Antecedents of Ironic Consumption

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Ironic consumption refers to using a product with the intent of signalling a meaning that reverses the conventional meaning of the product. This thesis proposes that consumers low in self-concept clarity are more likely to engage in ironic consumption compared to consumers high in self-concept clarity. Low self-concept clarity is associated with a motivation to maintain a stable self-concept and a reluctance to do anything that signals an identity change in case that further destabilizes the already low self-concept clarity. At the same time, consumers with a low self-concept clarity may also want to define an identity that they can use to signal who they are.

Ironic consumption offers a unique opportunity for consumers with low self-concept clarity because it enables them to try out transitory identities without actually committing to anything in particular. Ironic consumption allows consumers to signal different meanings—one to people who detect the irony and one to those who don’t. This insulates consumers from the risk of instability of self as well as disapproval because any criticism can have the defence, ‘I was just being ironic’. Three experiments are reported in support of these hypotheses. Collectively, this thesis suggests that people with low self-concept clarity use ironic consumption as a way to reconcile two seemingly competing motivations of stable self-concept and identity exploration.