



# “A generational study on self-referential advertising: How it affects attitude toward brands”

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# A GENERATIONAL STUDY ON SELF-REFERENTIAL ADVERTISING: HOW IT AFFECTS ATTITUDE TOWARD BRANDS

## Abstract

Self-referential, meta or self-aware advertising uses irony and cynicism to overtly critique and challenge conventional advertising strategies. While increasingly multiple brands are using self-referential advertising campaigns to implement innovative advertising strategies, a limited amount of research has been conducted on the effects of self-referential advertising on consumers' evaluative responses. This study aimed to identify a link between self-referential ads and the consumers' sense of self-presentation, mainly the conflict between the ideal self and the real self, and how this, in turn, affects their attitude toward the brand in the subject, further affecting purchase intention and brand perception. A quantitative structured study was conducted in a group of 326 18–35-year-old people, comprising Millennial and Generation Z consumers, using voluntary sampling through links to Google Forms distributed online on various platforms. Findings showed a significant positive correlation between self-referential ads, brand perception, and consumers' brand attitude ( $r = 0.777, 0.712$ ). Besides, in the mediation analysis, each of the four regression models establishes a correlation among the three variables. However, significance is not found in the mediating role of consumers' real selves between self-referential advertising and brand attitude, though consumption patterns mediate consumer acceptance of self-referential advertising. The findings gave product/brand managers and marketing professionals a strategic direction on the importance of using self-referential forms of advertising in congruence with the product life cycle and brand positioning. It also helps to understand the importance of consumption patterns in creating advertising appeals.

## Keywords

self-concept, advertising, private consumption, India,  
Gen Z, Millennials, brand attitude, purchase intention

## JEL Classification

M30, M37

## INTRODUCTION

“You cannot bore people into buying your product; you can only interest them into buying it” (Ogilvy, 2023). With the global advertising industry moving toward more disruptive forms of advertising, these iconic words become even more relevant today. As advertisers try to develop more efficient ways of capturing the viewer's attention, a new type of advertisement (ad) is gaining prominence. The self-referenced ad speaks the tongue of the person watching it, an ad that says, “Yes, this is another ad. Yes, we know you are saturated with us trying to sell things to you, but just hear us out this one more time,” in other words, an ad message that essentially refers to the context in which it is set, an ad that is ‘self-referential’ (Nöth, 2007).

Considering the increase in self-referencing ads leading to a rise in message elaboration and, consequently, persuasion through strong message arguments (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995; Kao, 2019; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1996; Tropp, 2017), especially on social media, it is essential to understand how the current young generations' consumption pattern

is affected. By consumption pattern, the study focuses on the private consumption scenario, which until now is associated with wealth, current income, perceived quality, emotional value, brand loyalty, and convenience (Adedeji & Adegboye, 2013; Bayar & McMorrow, 1999; Keho, 2019; Vidyarthi, 2014).

Therefore, the question arises: do young consumers with considerable income and wealth and self-brand connections through self-referential ads tend to have a positive brand attitude and increased purchase intention for private consumption? If so, do young consumers with real self-connection or ideal-self connection with the brand tend to have a positive brand attitude and increased purchase intention for private consumption? Besides, owing to digital data dominance and changing creativity – even though ads may go viral, garner attention, and be liked by all their viewers – fewer brands use their unique ads for brand building. Instead, it is now narrowed to serving the purpose of mere entertainment (Dan, 2021). Nevertheless, there is still a need to understand whether this will generate or reinforce brand perception, positioning, and loyalty – the benchmarks for brand success.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Deviation from the standard advertising message and breaking the ‘clutter’ in the 1980s formed the ultimate mode of advertising to establish an emotional connection with consumers (Bishara, 2007). This process of creativity has been labelled “wild semiosis”, as it violates the run-of-the-mill patterns of expectations prompted by advertisers, creating something unknown and unexpected which turns the audience’s focus to the execution of the communication, or in simpler words, the ad itself (Bishara, 2007).

The theatrical convention – ‘Breaking the fourth wall’ (the imaginary boundary through which the audience sees the play) and talking to the person exposed to the ad directly – contributes to the background study of self-reference in advertising (Bell, 2008). It suggests that the advertiser knows the audience’s feelings; it shakes them out of their docile viewer state and forces them to participate and pay attention to the message (Caroll, 2019).

All the self-referencing commercials assume that the viewer is looking at an ad and will try to notice and decode it (Nöth, 2007). Although some experts believe that making an ad about an ad is risky as it comes across as narcissistic and nonchalant (Ramírez et al., 2016). However, when used strategically, with the proper insight and copy, self-referential advertising messages can be immensely successful in breaking the inertia of mundane, prosaic advertising, especially in a world where every brand is asking the same consumers the same questions in the same way.

Although marketers believe that self-reference in advertising will put the product on a lower scale of consumer perception, studies have recommended that the ads need not poke fun at the product in question; they can still comment on the various dimensions of media representation in society that is fresh in the viewers’ minds. To elucidate with an example, LeBron James, the beverage brand endorser for Sprite, speaks directly to the camera (or viewers), assuring them, saying that he would never tell the viewer to drink Sprite, even if he was in a commercial for Sprite, which he currently is (Lybrand, 2018).

The literature further emphasizes that advertising also influences the consumers’ brand perception. Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2010) argue that the actual brand perception is generated by the information shown to the consumers, which is a way for the brand to create a conscious perception through various communication tools, the primary route being advertising. On the other hand, Trout and Rivkin (1996) argued that ads that uphold the imagery without concrete brand positioning or perceptual claims leave consumers lost as they have no reason to buy from the brand. Therefore, advertising helps the brand focus on its core values and communicate them to the viewers to change or reposition the brand strategy (Sama, 2019). Research has also established that advertising attracts consumers’ attention and opens the door for them to purchase (Bergkvist et al., 2016).

However, it is vital to consider that customers often use products or brands to communicate their personalities (Sirgy, 1982). Theories of self-asso-

ciated with advertising help understand whether consumers have an open-ended relationship with the brand (Boush, 1993). Self-concept is an individual's identity based on a personal collection of thoughts, perceptions, and feelings about themselves. The general notions about the theory of self-concept are that it is not inherent and formed throughout childhood and continues in adulthood but can be changed and developed (Rogers, 1959). This theory affirms that when the self-concept is not aligned with reality, it is 'incongruent' and vice-versa. From the brand advertising perspective, it was found that consumers were more likely to reject meanings that were not consistent with their group (in-group), as it is seen as being 'out-group' and contradicted their self-concept while they were more likely to accept those that were hinting at the notion of self-concept being a construct influenced by societal factors (Ilaw, 2014). It can thus be inferred that young consumers are more drawn to self-parodic messages in terms of advertising because it helps them gain social currency through sharing these ads and aligning themselves as part of the social group that is too smart to be manipulated by the exaggerated nature of advertising.

Moreover, self-concept is a multidimensional construct comprising two or more components: the ideal self (whom one wants to be) and the real self (who one is) (Rogers, 1959). When responding to an advertising message, the viewers bring out their ideal or authentic selves, eventually translating into brand loyalty. This is because of the self-consistency bias (Mehta, 1999), which states that consumers are more consistent in their attitudes, beliefs, and opinions than their behavior (Zeng et al., 2020). In addition, the self-presentation aspect of advertising (i.e., whether it evokes authentic or ideal selves) is imperative for marketers because it helps the customers decide what kind of relationship they want to establish with the brand.

In contrast, brand product categories with relatively fewer social expectations can use an ordinary spokesperson as it resonates well with that audience who want their authentic self to be presented. The postmodern consumer has a starkly contrasting self-image compared to the

fetishized portrayals of happy and beautiful people offered by the ads. This causes a sense of incompleteness or 'not being enough' because of the contrast between what the consumer sees on billboards and television versus what they are, leaving them feeling ugly and discontent with themselves (Rumbo, 2002).

Furthermore, self-congruity connects self-concept to the study of brand image (Sirgy, 1982). When there is a correlation between the image of the brand and the consumer's self-concept, there is a more substantial chance of forming a positive attitude toward the brand that translates into purchase intention (Boksberger et al., 2011). Consumers are unlikely to accept or process brand information inconsistent with what they believe to be their self-image. Thus, when an image formed of the brand is similar to that of the individual's self-concept, it can translate into a more robust brand preference (Ilaw, 2014).

For example, millennials form a deeper connection with figures from popular culture who are vulnerable and have humanistic flaws, like Joker from the Dark Knight Trilogy, Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, or Walter White from *Breaking Bad*. Since advertising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century borrows heavily from popular culture (Fowles, 1996), marketers must consider that the new cool among younger consumers in India and elsewhere has become to side with the grey underdog rather than the good or evil hero/villain.

This novel self-referential voice is vital, intimate, genuine, and strategic to sway even the most hesitant customers (Carr, 2021). Advertising messages that go out of the ad and talk to the viewer allow brands to nurture a personal connection that young consumers crave (Schriberg, 2019). Self-referential advertising seizes on sincerity to speak to the consumer's authentic self, intensifying purchase intention for a product/service that celebrates who they are.

When understood from the demographic perspective, consumers of 18–35-year-olds have a sharper eye and higher expectations from brands while purchasing a product. For an ad message to be liked by this 'hard to crack' demograph-

ic, advertising needs to be reflexive, rerouting consumer criticism, creating empathetic relationships, and making them the one who has access to the cultural capital (Goldman & Papson, 1994). In this way, viewers are not manipulated or told to buy something; they can figure the message out themselves and feel competent.

The purchase decision is also affected by the consumption type or pattern of the individual (S. Kim & J. Kim, 2016). Product consumption is of two kinds: private consumption (goal-oriented; something consumed not in the presence of others, for instance, an app on the phone, toothpaste, etc.) and public consumption (pleasure-oriented; something consumed publicly, in the company of others, for example, a car, clothes, shoes, etc.). While such products mostly align with consumers' idea of their ideal self, following the strategy of swanky, flaunting, enhanced and conspicuous consumption, products that are used in private mainly have an impact on how consumers perceive their authentic self, following the strategy of talking about comfortable, need-based and inconspicuous consumption (Dolich, 1969). Publicly consumed products tend to favor self-enhancing presentation styles, while privately consumed products are more likely to use self-deprecating presentation styles (Zeng et al., 2020).

How the consumers feel about the ad forms their attitude toward it. Attitude toward advertising thus refers to the "unfavorable or favorable response of the consumer to an ad" that leads to an emotional change after seeing the ad (Lee et al., 2017) and plays an essential role in forming attitudes toward brands (Brown & Stayman, 1992). Advertising leads to a favorable brand attitude, based on which customers decide to buy the product or service they have seen in the communication, referred to as purchase intention (Mackenzie & Spreng, 1992; Kim & Han, 2014; Kuo et al., 2009). It identifies the final purpose of the ad and explains the effect of congruency between ads and consumers on purchasing the advertised brand's offering (Kim & Han, 2014).

Purchase intention is often used to assess the impact of ads and derive factors that lead to a purchase (Kuo et al., 2009). Aaker and Jacobson

(2001) further suggest that attitudes formed toward brands can be seen as a direct driver of consumers' intent to purchase from that brand. Gresham and Shimp (1985) and Goldsmith et al. (2000) state that attitudes toward brands can significantly sway consumers' purchase intentions. Sheeraz et al. (2016) also argued that brand attitude and purchase intentions share a promising association. When understood from the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977) perspective, attitude toward the brand in the ad is a precursor to purchase intention having a positive effect on the latter. The elaboration likelihood model also illustrates that brand attitude drives consumer purchase decisions (Yeo et al., 2016).

Upon reviewing the above literature on the role of self-referential ads on consumers – especially Gen Z's brand attitude, awareness, purchase intention, and the position their consumption pattern and real self have on their brand attitude – the study intended to examine the impact of self-referential ads on the consumer's brand perception and brand attitude, indirectly influencing their purchase intention. Furthermore, the study aimed to analyze the mediating role of the consumers' consumption pattern of the products (private or public) and consumers' real self – affected by self-referential advertising – on the relationship between consumer brand attitude and self-referential ads. To achieve the aim, the following hypotheses were proposed:

*H<sub>0</sub>1: Self-referential advertisements significantly create a brand perception in the minds of consumers.*

*H<sub>0</sub>2: Consumers' real self mediates the effect of self-referential advertising on brand attitude.*

*H<sub>0</sub>3: Self-referential advertising positively impacts brand attitude, which creates purchase intention.*

*H<sub>0</sub>4: In a private consumption situation, self-referential advertising enhances the consumers' real self-forming positive brand attitude.*

*H<sub>0</sub>5: Consumption patterns mediate consumer acceptance of self-referential advertising.*

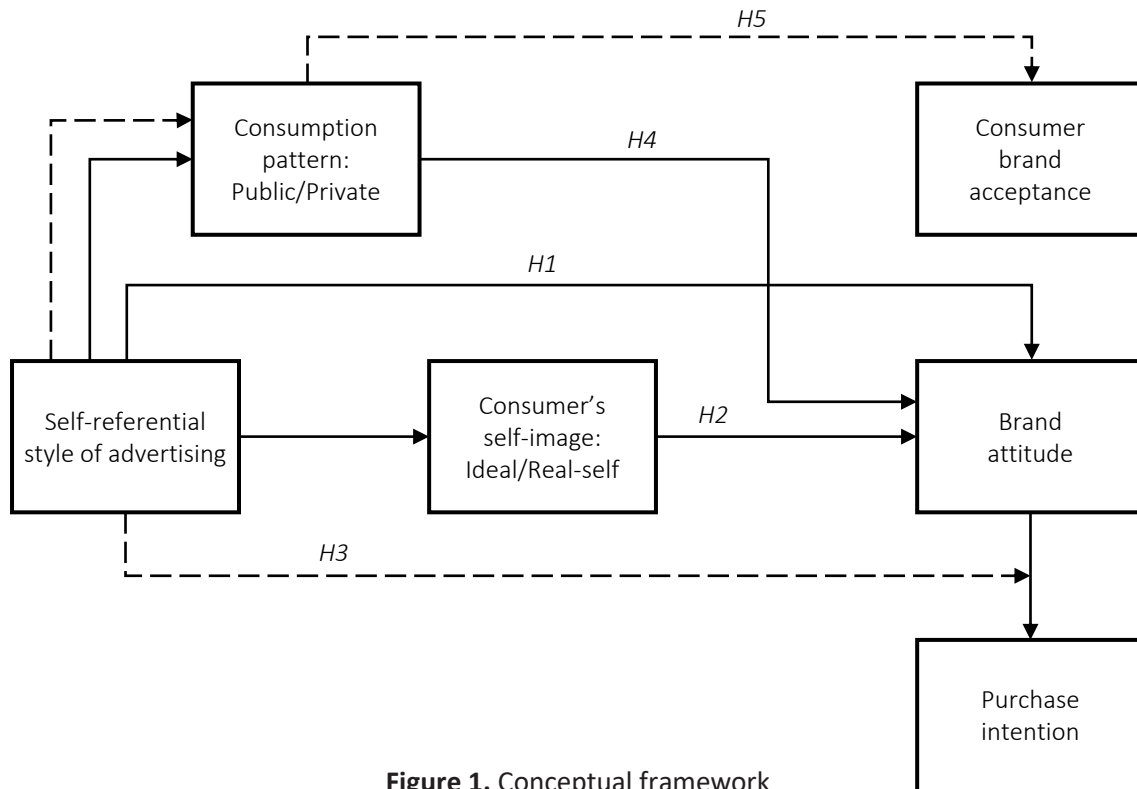


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

## 2. METHODS

Following the aim, the study involved Indian consumers aged 18 to 35, belonging to Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z, born between 1982 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), as its target population. The sample consumer population of the particular age cohort was approached on social media using exponential discriminative snowball sampling (Etikan et al., 2015). Through the sampling approach, every participant referred to other participants on the condition of being active on social media, being aware of self-referential ads in India and worldwide, and indulging in private consumption. Before the data collection through Google Forms, a call for participation was posted on Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit and participation interest from 524 active social media users was obtained. Then, screening was conducted to ensure the interested participants spent at least four hours on social media, followed multiple regional and international brands, and privately consumed these self-referenced brands' products. The participants' gender was not controlled to obtain a diverse population.

Nearly 75 self-referential ads released or shown during the 2020–21 Indian Premier League, which received organic popularity among the young generation, were chosen. The Indian Premier League is a significant cricketainment in the world, drawing big brands (chiming INR 2950 crore in TV advertising in 2021) and renowned players across countries (Khondker & Robertson, 2018; Laghate, 2021). In addition, a social media poll was created to identify the four most popular and liked consumer brands out of the 75 samples. Out of the four most-liked self-referential ads of brands obtained, social media ads of an electronics brand and a direct-to-consumer coffee brand were chosen to study self-image; an electronic trimmer brand and a fast-food restaurant were selected for measuring the private and public consumption pattern, respectively; and audio-visual ad of a Fintech credit cards payment app was chosen to measure brand perception.

The third and final stage of data collection involved the exposure of the four brands' self-referential ads to the participants, followed by a structured and close-ended survey using Google Forms. The survey consisted of 26 question items, of which the

items measuring self-presentation style (real and ideal self) and product consumption were adopted from Zeng et al. (2020), and purchase intention and brand attitude were taken from Spears and Singh (2004). In addition, the brand perception was adopted by Sciarrino and Roberts (2018). Out of the 524 participants who expressed interest, the screening narrowed down to 326 participants consisting of Millennial and Generation Z consumers (18–35 years) based in Mumbai, Bengaluru, and New Delhi, with valid answers.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 respondents to ensure the research instrument’s clarity and understanding. Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) for the questionnaire (22 items) was 0.89. Out of the 326 respondents sorted for the analysis, 181 participants were from the Generation Z demographic (18–24), while 145 were from the Millennial Generation (24–35). Although gender was not controlled, 154 respondents identified as males, and 167 identified as females. The remaining respondents preferred not to say. The respondents were asked to examine the self-referential ads and answer the questions on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 being highly unfavorable and 5 being highly favorable) that measured congruence between the ads’ likeability and the brand’s favorability.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Self-referential ads and brand perception

For this study, respondents were shown a self-referential audio-visual ad of a fintech brand, and they were then asked to rate their perceptions.

Linear regression was used to study whether self-referential ads create a brand perception in the minds of the consumers (Table 1). There is a

significant positive correlation between self-referential ads and brand perception in the minds of the consumers ( $r = 0.777$ ). The coefficients establish that with one unit change in self-referential ads, there will be a positive increase of .77 units in brand perception in the minds of the consumers. Moreover, 60% of the variance is explained by the regression model in brand perception in the minds of consumers.

Table 1 suggests that the relationship between self-referential advertising and clear brand perception is significantly strong, meaning that ads that are self-referential in their style have a remarkable contribution to forming brand perception in the minds of the consumers and that an increase in likeability for the ad would lead to more positive brand perception. Therefore, a significant association between self-referential advertising and brand perception in the minds of consumers is established.

#### 3.2. Consumers’ real self as the mediator

A two-way linear regression was carried out to analyze the mediation role of consumers’ real-self –  $X \rightarrow M$ ,  $M \rightarrow Y$ ,  $X \rightarrow Y$  and  $X+M \rightarrow Y$  followed by the Sobel Z test to establish the mediation model’s effect. M depicts the mediating variable, while X denotes the independent and Y the dependent variable. Each of the four regression models establishes a correlation among the three variables. However, the significance is not found (Table 2). Besides, the variance explained by the independent variables in each linear relationship – X for M, M for Y and X for Y is relatively low – below 40%, with significance being greater than 0.05, implying the model is not a good fit to predict the change in the dependent variable. Moreover, although the R-Square value in the regression analysis of  $X+M \rightarrow Y$  is

**Table 1.** Self-referential ads and brand perceptions: Regression and correlation analysis

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F	Beta	t
.777 <sup>a</sup>	.603	.602	492.32 <sup>**</sup>	.777	22.19 <sup>**</sup>
			<b>Brand Perception (Y)</b>		
			<b>Attitude toward Ad (X)</b>		
Brand Perception (Y)		1			
Attitude toward Ad (X)		0.7765940493			

Note: \*. Significant at the 0.05 level; \*\*. Significant at the 0.01 level.

**Table 2.** Regression analysis of the mediating role of consumers’ real-self between self-referential ads and brand attitude

Hypothesised Relationship	Variables	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Correlation	Semi correlation
Regression X → M	Self-referential advertising	0.7281	0.0540	13.4866	3.293E-33	0.5996	
Regression M → Y	Consumers’ real self	0.3382	0.0419	8.0750	1.34E-14	0.4093	0.0289
Regression X → Y	Self-referential advertising	0.6513	0.0424	15.3634	2.137E-40	0.6492	0.5530
M	Consumers’ real self	0.0258	0.0437	0.5919	0.5543		
X	Self-referential advertising	0.6325	0.0530	11.9279	2.007E-27		

42%, thereby highlighting relatively better variance explained, the Sobel Z test score is also less than 1.96, establishing the lack of mediation by the consumer’s real self. Therefore, no significant association exists between the means of the two variables – the consumer’s real self and self-referential advertising and consumers’ real self does not mediate the effect of self-referential advertising on brand attitude.

Sobel Z test result is as follows:

$$z\text{-value} = \frac{a \cdot b}{\sqrt{b^2 \cdot S_a^2 + a^2 \cdot S_b^2}} = 0.49, \quad (1)$$

where *a* – unstandardized coefficient of X variable = 0.6325, *S<sub>a</sub>* – standard error of X variable = 0.0530, *b* – unstandardized coefficient of M variable = 0.0258, *S<sub>b</sub>* – standard error of M variable = 0.0437.

As the *z* value is less than 1.96, the M variable is not significantly mediating between the X and Y variables.

### 3.3. Self-referential advertising, brand attitude, and purchase intention

Chi-Square was first conducted to explore the collinearity between self-referential advertising and brand attitude, wherein the test concluded there

is a significant association between self-referential advertising and brand attitude, which creates purchase intention, i.e., self-referential advertising does positively impact brand attitude, which makes purchase intention.

Later, the Pearson correlation found the correlation coefficient (*α*) to be 0.712, T statistics = 18.235, *df* = *n* - 2 = 324. Accordingly, *p* = *t* table value (at 1 - *α*/2 with *d.f.* = 324) = 0.761 where *α* = level of significance = 0.05. The hypothesis is rejected if the ABS (*t*-test statistic) is greater than the *t*-table value (for two-tail). In this case, it is observed that 18.235 > 0.761; hence, *H<sub>0</sub>* is accepted.

### 3.4. Self-referential advertising and brand attitude in a private consumption situation

Two different ads were adapted from the two brands’ social media channels for this study. One brand offered was a privately consumed product (electric trimmer), and the other was a publicly consumed product (fast-food restaurant). Both brands were promoted using a self-referential advertising message.

The inter-relationship between three variables is tested here: private consumption – mediator (M), self-referencing ads – X, and positive brand attitude – Y.

**Table 3.** Chi-Square tests: The positive association between self-referential ads and brand attitude

$\frac{(O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}}$		Brand attitude which creates purchase intention			Total
		Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	
Self-referential advertising	Disagree	42.98	6.94	22.04	71.96
	Neutral	34.06	16.48	0.86	51.39
	Agree	9.02	6.54	86.44	102.00
Total		86.05	29.96	109.33	225.35

Note: Chi sq. observed = 225.34; Chi sq. table value (0.05,4) = 9.488.



**Table 4.** Regression and Sobel Z test: The mediating role of consumption pattern between self-referential ads and brand attitude

Hypothesised Relationship	Variables	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Correlation	Semi correlation
Regression X → M	Self-referencing ads	0.4938	0.0366	13.4866	3.2933E-33	0.5996	
Regression M → Y	Consumption pattern	0.8334	0.0495	16.8344	3.9461E-46	0.6831	0.5936
Regression X → Y	Self-referencing ads	0.5254	0.0476	11.0421	2.8305E-24	0.5229	0.1939
M	Consumption Pattern	0.704	0.0608	11.58191994	3.5335E-26		
X	Self-referential ads	0.1778	0.0501	3.551893165	0.0004394		

Regression analysis was conducted to understand the effect of consumption patterns/situations on consumer attitudes toward brands with self-referential ads. The R square value for privately consumed brands is .56, while publicly consumed brands are .46, implying that advertising by privately consumed brands has a higher variance explained by consumers' brand attitude compared to brands of public consumption of self-referential advertising. Nonetheless, the p-value in the ANOVA and the coefficients table is greater than 0.05, implying that the regression model is not a good fit to predict the changes in the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the relationship between the mediator and brand attitude establishes a higher correlation (R-value =.68). However, the variance as the R-Square depicted is 46 %, and the p-value is greater than 0.05. Similarly, the relationship between X and Y also has a lower variance (27%) and a p-value of 0.05, implying the model is not a good fit. Consequently, the mediation model is also depicted to be insignificant. On the contrary, however, the Sobel Z test shows a score greater than 1.96. Therefore, the M variable significantly mediates between the X and Y, accepting H<sub>0</sub>4.

### 3.5. Consumption patterns and consumer acceptance of self-referential advertising

As above, this mediation analysis is also carried out through linear regression and Sobel Z test mediation analysis, wherein the consumption pattern is mediator (M), self-referential advertising – X and consumer's acceptance – Y. While the X → M regression model showed a correlation value to be .69, a lower variance of 47% is explained by the independent variable with a p-value of greater than 0.05. In addition, the regression model of M → Y has a low variance explained and correlation value with a p-value greater than 0.05, referring to no significant impact of consumption pattern on consumer acceptance.

Interestingly, the regression model testing the effect of self-referential advertising on Consumer acceptance has relatively the highest correlation (.71) and variance explained (51%) but with a p-value greater than 0.05. Moreover, the mediation analysis received a p-value of 0.003; hence, the mediation model was a good fit for predicting changes in the relationship between dependent and independent variables. The Sobel Z test also generated a score greater

**Table 5.** Mediation and regression analysis: The role of consumption patterns between consumer brand acceptance and self-referential advertising

Hypothesised Relationship	Variables	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Correlation	Semi correlation
Regression X → M	Self-referential advertising	0.7137	0.0418	17.0832	4.1891E-47	0.6884	
Regression M → Y	Consumption pattern	0.6692	0.0533	12.5555	9.8472E-30	0.5721	0.1439
Regression X → Y	Self-referential advertising	0.8615	0.0474	18.1681	2.3417E-51	0.7104	0.5321
M	Consumption pattern	0.1847	0.0623	2.9642	0.00326038		
X	Self-referential advertising	0.7297	0.0646	11.2949	3.7197E-25		

than 1.96, implying that the M variable significantly mediates between the X and Y variables. Therefore, H<sub>05</sub> is accepted.

## 4. DISCUSSION

There has often been an attempt to explore consumer psychology to understand their processing of diverse marketing information and the facilitation of marketing communication. However, though self-referential ads have emerged as a common marketing strategy, even in India, there has been a lesser academic attempt to understand its impact on consumer attitude and purchase intention. Besides, there has also been a secondary academic focus on associating self-concept and self-congruence with Indian consumers, especially the younger generation (Gen Z and the Millennials), how contemporary ads affect their self-concept and shape their attitude toward certain brands they privately consume through mental simulation. The general findings suggest that self-referential advertising generates a positive customer attitude toward the brand because it appeals to its authentic self. While the mediating effect of self-referential ads is more substantial for brand offerings consumed in a private situation by the individual, there is a significant relationship between self-referential advertising and the consumer's intention to purchase. In addition, contrary to the observations of the literature suggesting that the surrogate positioning adopted by using self-referential ads leads to confusion in clarity of brand perception, the results showed that for the Indian audience, self-referential advertising does lead to clear brand perception. Moreover, the findings also established the insignificant association between the consumers' real self and self-referential advertising, unlike the popular opinion that self-referential ads enable consumers to be more associated with brands because their identities and ideas of self resonate with the brand value (Bergkvist et al., 2016; Boutlis, 2000; Noth, 2007; Vinzenz et al., 2019). The findings refuted the inference that young consumers are more drawn to self-parodic messages in terms of advertising because it helps them gain social currency through sharing these ads and aligning themselves as part of the social group that is too smart to be manipulated by the exaggerated nature of advertising (Kao & Du, 2020; Martin & Lee, 2004).

Instead, the study established that irrespective of the association between the consumers' authentic self and self-referential advertising, the latter impacts the consumers' brand attitude, perception, and purchase intention. The findings, nonetheless, echo the observations of Martin and Lee (2004) that self-reference influences the consumers' attitude toward the ad, brand, and purchase intention; with higher self-reference, the impact will be higher. Yim et al. (2021) have reasoned the effect of self-referential ads on consumer attitudes through the facilitation of their mental stimulation, which produces an affirmative consumer evaluation, and they view themselves as consuming the displayed product and contribute to affirmative cognitive and affective consumer evaluations like enjoyment and informativeness. In addition, when self-referential ads influence the consumer's moral and social emotions, they significantly impact their attitude toward the ads and brands (Kao & Du, 2020). Therefore, self-referential ads have implications in shaping consumer attitudes and awareness toward social causes and brands which work toward environmental sustainability.

Coming to consumption situations, consumers determine their acceptance of the ad based on its craft and creative execution rather than taking into account whether or not it is privately or publicly consumed; however, the privately consumed brand offering did show a more significant impact on acceptance toward the ad, but it was not the basis for them to select. However, this observation on the insignificance of consumption patterns in shaping a positive brand attitude contradicts the literature, which shows that the type of consumption moderates the association between self-referencing ads, consumer self-image, and purchase intention (Zeng et al., 2020). Besides, ads providing personal nostalgia to consumers positively influence their private consumption (Chang & Feng, 2016), although the effect is product specific. As Kulviwat et al. (2009) observed on adopting high-tech innovations, consumers' intention to adopt depends on social influence and attitude, which is more robust when publicly consumed. A positive attitude toward brands that indulge in self-aware or self-referential advertising translates this into a purchase and is not merely seen as entertainment. Indian consumers can form a clear and concrete brand perception in their minds of a brand indulging in meta-advertising only because they liked the ads of the said brand. Similar

observations were presented by studies based in industrialised countries, like Kuo et al. (2009), Aaker and Jacobson (2001), and Yeo et al. (2016), who noted how brand attitude and purchase intentions share a promising association, which in turn is influenced by the type of advertising. Mackenzie and Spreng (1992), Kim and Han (2014), and Kuo et al. (2009) also identified the final purpose of the ad. They explained the effect of congruency between ads and consumers on purchasing the advertised brand's offering.

Most importantly, while furthering the observations of Zeng et al. (2020), the study found contradictory results concerning the association between self-referencing ads and consumers' real selves. The former established the effectiveness of self-referential ads on the consumers' real selves, although this study did not. In addition, the analysis did not confirm the mediating role of the real self between self-referential advertising and the consumers' purchase intention, unlike the base paper it took the idea from, though the consumption pattern (private over public) mediates the relationship between self-referential ads, consumer acceptance, and purchase intention, similar to what Zeng et al. (2020) highlighted. Therefore, the findings imply the country-wise difference in consumer attitudes and perceptions – China vis-à-vis India. Nevertheless, an extensive study based on primary data is required to explain the difference in consumer attitudes among countries and generations, keeping the variables of the analysis constant.

In marketing, the implications of self-referential advertising can be applied to strategic, tactical, and operational levels. At the strategic level, although the research results suggest the presence of clear brand perception, relying entirely on an abstract positioning might give the brand a unique differentiator but, at the same time, not effectively communicate what the offering is. Emotional cognition (providing more information through emotional messaging) about

the brand will be critical for them to purchase the product. Linking the creatives to the brand objectives will be of utmost importance. It is also imperative to consider the consumption situation at the tactical level since it is the overarching theme that directs consumer acceptance of self-reflexive advertising. Suppose the brands are entirely new to the market and the consumer. In that case, they might want to start by forming an emotional attachment with them and then adopting a self-referential advertising technique to deepen their interpersonal relationship with their consumers.

Moreover, while there is a direct relationship between purchase intention and attitude toward self-referential forms of communication, the connection needs to be sustained and strengthened. Self-referential ads can only be adapted to build brand likability for young consumers and sales over the long run but not direct, immediate sales. At the operational level, when executed well, self-referential ads can be thoroughly enjoyed; however, if the execution is a creative shortcut, the brand might be seen as lazy, trying to take the easy way out, which could be counterproductive. The importance of clever variations to win over the Millennials and Generation Z audiences should also be supported since these groups may have distinct needs.

The research outcomes seek to understand how self-referential advertising messages can positively impact consumers' sense of self, affecting their attitude toward the brand, which may or may not lead to purchase and directly relates to brand perception. This study affirms that young consumers demand honest, authentic, personalised, and realistic approaches to forming relationships with brands. Being over-exposed to advertising has made them immune to the typically orchestrated marketing campaigns. Relationships through peer-to-peer dialogue will be the future of advertising to these audiences.

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## CONCLUSION

The study intended to examine the impact of self-referential ads on the consumer's brand perception and attitude, indirectly influencing their purchase intention by mediating the consumers' real-self and consumption patterns. Primary data analysis has established self-referencing ads' positive and significant impact on Gen Z and Millennial consumers' brand attitudes, perceptions, and purchase intention. While self-referential advertising appeals to the authentic self of the consumers, self-referential ads as the mediator are more effective on brand offerings consumed in a private situation by the individual. In addition, the

findings refute the widespread observation that the surrogate positioning adopted by using self-referential ads leads to confusion in brand perception clarity. Albeit the study is a novel approach in the Indian landscape, where self-referencing ads are popularly utilized by renowned and some regional brands, especially on social media, academic interest in the concerned marketing communication is substantially lacking.

Further studies are required to check how the effect of self-referencing ads fairs across Gen Z and Millennials of different communities since India is a land of multi-religion and cultural and linguistic communities. Finally, a more rigorous analysis of the variables is required to validate/invalidate the findings and establish generalizability on the impact of self-referencing ads on consumer attitude toward brands, changes in the consumption pattern, and its association with their self-concept. The conclusions derived, therefore, may apply to other product categories and marketing communication contexts, and hence, future research replicating the current study is recommended to verify the results across a broad spectrum of advertising forms and products available in India.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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 Investigation: Mansuri Mallika.  
 Methodology: Kavitha Iyer, Mansuri Mallika.  
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