010). Assertive advertising can serve as a form of self-validation, catering to their perceptions and judgments of themselves. Therefore, people who possess high SCC may verify themselves through the direct, confident, and persuasive nature of assertive messages, and accordingly, are likely to respond positively to destination ads that employ this style of communication.

In contrast, the arbitrary, one-sided, and forceful style of assertive ads may go against the uncertain self-perceptions of individuals low in SCC (Rios Morrison & Wheeler, 2010). Such messages can intensify feelings of insecurity and discomfort among people who possess low SCC, leading them to reject or avoid such information (Mittal, 2015). The flexible and soft quality of non-assertive messages, on the other hand, may allow people with low SCC to affirm themselves, which causes them to react favorably to non-assertive commercials. These observations lead us to the following proposal:

H1: Customers with high SCC have a more positive response toward assertive (vs. non-assertive) ads, whereas customers with low SCC have a more positive response toward non-assertive (vs. assertive) ads.

H2: Customers' self-verification motive mediates the interactive effect between SCC and ad type on their responses towards ads.

2.3. Brand perception: warmth vs. competence

Leading companies including Coca-Cola, Johnson & Johnson, Hershey, and OfficeMax frequently leverage the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework in their branding approaches. This framework, grounded in the Stereotype Content Model from social psychology (Fiske et al., 2002), provides a robust perspective on brand perception (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020). Stereotypes are predominantly categorized into two dimensions: warmth, which reflects perceived intentions, and competence, which denotes the capability to realize those intentions (Halkias and Diamantopoulos, 2020). Warmth and competence are integral categories in individual social cognition (Leung et al., 2022). Brands that come across as friendly and focus on social bonds and emotions are seen as warm, while brands that appear competitive and expert-driven, helping customers reach their goals, are considered competent (Hoang et al., 2023, Zheng et al., 2022).

Research using the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework has emphasized the crucial roles of warmth and competence in brand perception and purchase intentions (Bennett et al., 2013; Ivens et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2022). Central to this understanding is the congruence effect, indicating that the significance of these dimensions varies depending on the context and individual differences. For instance, for tourists with a low (vs. high) need for cognition, tourists' intention to travel is more significant when the font type in the ad matches the destination stereotype (Li & Ma, 2023). When it comes to high-involvement products such as smartphones, competence is paramount. Yet, ads that highlight warmth resonate more with consumers anxious about such products. Moreover, consumers lean towards leading brands when feeling out of control, seeing these brands as more competent and thereby regaining a

sense of agency (Beck et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Feng et al. (2022) found that tourists' advertising information preference for warm or competent countries will be affected by their risk perception.

SCC, as a key individual difference, influences the significance of warmth and competence in consumer preferences. People with high SCC have a distinct and solid understanding of themselves, including their values, virtues, and faults (Sarial-Abi et al., 2016). This clarity fosters a more lucid self-perception and heightens their awareness of their abilities and limitations (Campbell, 1990). For example, competence-oriented tourist destinations offer opportunities for individuals to engage in challenging and specialized activities that align with their interests and abilities, enabling them to enhance their skills or expertise in specific areas (Li & Ma, 2023). Therefore, those with high SCC are more likely to pay attention to brands that can help them develop their skills and achieve their goals.

In contrast, individuals with low SCC often have a vague understanding of themselves, relying on external cues and social comparisons to assess their self-worth. They are also concerned about how others perceive them (Rozenkrants et al., 2017). They tend to prioritize forming positive self-signals and cultivating a favorable self-image (Dixon et al., 2021). Consequently, when a product or service is presented as friendly and warm, they may feel more comfortable and receptive. Such products and services can fulfill their emotional needs for social connection and recognition (Wang & Yu, 2023), which hold greater importance for them than skill enhancement or intellectual stimulation. Given that assertive language conveys a sense of importance and purposefulness (Kronrod et al., 2012a), and considering that individuals with high SCC place greater emphasis on competence-oriented brands and

services, while those with low SCC prioritize warmth-oriented ones, we propose that the relationship between SCC, ad type and consuming behavior will be moderated by brand perception (competence vs. warmth vs. neutral). Specifically, when the advertised brands are perceived as neutral, the relationship will replicate H1 and H2. However, when the advertised brands are associated with competence or warmth, the proposed relationship be attenuated or reversed, such that:

H3a: For competence-oriented brands, customers with high SCC have a more positive response toward assertive ads than non-assertive ones, while the difference in response between assertive and non-assertive ads among customers with low SCC is expected to be insignificant.

H3b: For warmth-oriented brands, customers with low SCC have a more positive response toward assertive ads than non-assertive ones, while the difference in response between assertive and non-assertive ads among customers with high SCC is expected to be insignificant.

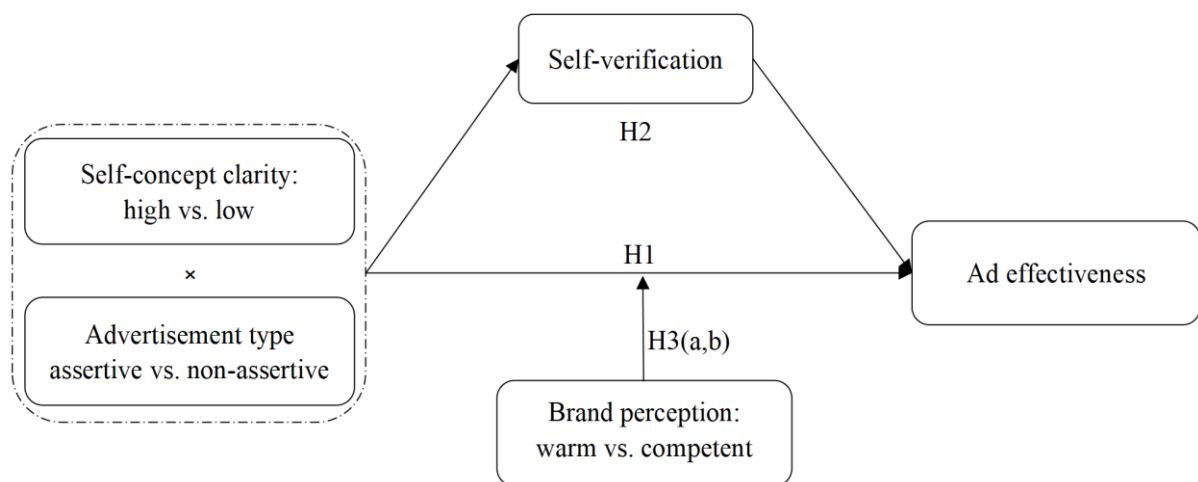


Figure 1. Research model

3. Study overview

We conducted five studies to verify our hypothesis (H1-H3). Study 1 adopted a survey design to provide initial evidence to support H1 that assertive (non-assertive) ads are more effective than non-assertive (assertive) ads among customers with high (low) SCC. Study 2 used an experimental design to test H1 and further supported the interactive effect between SCC (high vs. low) and ads types (assertive vs. non-assertive) on ad effectiveness. Study 3 supported H2 by demonstrating that assertive (vs. non-assertive) ads facilitate customers with high (vs. low) SCC to self-verify via the advertising messages, which mediate ad effectiveness. Studies 4 and 5 verified H3 by demonstrating the moderating effect of brand perception (warm vs. competent). Finally, to strengthen the robustness of our findings, an internal meta-analysis was conducted across the experiments. All data in the studies were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0. An overview of the empirical studies is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research design

Study	Research Design	Context	SCC manipulation	Source of measurement	Hypothesis
1	Correlation study	Real hotel: Upandin	NA	Self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996)	H1

2	Single factor (SCC: high vs. low) between-subjects design	Factitious hotel: Youyou	A directional feedback; from Wang & Yu, (2020)	Self-concept clarity (Wang & Yu, 2020); Message assertiveness (Wang & Zhang, 2020)	H1
3	2 (SCC: high vs. low) x 2 (ad type: assertive vs. non-assertive) between-subjects design	Real destination: Vietnam	Headline hint; from Wang & Zhang, (2020)	Self-concept clarity (Wang & Yu, 2020); Message assertiveness (Wang & Zhang, 2020); Self-verification (Leung et al., 2022); Perceived agency (Bhattacharjee et al., 2014); Self-affirmation (Steele & Liu, 1983)	H1, H2
4	2 (SCC: high vs. low) x 2 (ad type: assertive vs. non-assertive) x 3 (brand perception: warm vs. control vs. competent) between-subjects design	Factitious restaurant: Jiale	Recall task; from Wang & Yu, (2023)	Self-concept clarity (Wang & Yu, 2020); Message assertiveness (Wang & Zhang, 2020)	H3a, H3b
5	2 (SCC: high vs. low) x 2 (ad type: assertive vs. non-assertive) x 2 (brand perception: warm vs. competent) between-subjects design	Real destination: Everest, Bangkok	Writing task; from Wang & Yu, (2023)	Self-concept clarity (Wang & Yu, 2020); Message assertiveness (Wang & Zhang, 2020)	H3a, H3b
6	Internal meta-analysis	NA	NA	NA	H1, H3

4. Pretest of warm, competent, and neutral stimuli

The objective of the pretest is to select stimuli characterized as neutral, warm, or

competent for the main studies in this research. We enlisted 280 participants from Credamo to evaluate their perceptions of warmth and competence concerning various hotels, countries, and regions. Drawing on the findings from Leung et al. (2022) and Li and Ma (2023), we pretested six hotel and restaurant brands that consumers often encounter while traveling: Upandin Hotel, Hilton Hotel, Homeinn Hotel, Hanting Hotel, McDonald's, and Wallace. We also included five countries: Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Iceland, and Maldives, and two regions: Everest and Bangkok. The stimuli were randomly allocated, with each participant assigned six evaluation tasks.

Participants were prompted to assess their perceptions of warmth (characterized as warm, friendly, and attentive; $\alpha = 0.89$) and competence (defined as excellent, capable, and professional; $\alpha = 0.88$; Li & Ma, 2023) for each brand, country, or region. The findings indicated that Upandin Hotel, Hanting Hotel, and the Maldives served as potential neutral stimuli, as there were no significant perceptual differences between warmth and competence for these entities. Stimuli with significantly higher warmth ratings compared to competence included Homeinn Hotel, Bangkok, and Iceland. Conversely, entities perceived as more competent than warm comprised Hilton Hotel, Everest, South Korea, and Japan (see Appendix A for details).

5. Study 1

The objective of Study 1 is to examine how SCC influences customers' responses to different types of ads (assertive vs. non-assertive). We measure participants' SCC, present them with an assertive and a non-assertive ad promoting a hotel brand that is pretested as neutral (see Appendix A for details), and ask them to choose their preferred ad.

5.1. Participants

We recruited 233 participants from Credamo, a reputable Chinese online research platform. Excluding participants who failed the attention checks and those who completed the study in an extremely short time, the final number of valid participants was 200 (35% female; $M_{age} = 31.31$, $SD = 6.14$), with an effective response rate of 85.8%. All participants were aged 18 or above. Most participants (55.2%) were between 30 and 40 years old, and 90.5% of the participants had a college degree. An a priori power analysis (Z-test, logistic regression, χ^2 distribution: normal) using G*Power software indicated that a sample size of 90 is required to achieve a statistical power of 0.80 at a 0.05 significance level and a medium effect size ($R^2 = 0.09$). Thus, this study met the sample size requirement.

5.2. Procedure and design

First, participants completed a 12-item SCC Scale adapted from Campbell et al. (1996) (e.g., “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another,” “Sometimes I think I know other people better than I know myself.”, $\alpha = 0.95$; see Appendix B for details). We summed and averaged the scores of each item to create an index of SCC. Afterward, we instructed the participants to imagine a scenario in which they accidentally saw two billboards in a tourist attraction. One billboard featured an assertive ad promoting Upandin Hotel, a chain hotel brand (thankhotels.com) in China, with the ad message stating, “You Must Try Upandin Hotel.” The other billboard featured a non-assertive ad promoting the same hotel, with the ad message stating, “It’s Worth Trying Upandin Hotel.” Both advertising messages were adapted from Wang and Zhang (2020). See Figure 2 for the ads. To avoid potential bias caused by the order and sequence, the presentation order of the two ads was counterbalanced.

Next, to measure ad preferences, participants were asked to select their preferred message from the two ads. To check the manipulation of ad assertiveness, participants rated how assertive each ad was (1 = “not at all”, 7 = “very much”). Participants’ familiarity with the hotel, their attitudes toward the hotel, and their demographic information including age, gender, education level, and income were measured and controlled.



(1). Assertive ad



(2). Non-assertive ad

Figure 2. Ads used in Study 1

5.3. Results

Manipulation Checks. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA showed that participants rated the ad in the assertive condition ($M_{\text{assertive}}=6.14$, $SD=1.30$) as more assertive than the ad in the non-assertive condition ($M_{\text{non-assertive}}=4.99$, $SD=1.35$; $F(1,199)=62.40$, $p<0.001$), indicating that the manipulation of ad assertiveness was successful.

Advertisement Preferences. We conducted a binary logistic regression analysis with SCC as the independent variable (a higher index indicated holding lower SCC) and ad options as the dependent variable (0=assertive, 1=non-assertive). Consistent with H1, the results showed that participants with high SCC were more likely to select the assertive ad than participants with low SCC ($b=0.38$, $\chi^2(1, N=200)=10.09$, $p<0.001$, Nagelkerke $R^2=0.70$). To control for the individual differences, we performed the logistic regression analysis with participants' familiarity with the hotel, attitudes toward the hotel, and their demographic information as covariates. The findings demonstrated that the effect of SCC on the preference for the assertive ad was still significant ($b=0.37$, $\chi^2(1, N=200)=7.29$, $p<0.01$, Nagelkerke $R^2=0.15$).

5.4. Discussion

Study 1 provided initial support to H1 that customers' responses towards assertive versus non-assertive ads are associated with their SCC. Specifically, our findings that customers with high (vs. low) SCC prefer assertive (vs. non-assertive) ads extend prior work (Kronrod et al., 2012a; Zemack-Rugar et al., 2017), thereby identifying the role of SCC in predicting which type of advertising messages is more effective in persuading potential customers. In order to further verify whether the matching effect of customers' SCC and ad type will affect

ad effectiveness, we will conduct an experiment in which participants' SCC and ad assertiveness are both manipulated in Study 2.

6. Study 2

Study 2 aims to further test H1 with two major changes. First, we manipulate participants' SCC, rather than measuring it as in Study 1. Second, to prevent the influence of participants' existing hotel preferences, we use a fictitious hotel brand. Participants are presented with both an assertive ad and a non-assertive ad promoting the same hotel brand and are asked to choose the ad that would make them more likely to book the hotel.

6.1. Participants

We recruited 319 participants from Credamo and randomly assigned them to either a high or low SCC experimental condition. Excluding participants who failed the attention checks and those who completed the study in an extremely short time, the final number of valid participants was 270 (59.6% female; $M_{\text{age}}=31.41$, $SD=6.93$), with an effective response rate of 84.6%. Most participants (51.1%) were between 30 and 40 years old, and 50.3% of the participants had a college degree. An a priori power analysis (Z-test, Logistic regression, x distribution: binomial) using G*Power software indicated that a sample size of 261 is required to achieve a statistical power of 0.80 at a 0.05 significance level and a medium effect size ($R^2=0.09$). Thus, this study met the sample size requirement.

6.2. Procedure and design

We employed a 2 (SCC: high vs. low) between-subjects experimental design. First, we

manipulated participants' SCC using the false feedback paradigm from Wang & Yu (2020). Participants were asked to take a personality assessment test. After answering 25 questions assessing their personality, participants in the low SCC condition received the following feedback: "The findings of our test indicate that your personality is unstable..."; whereas participants in the high SCC condition were given the following feedback: "The findings of our test indicate that you have a stable personality..." (see Appendix C for details). To test whether the SCC manipulation was successful, participants reported the extent to which they had a clear idea about who they were and what they were.

After completing the manipulation check question, participants were asked to imagine themselves browsing Weibo (a social media platform), where they came across two ads for the Youyou hotel by chance. One ad presented assertive advertising, stating, "You must try our hotel". The other ad presented non-assertive advertising, stating, "It's worth trying our hotel" (see Figure 3). Participants were prompted to choose the ad that would make them more likely to book a stay at the hotel. The presentation order of the two ads was counterbalanced. The manipulation check of message assertiveness was the same as that in Study 1. Finally, participants provided their demographic information.



(1). Assertive ad



(2) Non-assertive ad

Figure 3. Ads used in Study 2

Note: “优优酒店” = Youyou Hotel

6.3. Results

Manipulation Checks. The manipulation of SCC was successful: an independent sample t-test showed that participants in the high SCC condition ($M_{\text{high}}=4.84$, $SD=1.31$) reported a clearer sense of the self than participants in the low SCC condition ($M_{\text{low}}=2.13$, $SD=0.98$; $t(168)=18.74$, $p<0.001$). The manipulation of the ad assertiveness was also successful: a one-way repeated measures ANOVA showed that participants rated the ad in the assertive message condition ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.87$, $SD=1.17$) as more assertive than the one in the non-assertive message condition ($M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.14$, $SD=1.38$; $F(1,168)=34.98$, $p<0.001$).

Booking preferences. We conducted a binary logistic regression analysis with SCC as the independent variable (0 = high self-concept clarity, 1 = low self-concept clarity) and ad

options as the dependent variable (0=assertive, 1=non-assertive). The results revealed that participants in the high SCC condition showed higher booking preference for the assertive choice than participants in the low SCC condition ($b=1.09$, $\chi^2(1, N=270)=18.29$, $p<0.001$, Nagelkerke $R^2=0.09$). In the high SCC condition, 67.5% of participants chose the assertive (vs. non-assertive) ad. In contrast, in the low self-concept condition, 58.8% of participants chose the assertive (vs. non-assertive) ad. To control for individual differences, we performed the logistic regression analysis with participants' demographic information as covariates. The findings was still significant ($b=1.12$, $\chi^2(1, N=270)=16.53$, $p<0.001$, Nagelkerke $R^2=0.12$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

6.4. Discussion

By manipulating participants' SCC, Study 2 provided causal evidence to support H1 that SCC and ad type have a matching effect on customer hotel booking intent. In the next study, we will further investigate our proposed psychological mechanism of self-verification.

7. Study 3

The objective of Study 3 is twofold. First, it aims to extend our findings regarding the matching effect between SCC and ad type on ad effectiveness (H1) to a different context, promoting a real and neutral tourism destination, Vietnam. Second, it aims to investigate self-verification as the mechanism that underlies this effect (H2). We expect that assertive (vs. non-assertive) ad messages facilitate customers with high (vs. low) SCC to self-verify via the ads, which indirectly increases ad effectiveness as evidenced by customers' greater visit intent. In addition to examining the mechanism of self-verification, we test the alternative

mechanisms of perceived agency and self-affirmation.

7.1. Participants

We recruited 324 participants from Credamo. Excluding participants who failed the attention checks and those who completed the study in an extremely short time, the final number of valid participants was 271 (36.5% male; $M_{\text{age}}=32.19$, $SD=9.213$), with an effective response rate of 83.6%. Most participants (40.9%) were between 30 and 40 years old, and 72.3% of the participants had a college degree. An a priori power analysis (F-test, ANOVA: fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions) using G*Power software indicated that a sample size of 179 is required to achieve a statistical power of 0.80 at a 0.05 significance level and a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$). Thus, the experiment met the sample size requirement.

7.2. Procedure and design

We employed a 2 (SCC: high vs. low) \times 2 (ad type: assertive vs. non-assertive) between-subjects experimental design. First, following Wang & Zhang's (2020) design, we manipulated participants' SCC. In the high SCC condition, participants read the headline, "It is easy for me to make up my mind about things, because I know what I want." In the low SCC condition, participants read the headline, "It is often hard for me to make up my mind about things, because I don't really know what I want." Participants were asked to indicate how well they knew themselves at that moment as a manipulation check.

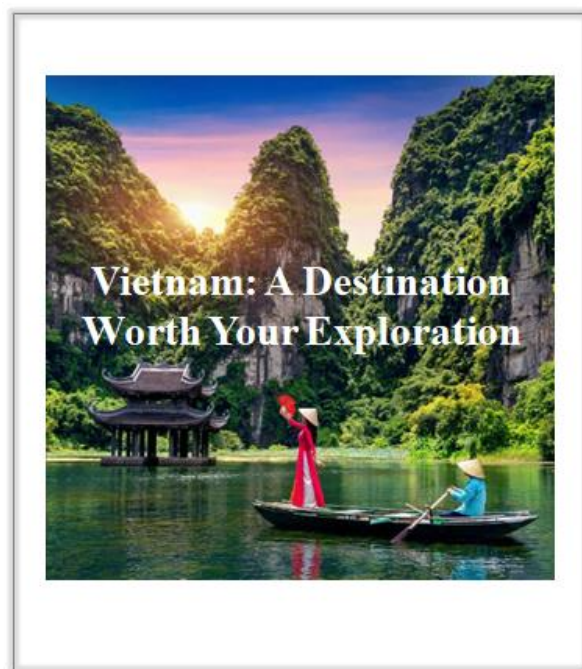
Participants were then asked to imagine that they were browsing a social media platform named Xiaohongshu and saw a tourist route ad promoting Vietnam as a tourism destination

by chance. Participants in the assertive ad condition saw an image of Vietnam, and read the advertising message “Vietnam: A destination you must explore”. Participants in the non-assertive ad condition saw an identical image, but read a different message “Vietnam: A destination worth your exploration” (See Figure 4). Participants completed the manipulation checks of ad assertiveness, the same as in Study 1.

Next, as the dependent measure, all participants indicated their intent to visit the advertised destinations (1= “very low”, 7 = “very high”). To test the mediating role of self-verification and rule out alternative explanations, participants completed the self-verification scale ($\alpha=0.75$, Leung et al., 2022), perceived agency scale (single item, Bhattacharjee et al., 2014) and self-affirmation scale ($\alpha=0.68$, Steele & Liu, 1983) (See Appendix B). We also measured and controlled for participants’ level of interest in the destination, the frequency of their travels, and the extent to which they liked traveling. Finally, participants provided their demographic information.



(1) Assertive ad



(2) Non-assertive ad

Figure 4. Ads used in Study 3

7.3. Results

Manipulation Checks. An independent sample t-test showed that participants in the high SCC condition ($M_{\text{high}}=5.25$, $SD=1.15$,) reported a clearer sense of the self than participants in the low SCC condition ($M_{\text{low}}=2.38$, $SD=1.26$, $t(269)=-19.57$, $p<0.001$). According to a separate t-test, participants rated the ad in the assertive message condition ($M_{\text{assertive}}=6.09$, $SD=1.08$) as more assertive than that in the non-assertive message condition ($M_{\text{non-assertive}}=4.72$, $SD=1.30$; $t(269)=3.86$, $p<0.001$). Therefore, the manipulations of SCC and ad assertiveness were successful.

Visit intent. A two-way ANOVA was conducted using the SCC (0=high, 1=low) and ad types (0=assertive, 1=non-assertive) as the predictors, and visit intent as the dependent variable. The results showed a significant SCC x ad type interactive effect on visit intent ($F(1,267)=23.638$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.08$, $95CI=[5.57, 5.81]$). Planned contrast analysis revealed that participants in the high SCC condition reported greater visit intent when they were provided with an assertive ad ($M=5.92$, $SD=0.13$) than when they were provided with a non-assertive ad ($M=5.56$, $SD=0.12$; $F(1,267)=5.61$, $p<0.05$, $\eta_p^2=0.04$, $95CI=[0.02, 0.71]$). Conversely, participants in the low SCC condition reported greater visit intent when they were provided with a non-assertive ad ($M=6.05$, $SD=0.125$) than with an assertive ad ($M=5.23$, $SD=0.12$; $F(1,267)=21.86$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.08$, $95CI=[-1.16, -0.47]$). See Figure 5. The main effect of SCC ($F(1, 267)=0.71$, $p=0.89$) or assertive ad ($F(1,267)=3.30$, $p=0.77$) was insignificant.

A two-way ANCOVA showed that when controlling for participants' level of interest in the destination, their familiarity with the destination, and their demographic information, the results were still replicated, with a significant SCC x ad type interaction ($F(1,270)=21.157$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.07$, $95CI=[5.57, 5.80]$). Planned contrast analysis revealed that participants in the high SCC condition reported greater visit intent when they were provided with an assertive ad ($M=5.92$, $SD=0.13$) than with a non-assertive ad ($M=5.56$, $SD=0.12$; $F(1,265)=4.156$, $p<0.05$, $\eta_p^2=0.02$, $95CI=[0.01, 0.66]$), whereas participants in the low SCC condition reported greater visit intent when they were provided a non-assertive ad ($M=6.05$, $SD=0.125$) than an assertive ad ($M=5.23$, $SD=0.12$; $F(1,265)=20.232$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.08$, $95CI=[-1.06, -0.41]$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

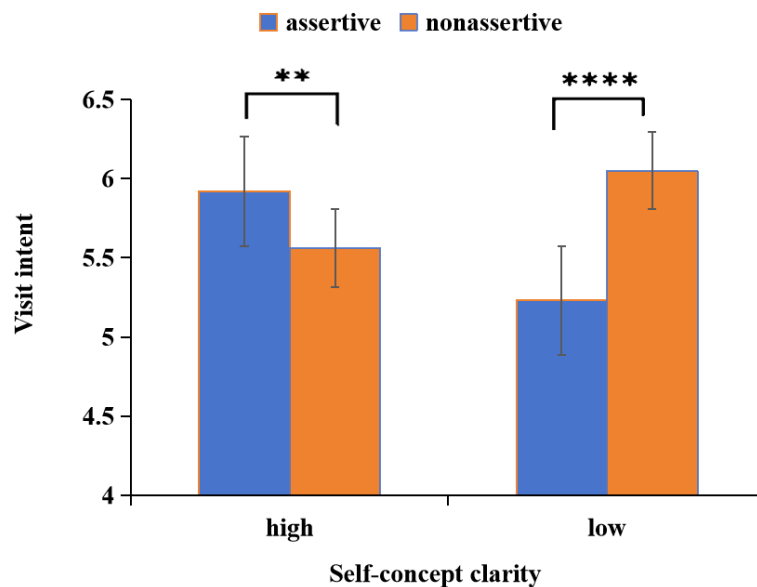


Figure 5. The impact of SCC and ad type on an individual's visit intent in Study 3

Moderated mediation. A moderated mediation analysis was conducted (PROCESS Model 8, bootstrapping with 5000 samples), with ad type (0=assertive, 1=non-assertive) as the

independent variable, SCC (0=high, 1=low) as the moderator, self-verification (a higher index indicated perceiving the ad as more self-verifying) as the mediator, and the visit intent as the dependent variable. The mediating role of self-verification was significant, with the index of moderated mediation of 0.51 (SE=0.17, CI95=[0.21, 0.89]).

Under the high SCC condition, the mediating effect of self-verification was negative and significant ($\beta=-0.25$, SE=0.09, $p<0.001$, CI95=[-0.45, -0.09]), suggesting that for customers with high SCC, assertive ads are more effective than non-assertive ads in verifying themselves, which indirectly increase their visit intent in assertive (vs. non-assertive) ads condition. The direct effect of assertive ads on ad preference ($\beta=-0.11$, SE=0.14, $t=-0.75$, $p=0.45$, CI95=[-0.39, 0.17]) was insignificant, thus indicating the full mediating role of self-verification. Under the low SCC condition, the mediating effect of self-verification was positive and significant ($\beta=0.26$, SE=0.13, $p<0.001$, CI95=[0.03, 0.53]), suggesting that for customers with low SCC, non-assertive ads are more effective in verifying themselves, which indirectly increase their visit intent in non-assertive (vs. assertive) ads condition. The direct effect of assertive ads on ad preference ($\beta=0.56$, SE=0.14, $t=3.96$, $p<0.001$, CI95 = [0.28, 0.83]) was significant, thus indicating the partial mediating role of self-verification (see Figure 6). Therefore, H2 was supported.

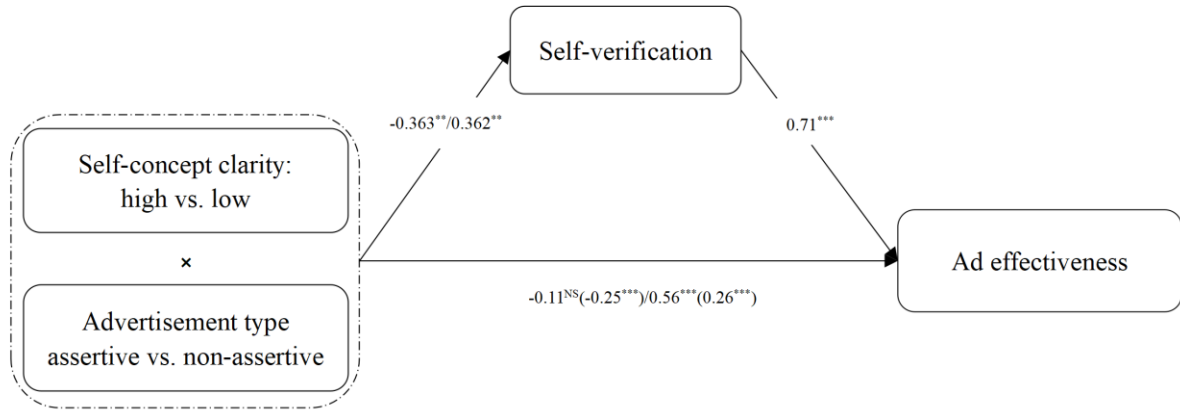


Figure 6. Path coefficients (high SCC condition / low SCC condition)

Note:***p <0.001

To further examine and rule out the potential mechanisms of self-affirmation and perceived agency, two separate mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 8, bootstrapping with 5000 samples) were conducted. The mediating role of self-affirmation was insignificant, with the index of moderated mediation of 0.76 (CI95=[-0.32, 0.27]). The mediating role of perceived agency was insignificant, with the index of moderated mediation of -0.48 (CI95=[-0.15, 0.06]). Therefore, the alternative explanations of self-affirmation and perceived agency can be ruled out.

7.4. Discussion

The results of Study 3 verified the mediating role of self-verification. Extending to a real destination promotion context, the study found that for customers with high (vs. low) SCC, assertive (vs. non-assertive) ads facilitate their self-verification, thus leading to higher visit intent. In the next study, we will test how this relationship is moderated by customers' brand

perception.

8. Study 4

Study 4 aims to examine how brand perception (competence vs. warmth) influences the interactive effect between SCC and ad type on ad effectiveness (H3). In a restaurant setting, we manipulate competence and warmth perceptions through restaurant descriptions. We anticipate that in descriptions emphasizing competence, customers with high SCC will have a more positive response toward a restaurant promoted by assertive ads than non-assertive ones, while customers with low SCC will not show a significant difference (H3a). Conversely, in descriptions emphasizing warmth, customers with low SCC will have a more positive response toward a restaurant promoted by assertive ads, and those with high SCC will not exhibit a significant difference (H3b). Additionally, to further verify H1 that customers with high (low) SCC have a more positive response toward a restaurant promoted by assertive (non-assertive) ads for a neutrally perceived brand, we include a control condition with no warmth or competence cues in the restaurant description.

8.1. Participants

We recruited 974 participants from Credamo. Excluding those who failed the attention test and those who took an extremely short time to complete the questionnaire, the final number of valid participants was 810 (60.2% female; $M_{\text{age}}=31.09$, $SD=7.36$), with an effective response rate of 83.2%. Most participants (44.3%) were between 20 and 30 years old, and 75.3% of the participants had a college degree. An a priori power analysis (F-test, ANOVA: fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions) using G*Power software

indicated that a sample size of 264 is required to achieve a statistical power of 0.80 at a 0.05 significance level and a medium effect size ($f=0.25$). Thus, the experiment met the sample size requirement.

8.2. Procedure and design

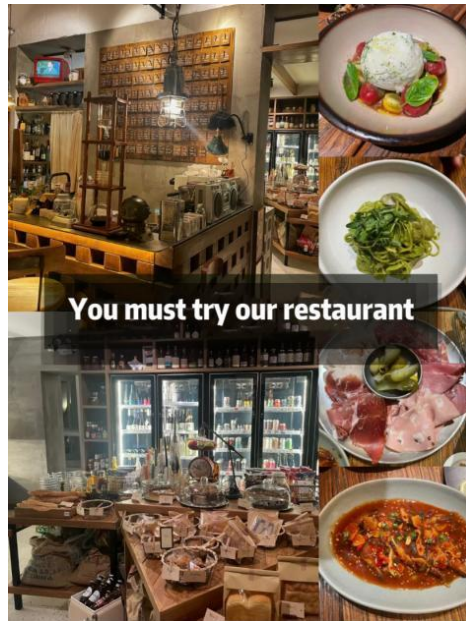
A 2 (SCC: high vs. low) \times 2 (ad: assertive vs. non-assertive) \times 3 (brand perception: warmth vs. competence vs. control) between-subjects experimental design was conducted. In this study, we employed a writing task adapted from Wang and Yu (2023) to manipulate SCC. Participants in the high SCC condition read a passage stating, “Life is a constantly changing journey. Think about those times when you acted like very different persons in different situations, transitioning into a new position or place... All those experiences make you feel uncertain about yourself: ‘Is this really who I am?’” They were then asked to recall an experience in which they behaved like a completely different person in different situations. Participants in the low SCC condition read a passage stating, “Life is a continuous journey. Think about those times when you are always the same person in different life roles, staying in the same place for many years... You say to yourself many times: ‘This is really who I am!’ ‘I know myself so well!’” They were asked to recall an experience in which they behaved similarly in different situations. As a manipulation check, they answered four questions ($\alpha=0.85$, e.g. “I know clearly who I am and what I am”, see Appendix A).

Afterward, participants were presented with a piece of information about a fictitious restaurant named Jiale. Following the experimental design of Leung et al. (2022), we manipulated the brand personality by the descriptions of the restaurant. Participants in the warmth condition read the description that “Jiale is a warm and comfortable restaurant...”;

while participants in the competence condition read “Jiale is a restaurant with strong professional capabilities...”. Participants in the control condition were only informed that Jiale was a restaurant (see Appendix D).

Next, participants were presented with a promotional image published by Jiale restaurant on Xiaohongshu. To manipulate language assertiveness, participants in the assertive ad conditions saw the message “You must try our restaurant” along with the images of the restaurant, whereas participants in the non-assertive ad conditions saw the message “It’s worth trying our restaurant” and the images identical to those in the assertive ad conditions (see Figure 7). As a check for the manipulation of brand perception, participants reported their perceptions of warmth and competence for the restaurant. We checked the manipulation of ads assertiveness in the same way as in Study 1.

To measure the dependent variable, participants reported their intent to book a dining table in the restaurant after seeing the ad. Finally, participants provided their demographic information such as gender, age, occupation, and education.



(1) Assertive ad



(2) Non-assertive ad

Figure 7. Ads used in Study 4

8.3. Results

Manipulation Checks. An independent sample t-test showed that participants in the high SCC condition ($M_{\text{high}}=4.45$, $SD=1.21$, $n=405$) reported a clearer sense of self in comparison to those in the low SCC condition ($M_{\text{low}}=2.47$, $SD=1.48$, $n=405$; $t(808)=-20.71$, $p<0.001$). A separate t-test showed that ratings of the assertiveness in the assertive ad conditions ($M_{\text{assertive}}=6.17$, $SD=0.91$) were higher than those in the non-assertive conditions ($M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.78$, $SD=1.09$; $t(808)=5.63$, $p<0.001$). To check the manipulation of brand perception, a one-way ANOVA was conducted and the results revealed a significant difference in brand perception among the three conditions. The restaurant was rated as more competent in the competence condition ($M_{\text{competence}}=5.97$, $SD=0.66$) than in the warmth condition ($M_{\text{warmth}}=5.156$, $SD=1.48$, $F(1,808)=95.05$, $p<0.001$) and the control condition ($M_{\text{control}}=5.23$, $SD=1.04$, $F(1,808)=88.43$, $p<0.001$); and it was not rated differently between the warmth condition and the control condition ($F(1,808)=1.01$, $p=0.45$). The restaurant was rated as warmer in the warmth condition ($M_{\text{warmth}}=6.35$, $SD=0.57$) than in the competence condition ($M_{\text{competence}}=5.24$, $SD=1.27$, $F(1,808)=76.81$, $p<0.001$) and the control condition ($M_{\text{control}}=5.31$, $SD=0.98$, $F(1,808)=93.12$, $p<0.001$); and it was not rated differently between the competence condition and the control condition ($F(1,808)=2.23$, $p=0.38$). Therefore, the manipulations of SCC, ad assertiveness, and brand perception were successful.

Booking intent. A three-way ANCOVA was conducted using participants' demographic information as covariates. The findings showed that the interactive effect of $\text{SCC} \times \text{ad assertiveness} \times \text{brand perception}$ on participants' booking intent was significant ($F(1,809)=9.49$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.023$, $95\text{CI}=[5.67, 5.81]$). The examination of the three-way

interaction can be decomposed into a focused analysis of the SCC \times ad assertiveness interaction under different brand perceptions. This analysis was conducted separately for participants in the competence, warmth, and neutral conditions (See Figure 8).

A two-way ANCOVA analysis showed that when the restaurant was presented with competence cues in its description, the SCC \times ad type interactive effect on booking intent was significant ($F(1,277)=4.07, p<0.05, \eta_p^2=0.02, 95CI=[5.57, 5.79]$). Planned contrast analysis revealed that in the high SCC condition, the assertive ad led to higher booking intent than the non-assertive one ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.95, SD=0.84, M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.59, SD=0.97; F(1,136)=5.75, p<0.05, \eta_p^2=0.02, 95CI=[0.02,0.65]$). In the low SCC condition, there was an insignificant difference in the booking intent between the assertive ad and the non-assertive one ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.51, SD=0.96, M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.67, SD=1.07; F(1,139)=0.83, p=0.45, 95CI=[-0.44,0.19]$) (see Figure 8a). These results supported H3a that for competence-oriented brands, customers with high SCC have a more positive response toward assertive ads than non-assertive ones, while the difference in response between assertive and non-assertive ads among customers with low SCC is insignificant.

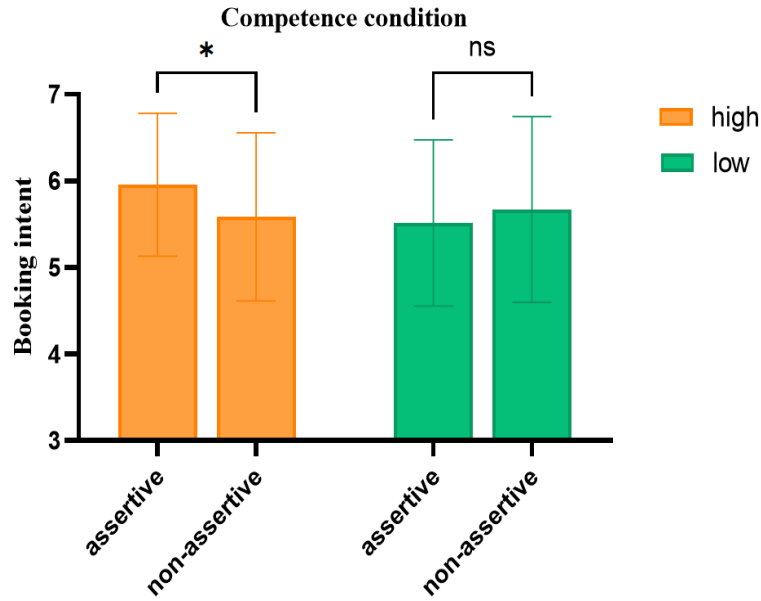


Figure 8a. An interaction between SCC and ad type on booking intent in competence perception condition in Study 4

A two-way ANCOVA analysis showed that when the restaurant was presented with warmth cues in its description, the SCC x ad type interactive effect on booking intent was significant ($F(1,274)=5.82, p<0.05, \eta_p^2=0.02, 95CI=[5.67, 5.92]$). Planned contrast analysis revealed that in the high SCC condition, there was an insignificant difference in the booking intent between the assertive ad and the non-assertive one ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.74, SD=1.12, M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.80, SD=1.11; F(1,138)=0.48, p=0.49, 95CI=[-0.46, 0.22]$). For participants in the low SCC condition, the assertive ad led to higher booking intent than the non-assertive one ($M_{\text{assertive}}=6.09, SD=0.70, M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.57, SD=1.14,; F(1,134)=7.28, p<0.01, \eta_p^2=0.03, 95CI=[0.13, 0.81]$) (see Figure 8b). These results supported H3b that for warmth-oriented brands, customers with low SCC have a more positive response toward assertive ads than non-assertive ones, while the difference in response between assertive and non-assertive ads

among customers with high SCC is insignificant.

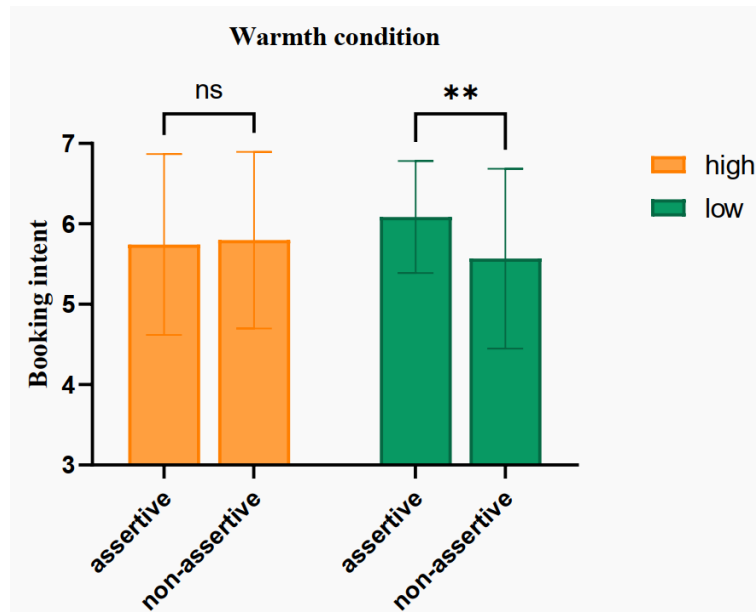


Figure 8b. An interaction between SCC and ad type on booking intent in warmth perception condition in Study 4

A two-way ANCOVA analysis showed that when the restaurant was presented with a neutral description, the SCC x ad type interactive effect on booking intent was significant ($F(1,256)=18.17, p<0.001, \eta_p^2=0.07, 95CI=[5.62, 5.85]$). Planned contrast analysis revealed that replicating results of Studies 1-3, in the high SCC condition, the assertive ad led to higher booking intent than the non-assertive one ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.95, SD=0.83, M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.58, SD=0.86; F(1,127)=4.56, p<0.05, \eta_p^2=0.02, 95CI=[0.03, 0.68]$). In the low SCC condition, the non-assertive ad led to higher booking intent than the assertive one ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.35, SD=1.20, M_{\text{non-assertive}}=6.04, SD=0.84; F(1,127)=14.41, p<0.001, \eta_p^2=0.07, 95CI=[-0.97, -0.32]$) (see Figure 8c). Therefore, H1 was further supported.

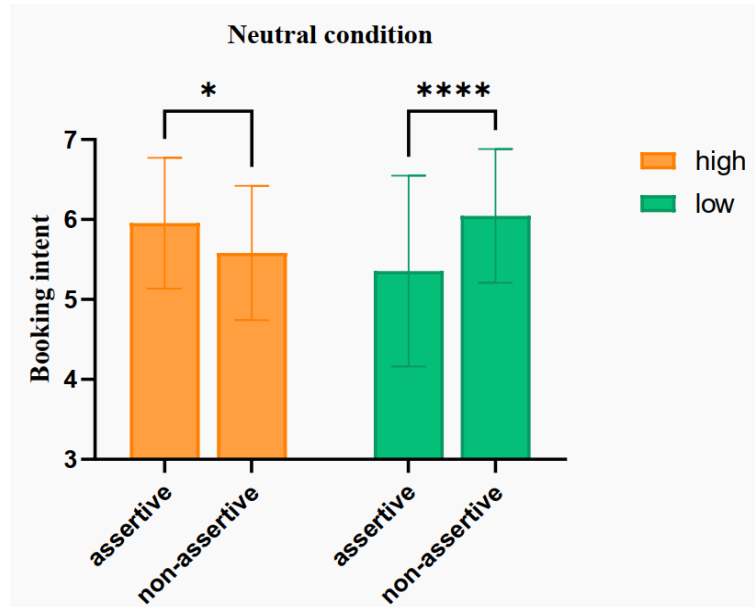


Figure 8c. An interaction between SCC and ad type on booking intent in neutral condition in Study 4

8.4. Discussion

The findings from Study 4 provided support for H3. In instances where a competence-oriented restaurant was promoted, customers with high SCC exhibited a more positive response to assertive ads than non-assertive ones, while those with low SCC displayed no significant difference in their reactions to assertive ads and non-assertive ones. Conversely, for a warmth-oriented restaurant, customers with low SCC exhibited a more positive response to assertive ads over non-assertive ones, whereas customers with high SCC showed no significant distinction in their responses to assertive ads and non-assertive ones. Additionally, the study confirmed H1: in cases where the target restaurant was perceived as neutral, customers with high (low) SCC are more likely to book products promoted with assertive (non-assertive) ads.

9. Study 5

The purpose of Study 5 is to increase the validity of our research by further verifying H3 with two major changes. First, it extends the findings of Study 4 to a real tourism destination context. Second, it manipulates the warmth- versus competence- association using customers' inherent perceptions of the target destinations, rather than using message cues as in Study 4.

9.1. Participants

We recruited 712 participants from Credamo. Excluding participants who failed the attention checks and those who completed the study in an extremely short time, the final number of valid participants was 551 (62.3% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.99$, $SD = 9.67$), with an effective response rate of 77.4%. Most participants (46.4%) were between 20 and 30 years old, and 77.1% of the participants had a college degree. An a priori power analysis (F-test, ANOVA: fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions) using G*Power software indicated that a sample size of 224 is required to achieve a statistical power of 0.80 at a 0.05 significance level and a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$). Thus, the experiment met the sample size requirement.

9.2. Procedure and design

We employed a 2 (SCC: high vs. low) x 2 (ad type: assertive vs. non-assertive) x 2 (brand perception: warmth vs. competence) between-subjects experimental design. In this study, we employed a writing task from Wang and Yu (2023) to manipulate SCC. Individuals in the high (low) SCC condition read six sentences respectively, then chose the sentence most relevant to their own experience and wrote down their detailed experience (See Appendix E).

Then they were asked to answer the same manipulation check questions as in Study 4 ($\alpha=0.92$).

Next, participants were shown an ad about a tourist destination. Participants in the competent destination condition were presented with an image of Everest, whereas participants in the warm condition were presented with an image of Bangkok. These two destinations were selected based on the results of our pretest (see appendix A) that Everest was perceived as a competent destination and had the highest ratings on the competence perception scale among all the pretested locations, whereas Bangkok was perceived as a warm destination and had the highest ratings on the warmth perception scale.

To manipulate language assertiveness, participants in the assertive ad conditions saw an image of either Bangkok (in the warmth condition) or Everest (in the competence condition), along with the slogan “A destination you must explore”. Participants in the non-assertive ad conditions saw the identical image, along with the slogan “A destination worth your exploration” (See Figure 9). As a check for the manipulation of brand perception, participants rated Bangkok or Everest by completing the warmth scale ($\alpha=0.72$) and competence scale ($\alpha=0.83$). We checked the manipulation of ads assertiveness in the same way as in Study 1.

To measure the dependent variable of advertising responses, participants reported their visit intent. We also measured and controlled for participants’ interest in the destination, the frequency of their travels, and the extent to which they liked traveling. Finally, participants answered several demographic questions.



A destination you must explore

A destination you must explore

(1) Assertive ads



A destination worth your exploration

A destination worth your exploration

(2) Non-assertive ads

Figure 9. Ads used in Study 5

9.3. Results

Manipulation checks. The manipulations of SCC, ad assertiveness, and destination perception were successful. An independent sample t-test revealed that participants in the high SCC condition ($M_{\text{high}}=2.34$, $SD=0.95$) reported a clearer sense of self in comparison to

those in the low SCC condition ($M_{\text{low}}=5.04$, $SD=0.93$; $t(548)=-34.59$, $p<0.001$). A separate t-test revealed that ratings of the ad in the assertive message condition ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.99$, $SD=0.95$) were higher than those in the non-assertive message condition ($M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.67$, $SD=1.03$; $t(548)=3.73$, $p<0.05$). In addition, another t-test revealed that Bangkok was rated as warmer than Everest ($M_{\text{Bangkok}}=5.73$, $SD_{\text{Bangkok}}=0.84$; $M_{\text{Everest}}=4.78$, $SD_{\text{Everest}}=1.17$; $t(548)=-10.90$, $p<0.001$), whereas the Everest was rated as more competent than Bangkok ($M_{\text{Bangkok}}=4.91$, $SD_{\text{Bangkok}}=1.09$; $M_{\text{Everest}}=5.94$, $SD_{\text{Everest}}=0.64$; $t(548)=13.40$, $p<0.001$).

Visit intent. We performed a three-way ANCOVA analysis with participants' interest in the destination, the frequency of their travels, the extent to which they liked traveling, and demographic information as covariates. The findings revealed that the interactive effect of $\text{SCC} \times \text{destination type} \times \text{ad type}$ on visit intent was significant ($F(1,549)=6.57$, $p<0.01$, $\eta_p^2=0.012$, $95\text{CI}=[5.33, 5.53]$). We decomposed the three-way interactions into a focused analysis of $\text{SCC} \times \text{ad assertiveness}$ two-way interaction, conducted separately for participants in the competence destination condition and for participants in the warm destination condition (See Figure 10).

According to the two-way ANCOVA analysis, when presented with a competent destination (i.e., Everest), the interactive effect of destination type \times ad type on visit intent was marginally significant ($F(1,271)=3.11$, $p=0.07$, $\eta_p^2=0.01$, $95\text{CI}=[5.22, 5.49]$). Consistent with results in Study 4, planned contrast analysis revealed that participants in the high SCC condition reported higher visit intent in the assertive ad condition than the non-assertive one ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.53$, $SD=1.08$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.14$, $SD=1.14$; $F(1,130)=4.36$, $p<0.05$, $\eta_p^2=0.02$, $95\text{CI}=[0.02, 0.79]$). In contrast, participants in the low SCC condition reported insignificant

differences in their visit intent between the assertive ad and non-assertive ad ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.33$, $SD=1.27$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.43$, $SD=1.11$; $F(1,138)=0.25$, $p=0.62$, $95CI=[-0.45, 0.30]$) (See Figure 10a).

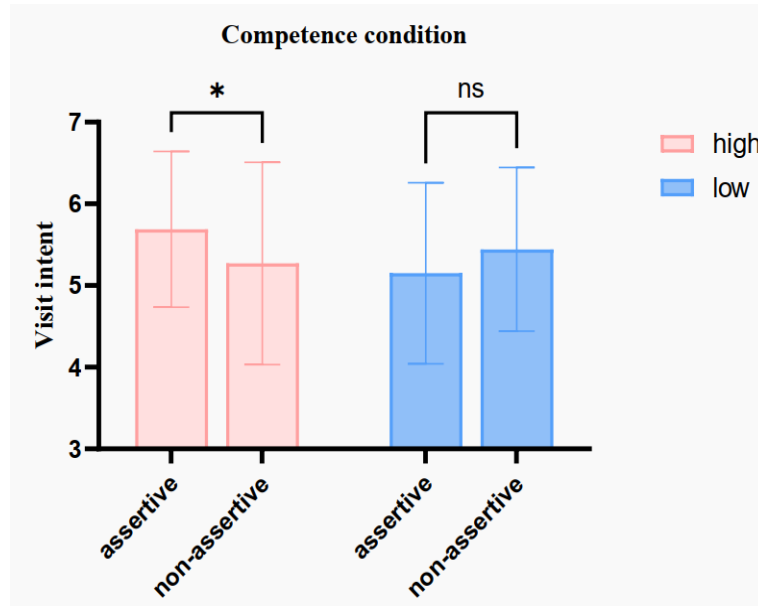


Figure 10a. An interaction between SCC and ad type on visit intent in competence perception condition in Study 5

According to a separate two-way ANCOVA analysis, when presented with a warm destination (i.e., Bangkok), the interactive effect of destination type x ad type on visit intent was significant ($F(1,277)=11.09$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.04$, $95CI=[5.39, 5.65]$). Consistent with results in Study 4, planned contrast analysis revealed that participants in the high SCC condition reported marginal differences in their visit intent between the assertive ad condition and the non-assertive ad condition ($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.47$, $SD=1.03$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.76$, $SD=1.05$; $F(1,138)=3.517$, $p=0.06$, $95CI=[-0.48, 0.01]$). In contrast, participants in the low SCC condition reported greater visit intent in the assertive ad condition than the non-assertive one

($M_{\text{assertive}}=5.64$, $SD=1.06$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}}=5.20$, $SD=1.32$; $F(1,136)=7.97$, $p<0.01$, $\eta_p^2=0.03$, $95CI=[0.11, 0.60]$) (See Figure 10b). Therefore, H3b was supported.

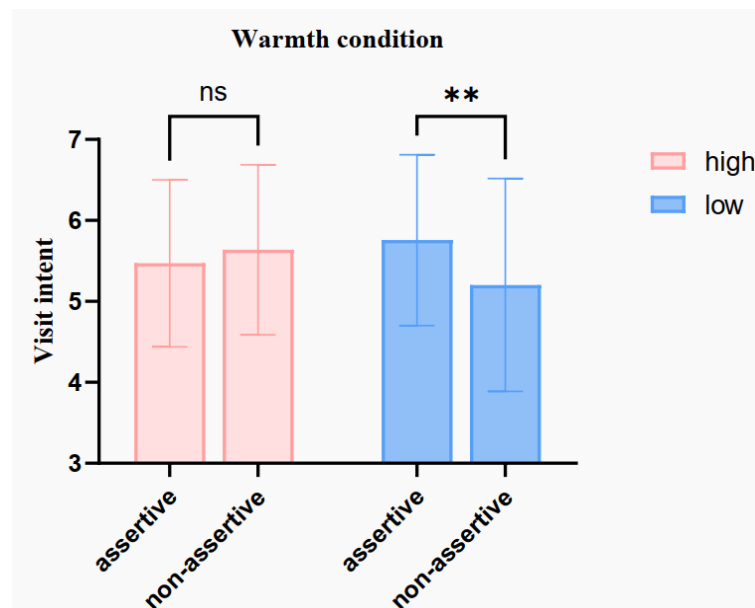


Figure 10b. An interaction between SCC and ad type on visit intent in warmth perception condition in Study 5

9.4. Discussion

The results of Study 5 further supported H3. Consistent with Study 4, the study revealed that customers' visit intent is jointly affected by customers' SCC, ad assertiveness, and brand perceptions, thus verifying the moderating role of customers' brand perception in the interactive effect between SCC and ad type on ad effectiveness.

10. Internal meta-analysis

Across the five studies, there was significant variation in how the SCC was operationalized, including different manipulations and measurements. To further confirm the

support for H1 and H3, we conducted two separate internal meta-analyses to examine the effect of a high versus a low SCC on consuming response in assertive versus non-assertive ads condition, by following the procedure of McShane and Böckenholt (2017).

To further validate H1, we analyzed the findings from studies using a binary dependent variable, specifically Studies 1 and 2. Consistent with H1, the results of the internal meta-analysis showed that high SCC customers displayed more positive responses towards the brands (hotel, destination, restaurant) promoted by assertive ads than those provided by non-assertive ones, while low SCC customers displayed more positive responses towards the brands promoted by non-assertive ads than assertive ones (estimate effect=1.10, 95%CI[0.62 to 1.57], SE=0.24; Z=4.50, $p<0.001$).

To further validate H3, we analyzed the findings from studies using an experimental design and a continuous dependent variable, specifically Studies 4 and 5. In Study 4, only the subsets related to warmth and competence brands were included, excluding the neutral brand subset. Consistent with H3, the results of the internal meta-analysis showed that when promoting competence-oriented brands, customers with high SCC show positive responses toward brands promoted by assertive ads over those provided by non-assertive ones (estimate effect=0.37, 95%CI[0.13 to 0.61], SE=0.12; Z=3.05, $p<0.001$), whereas the different responses of customers with low SCC between assertive and non-assertive ads were insignificant (estimate effect=-0.12, 95%CI[-0.35 to 0.11], SE=0.12; Z=-1.01, $p=0.39$) (H3a). When promoting warmth-oriented brands, customers with low SCC show positive response toward brands promoted by assertive ads over non-assertive ones (estimate effect=0.46, 95%CI[0.22 to 0.69], SE=0.12; Z=3.74, $p<0.001$), whereas the different responses of

customers with high SCC between assertive and non-assertive ads were insignificant (estimate effect=-0.17, 95%CI[-0.40 to 0.07], SE=0.12; Z=-1.39, $p=0.074$) (H3b). These findings demonstrate the robustness and generalizability of our results.

11. General discussion and conclusion

This research, conducted across five studies, investigates the impact of SCC and advertisement type on ad effectiveness in the context of hotel, restaurant, and destination selection. The findings indicate that assertive advertisements are more effective than non-assertive ones among consumers with high SCC, while non-assertive advertisements outperform assertive ones among consumers with low SCC. This effect is attributed to consumers' motivation to verify their self-concept through the ad messages. Additionally, consumers' brand perception moderates the relationship between SCC and ad effectiveness. Specifically, the positive impact of assertive advertisements on high SCC consumers is significant for brands perceived as competent or neutral, but not for those perceived as warm. Conversely, the positive impact of non-assertive advertisements on low SCC consumers is significant for brands perceived as warm or neutral, but not for those perceived as competent. The hypotheses receive consistent empirical support across various scenarios, including direct measurement of SCC (Study 1), manipulation through different techniques (Studies 2 and 3), and comparisons between fictitious and established brands.

11.1. Theoretical implications

This research significantly contributes to the literature by examining the interaction between customers' SCC and advertising messages on ad effectiveness. Although SCC's

influence on individual preferences, judgment, and self-control, particularly its role in enhancing psychological well-being through external validation (Rios Morrison & Wheeler, 2010; Swann & Buhrmester, 2012), has been well-documented, its impact on customer responses to advertising messages has received comparatively less attention (Kim et al., 2017). While some studies have explored the influence of personal identity and self-construal on advertising receptivity (Grier et al., 2006), the specific role of SCC remains under-explored. This research distinguishes itself from prior studies (Kronrod et al., 2012b; Wang & Zhang, 2020; Zemack-Rugar et al., 2017) by focusing on individuals' traits, demonstrating the significant role of SCC in shaping responses to assertive versus non-assertive advertisements.

This research, drawing upon self-verification theory, introduces a novel mechanism explaining how SCC affects positive responses toward assertive ads. It finds that customers with low SCC prefer non-assertive ads, as they seek self-verification through a non-assertive communication style. While previous studies have examined SCC's impact on self-enhancement and self-change (Emery et al., 2018; Dixon et al., 2021; Reeves et al., 2012; Savary & Dhar, 2020; Wang & Yu, 2023), few have explored its role in fulfilling customers' self-verification needs. This study offers a clearer theoretical explanation of the matching effect between advertisement messages (assertive vs. non-assertive) and customers' SCC, providing a new perspective on how SCC influences ad preferences.

Finally, our research enhances the tourism literature by demonstrating that for competence-oriented brands, customers with high SCC respond more positively to assertive advertisements compared to non-assertive ones. This finding links the preference for assertive

ads to the desire of individuals with clear self-concepts to associate with brands that emphasize abilities and achievements (Campbell, 1990; Kervyn et al., 2012). While warmth and competence are well-established factors in brand perception, our research delves into how these dimensions interact with individual SCC and advertising messages to influence ad effectiveness (Bennett et al., 2013; Ivens et al., 2015). This study extends the understanding of the congruence effect between ad language style and brand personality (warmth and competence), showing that this congruence varies according to customers' SCC.

11.2. Practical implications

Our research offers key recommendations for destination marketing managers to enhance campaign effectiveness. Tailoring advertising language to match the SCC of the target audience is crucial. For customers with high SCC, assertive language works best, conveying boldness and confidence. Conversely, for those with low SCC, non-assertive language, gentle and persuasive, is more effective. First, hotel managers can induce individuals' certain (uncertain) self-cognition by asking questions at the beginning of the advertisement to activate high (low) SCC. Then managers can deliver matching advertising content to individuals with different SCCs. For example, borrowing from the manipulation method of SCC in study 4, Hilton Hotels can start the advertisement with a description to induce high (e.g., "Life is a continuous journey. Think about those times when you are always the same person in different life roles, staying in the same place for many years.") or low SCC (e.g., "Life is a continuous journey. Think about those times when you are always the same person in different life roles, staying in the same place for many years.") before presenting the tagline. Then, managers show assertive ads (e.g., Enjoy the perfect combination of luxury and

comfort, choose Hilton!) to high SCC individuals and non-assertive ads (e.g., Enjoy the perfect combination of luxury and comfort, Hilton is worth your choice!) to low SCC individuals. Furthermore, marketers can add SCC survey questions to games (e.g., the manipulation check in Study 5) to obtain individual SCC information and then present appropriate advertising content to them. Finally, brands may also consider dual campaigns—one assertive and one non-assertive—to cater to a broader audience.

Second, delving into self-verification motives can aid destinations or brands in crafting resonant marketing messages. Aligning advertising with customers' self-views is persuasive. Brands can position products as tools for achieving self-verification goals, like expressing individuality or attaining status. Our study suggests that SCC can be influenced, allowing marketers to potentially shape customers' SCC through targeted messaging or framing techniques (e.g., headline hints, recall tasks, or writing tasks). Marketers can induce SCC by directly presenting similar content or activating specific SCC through methods such as role-playing. In this way, reinforcing stable and coherent self-views may enhance assertive advertising effectiveness and consumer behavior for those with high SCC.

Marketing managers should consider brand perception as a moderating factor in selecting advertising language styles. For competence-driven brands/destinations, assertive advertising is effective, especially for high SCC audiences. Conversely, warmth-oriented brands/destinations benefit from assertive advertising, particularly for low SCC audiences. Tailoring advertising messages to the SCC of the target audience is crucial. High SCC customers prefer assertive advertising for competence-oriented brands, while low SCC customers respond well to assertive advertising for warmth-oriented brands. Recognizing

these preferences enhances targeting precision, potentially boosting engagement and conversion rates. Understanding these dynamics aids efficient resource allocation in advertising campaigns, ensuring the most receptive segments receive the right ads.

11.3. Limitations and future research

Our study is limited to examining the moderation of brand perception in the interactive effect between SSC and ad type on ad effectiveness. Future research could delve into other moderating factors such as individual differences in personality traits, cultural backgrounds, or specific product categories. Examining the interactive effects of SCC with other psychological constructs, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, or need for uniqueness, could offer a more holistic view of the psychological drivers influencing customer responses to advertising. Moreover, the potential cultural bias of our sample may limit the generalizability of our findings. Future studies should expand our results to diverse cultural contexts to establish cross-cultural validity (e.g., comparing collectivist versus individualist cultures). Additionally, our research lacks attention to longitudinal effects. Future research may investigate the longitudinal impact of assertive versus non-assertive ads on customers' selection of destinations/service providers and customer retention, examining how repeated exposure to assertive or non-assertive ads affects customers' perceptions of the service providers in the long term, especially in high-commitment industries like travel or hospitality. While we investigated how SCC and ad type influence ad effectiveness, we did not explore how customers' brand orientation interacts with SCC. Future research may delve into the intricate dynamics of brand-customer relationships. Finally, although we controlled for gender as a covariate in our studies, the relationship between advertising type and gender has

always been an important research topic. Future research should further expand the sample size and maintain gender balance in the sample to explore the impact of gender on assertive advertising preferences.

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