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They're Just Not that into You: How to Leverage Existing Consumer-Brand Relationships through Social Psychological Distance

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They're Just Not That Into You: How to Leverage Existing Consumer–Brand Relationships through Social Psychological Distance

Abstract

While prevailing marketing practice is to encourage ever stronger relationships between consumers and brands, such relationships are rare and many consumers are relationship-averse or content with the status quo. The authors examine how marketers can more effectively manage existing brand relationships by focusing on the psychological distance between consumers and brands in order to match close (distant) brands with concrete (abstract) language in marketing communications. Through such matching, marketers can create a beneficial mindset-congruency effect leading to more favorable evaluations and behavior, even for brands that are relatively distant to consumers. Study 1 demonstrates the basic mindset-congruency effect and Study 2 shows it is capable of affecting donation behaviors. Study 3 documents two brand-level factors (search versus experience goods, brand stereotypes) that moderate this effect in managerially relevant ways. Study 4 shows that activation of the mindset-congruency effect influences consumers to spend more, and that these behaviors are moderated by consumer category involvement. The authors conclude with marketing and theoretical implications.

Keywords: consumer–brand relationships, psychological distance, construal level, brand-relationship type, brand relationship management, mindset congruency

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"Just as parents find it difficult to be objective about their children, so it is with marketing managers and their brands. It is hard to see the brand from the consumer's perspective. It is difficult to appreciate the minor role the brand plays in the life of the consumer… No one else loves your brand as much as you do."
(Heckler and Till 2009, pp. 6–7)

Marketing managers want consumers to form strong connections with their brands. Building on Fournier's (1998) consumer–brand relationship (CBR) framework, research has mapped more than 50 relationship types (Wittenbraker, Zeitoun, and Fournier 2015), many of them meaningful and closely tied to the consumer's sense of self. In the academic literature there has been a notable propensity to focus on these kinds of relationships, such as *committed partnerships* and *best friendships* (Fournier and Alvarez 2013). This focus is also reflected in prevailing brand-management approaches that seek to move consumers from "weak or indifferent" relationships (Fournier and Alvarez 2013, p. 253) to stronger ones where the consumer is more attached, connected to, or in love with a brand (Malar et al. 2011). After all, if stronger brand relationships are commercial assets that "offer the greatest economic profit potential" (Park, MacInnis, and Priester 2009, p. 379), then pursuing stronger relationships seems to be a sound strategy.

However, as indicated by the sheer volume and variation of CBR types, consumers often do not experience or seek strong brand relationships. Strong relationships are, in fact, "rare in a brand context" (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005, p. 89), and as many as 77% of consumers report that they do not forge strong relationships with brands (Freeman, Spenner, and Bird 2012). Similarly, large-scale practitioner research by Havas (2020) suggests that a majority of brand content is not meaningful, and consumers would not care if most brands "disappeared" (*meaningful-brands.com*). To underscore this point, we conducted a simple test: we recruited 323 consumers from a private research panel (M_{age} = 37; 47% male) and asked them to list all the brands that were important to them. On average, respondents listed only 2.15 brands (SD = 1.50),

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and fewer than 1% of respondents listed 10 or more brands. Thus, while most consumers have at least one brand that they feel strongly about, there appears to be a low ceiling to this phenomenon. All of this speaks to a situation lamented decades ago that persists today (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998, p. 44):

> Every company wants the rewards of long term, committed partnerships. But people maintain literally hundreds of one-on-one relationships in their personal lives… and clearly, only a handful of them are of a close and committed nature. How can we expect people to do any more in their lives as consumers?

The implication is that marketers are fixated on building the types of relationships that countless consumers simply may not want, in essence choosing a potentially wasteful relationship-upgrading strategy as a result of disregarding consumer preferences. In response, we highlight the value of marketers' embracing the relationship status quo and argue in favor of a simplified strategy based upon a *phenomena-to-construct* (MacInnis et al. 2020) assessment of CBRs. We leverage the fact that all the major CBR constructs (e.g., love, attachment, identification) implicitly or explicitly reflect the idea of *self–brand distance*, defined as the psychological proximity between a brand and the consumer's self-concept. We show that different types of brand relationships are associated with varying levels of psychological distance (Trope and Liberman 2010) and expand upon this theoretical mapping to demonstrate how to better leverage existing CBRs. Drawing on Construal Level Theory (Trope and Liberman 2010), we establish a congruency effect, showing that matching the psychological distance associated with a CBR to an appropriate level of construal or message concreteness improves brand evaluations and spending for both close and distant consumers. In five studies, we offer the first empirical demonstration that *social* psychological distance is common to many major CBR constructs, that matching distance and construal level in marketing communications results in superior consumer evaluations and behaviors, and that these effects are moderated by variables

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with strong implications for how marketers can respond more effectively to consumers' existing

brand relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Consumers engage in many types of brand relationships, and most implicate their self-

concept. This basic idea is captured with different terms such as self–brand connection (Escalas

2004), self–brand overlap (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992), self–brand distance (Park,

Eisingerich, and Park 2013), self-connection (Fournier 1998), and self-concept connection (e.g.,

Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). While each possesses its own nuance, they

converge on reflecting "the extent to which the brand overlaps with or is included in the self; that

is, the extent to which the brand is me and I am the brand" (MacInnis and Folkes 2017, p. 364).

Extensive evidence of this self–brand distance is embedded in core CBR concepts such as brand

identification, commitment, attachment, and love. For example, earlier work proposed that self-

connection—the extent to which a brand reflects and expresses important aspects of the self—is

a vital component of how brands can become meaningful relationship partners (Fournier 1998).

Other work draws from self-expansion theory (Reimann and Aron 2009) to posit that brand

relationships are formed as part of an unconscious motivation to expand the self and include

close others in the self-concept. What these differing accounts make clear is that many brand

relationships largely implicate closeness of the brand to the self-concept (see Table 1).

Consumer–Brand Relationships and Psychological Distance

We employ *psychological distance* as a useful complement to the CBR literature as a

means of conceptualizing self–brand distance. Psychological distance refers to the "subjective

experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now" (Trope and

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Liberman 2010, p. 440). At its core, psychological distance reflects the subjective feeling of how far, in abstract psychological space, a target (e.g., object or event) is perceived to be from the self (Alter and Oppenheimer 2008). We suggest that psychological distance can be construed as the foundation underlying the numerous conceptualizations of self–brand distance in the CBR literature. Supporting this contention, we report empirical evidence from a large-scale pilot study implying that the common self–brand constructs in the marketing literature (e.g. Self-brand Connection [Escalas and Bettman 2003] or Self-Connection [Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004]) load on a single factor interpretable as psychological distance (see Web Appendix W1).

While psychological distance can vary based upon geographic, temporal, or probabilistic proximity (e.g., Murdock and Rajagopal 2017), numerous aspects of social cognition have also been shown to alter perceptions of psychological distance. For example, the psychological distance of a target is smaller for an ingroup member (psychologically close; e.g., sister) and larger for an outgroup member (psychologically distant; e.g., waiter) (Linville, Fischer, and Yoon 1996). Further, similar others are perceived to be more psychologically close than dissimilar others (Liviatan, Trope, and Liberman 2008), and objects are perceived to be psychologically closer when imagined from the first-person versus third-person perspective (Pronin and Ross 2006).

Findings in the literature are consistent with the idea that the social component of psychological distance may explain how consumers interact with brands. For example, examining moral identity in the context of outgroup brands, Choi and Winterich (2013) do not explicitly address the social dimension of psychological distance but suggest that "although psychological distance tends to be examined as the distance between two people rather than between a consumer and a brand, it is possible that the perception of distance from others applies

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to brands given the relationships and group associations with brands" (p. 100). Even so, there is

nearly no explicit consideration of the social component of psychological distance in the

branding literature.

Since CBRs represent socially-construed dyads that are in many ways akin to an

interpersonal relationship (Fournier 1998), the array of consumer–brand relationships identified

in past research should vary predictably along the social dimension of psychological distance,

based upon the relational norms and behaviors that constitute each relationship. Consider two

examples: With *committed* brand relationships, consumers are faithful to the brand in some

lasting way and think about these brands relatively similarly to their more intimate interpersonal

connections (Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012). In this case, much like personal relationships

(e.g., Linville, Fischer, and Yoon 1996), it is clear that the brand will be perceived as

psychologically close and incorporated into the self-concept (Fournier 1998). Conversely, *secret*

affair brand relationships, also characterized by high levels of affect, imply that brands are kept

hidden in order to avoid a public association. Indeed, their nearest relational neighbor is the

"complete stranger" type (Zayer and Neier 2011), underlining that *secret affair* brands lie more

in the domain of "not me." In this case, despite positive feelings towards the brand, *secret affair*

brands will be perceived as more psychologically distant, since the brand is incorporated into the

self-concept to a lesser extent and the consumer actively seeks distance from it (Arsel and

Stewart 2015). More generally, we use *close brand-relationship types* to refer to those associated

with a low level of perceived psychological distance between the self and the brand, and *distant*

brand-relationship types to refer to those associated with a high level of perceived psychological

distance between the self and the brand. Pilot Study B provides empirical support for the level of

psychological distance as a common foundation to a number of CBR types (Web Appendix W2).

Construal Level Theory

If brand relationships indeed involve consumers' perceptions of psychological distance, it should benefit the brand to align this social distance with the construal level of brand information offered by marketers. Construal Level Theory (Trope and Liberman 2010) suggests that the greater an object's psychological distance from a person, the greater the likelihood that it will be conceptualized at a higher level of abstraction. On the other hand, objects that are psychologically close are represented by more concrete, low-level construals. Abstract, high-level construals are "schematic, decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information" whereas concrete, low-level construals are "relatively unstructured, contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of events" (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007, p. 83).

Matching the psychological distance of an object with an appropriate level of construal or concreteness of brand information results in mindset-congruency effects that have been shown to lead to information being perceived as more persuasive (e.g., Lee and Aaker 2004; Trope, Liberman, Wakslak 2007) and more likely to be accurately stored and retained in memory (Kisielius and Sternthal 1986). Such mindset-congruency effects have been observed in marketing. For example, research on message framing and construal suggests that high-level, abstract versus low-level, concrete language improves conservation behavior (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011), increases effectiveness of charitable appeals and health messaging (Han, Duhachek, and Agrawal 2016; MacDonnell and White 2015), and explains consumer evaluations of brand extensions (Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012).

We harness the concept of psychological distance that underlies the various brand-relationship types to establish actionable strategies focused on leveraging the relationships that

form organically between consumers and brands, rather than attempting to lead often-unwilling

consumers into stronger relationships. Specifically, we expect that evaluations and behavior

directed towards psychologically close brand relationships will be more favorable when

consumers are presented with low-level, concrete brand information, whereas evaluations and

behavior directed towards psychologically distant brand relationships will be more favorable

when consumers are presented with high-level, abstract brand information.

The Role of Processing Fluency

The concept of *processing fluency* has been defined in a number of ways, generally referring

to the ease with which a person is able to process information and assess meaning (Alter and

Oppenheimer 2008; Lee and Labroo 2004). Fluency has been shown to increase as a result of

construal-based mindset congruencies (e.g., matching loss- [gain]-framed messages with

concrete [abstract] mindsets), leading to more favorable behaviors (White, MacDonnell, Dahl

2011; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). Research has further shown that heightened processing

fluency resulting from a fit-based mindset congruency can lead to greater message persuasion

(Lee and Aaker 2004) and positively influences a variety of judgments such as liking (Allard and

Griffin 2017). Thus, further corroborating our psychological distance-based account, we expect

perceptions of fluency will increase when the degree of psychological distance implied by a

particular brand relationship is matched with an appropriate construal level or concreteness of

brand information.

We report four studies. Study 1 demonstrates our mindset-congruency effect by embedding

a construal manipulation within brand information and documents processing fluency as a

mediator. Study 2 embeds a manipulation of construal level in an advertisement and shows that

the mindset-congruency effect can increase donations to a brand-supported cause. Study 3 elicits

psychologically close and distant brands and examines both brand stereotypes (i.e., warmth and competence) and the search versus experience nature of the brand as moderators to shed light on how to more effectively manage existing CBRs. Finally, Study 4 employs a concreteness manipulation in a field study to demonstrate that the mindset-congruency effect is sufficiently strong to influence consumer spending and establishes an actionable segmentation moderator: category usage rate.

Study 1

Study 1 examines the brand-relationship mindset-congruency effect using a construal manipulation embedded within a brand communication. If different brand-relationship types are associated with varying levels of closeness to the self, this should result in a mindset-congruency effect when processing that brand information at an appropriate construal level. To achieve this, we elicit two types of brand relationships—"committed" and "secret affair"—based upon the results of Pilot Study B (see Web Appendix W2) that examined twelve brand relationships along the psychological-distance dimension in addition to other dimensions currently used to conceptualize CBRs. As committed relationships are closer to the self (Fournier 1998; Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012), we expect to see improved brand evaluations following low-construal brand information processing. Conversely, since "secret affairs" are more distant from the self (Fournier 1998; Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012), brand evaluations should be more positive following exposure to high-construal brand information. Furthermore, by showing mediation by processing fluency, we provide further evidence to support our claim that we are documenting a construal–mindset congruency effect driven by psychological distance.

Method and Procedure

We recruited 266 undergraduates (33% female, M_{age} = 18.2 years) from a large public

university in exchange for partial course credit. Twelve were removed for failing an attention

check or for not following instructions, and five were removed due to incomplete responses (N =

249). Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (*brand-relationship type*:

committed, secret affair) × 2 (*construal level*: low, high) between-subjects design.

Participants were informed that they would be evaluating the quality of various brands using

an online system, *International Standard*, which (ostensibly) compiles information from a

variety of online sources (e.g., consumer reports, online product reviews) and produces brand-

quality scores (see Web Appendix W3). After learning about the system, participants completed

an established brand-relationship elicitation task in which they were asked to nominate a brand

that fit the given brand-relationship type: committed or secret affair (Miller, Fournier, and Allen

2012; see Web Appendix W1). In all conditions, participants were asked to reflect upon brands

that they use regularly in their daily life, so the only difference between the conditions was the

nature of the brand relationship elicited. On the following screen, participants were asked to wait

ten seconds while the system calculated the *International Standard* quality score for their

nominated brand. The system then informed all participants that their brand had scored 9.2 (out

of 10). To manipulate *construal level* of the brand information, the next screen provided a list of

the "top five factors that contributed to the *International Standard* score that the brand received,"

which varied by condition based upon a "how versus why" manipulation of construal level.

Repeatedly focusing on how something is done elicits a low-level, concrete mindset, whereas

focusing on why it is done elicits a high-level, abstract mindset (Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope

2004). In the low-level condition, participants were shown five claims about the brand pertaining

to *how* (concrete) the brand earned the score that it did (e.g., *by creating products that*

continually meet or exceed the expectations of its customers—according to consumer reports). In

the high-level condition, participants were shown five claims about the brand pertaining to *why*

(abstract) it received the score that it did (e.g., *because it creates products that continually meet*

or exceed the expectations of its customers—according to consumer reports). The content of the

five claims did not differ between the two conditions—the only difference was the manipulation

of *construal level*. We pretested the manipulation to assess the construal level of the brand

information and attitudes towards the information (for pretest results for construal manipulations

used in all studies see Web Appendices W4 and W5).

Next, participants were asked to complete a three-item measure of *processing fluency* (α =

.91; Lee and Aaker 2004; e.g., "How easy was this information to comprehend?" "How easy was

this information to process?") on a 1-7 scale (very difficult – very easy). This was followed by

evaluations of the brand using indices of *attitudes* (α = .95; nine items from Batra and Stayman

1990; e.g., unfavorable – favorable, dislike – like), *trust* (α = .81; three items from Chaudhuri

and Holbrook 2001; e.g., "I trust this brand", "I rely on this brand"), and *satisfaction* (α = .96;

three items of Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas 2000; e.g., "How satisfied are you with this

brand?", "How content are you with this brand?"), all measured on 1-7 scales. Finally,

participants completed basic demographics and manipulation checks for psychological distance

using the IOS zipper (Choi and Winterich 2013; i.e., "Please indicate which case best describes

the level of overlap between your own self-definition or identity and this brand") and self–brand

connection (α = .92; seven items from Escalas 2004; e.g., "This brand reflects who I am", "I can

identify with this brand") scales. The latter measure was captured on a 1-7 scale (not at all –

extremely well; see Web Appendix W6 for measures used in all studies).

Results

Manipulation check. Manipulation checks revealed that the brand closeness manipulation

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was successful. A *brand relationship type × construal level* condition ANOVA on psychological

distance revealed a significant main effect of *brand relationship type F*(1, 243) = 16.73, *p* <

.001). Participants in the committed brand relationship condition perceived the brand to be closer

to the self (M = 4.80) than those in the secret affair condition (M = 3.96). As an additional check

of psychological distance, we examined self-brand connection: as expected, committed brand

relationships were perceived to be closer (M = 4.27) than secret affair brand relationships (M =

2.97), *F*(1, 245) = 55.86, *p* < .001.

Brand evaluations. A principal components analysis indicated that all three dependent

variables (attitudes, trust, satisfaction) were unidimensional (all loadings > .89) so we indexed

them to form a *brand evaluations* composite (α = .88). We use a composite in all remaining

analyses in order to economize reporting, though the choice is bolstered by research showing

strong correlations and theoretical links across these variables (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson

1999). A 2 (*brand-relationship type*: committed, secret affair) × 2 (*construal level*: high, low)

ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of brand relationship on *brand evaluations* (F(1, 245)

= 48.79, *p* < .001; η² = .17). In general, brands were evaluated more positively in the committed

condition than in the secret affair condition. Importantly, the results show a significant

interaction (F(1, 245) = 11.81, *p* < .01; η² = .05) that remained significant after controlling for

both age and gender (F(1, 243) = 11.73, *p* < .01; η² = .05), which we include as covariates in all

further studies.

Follow-up simple effects revealed that for committed relationships, *brand evaluations* were

significantly more favorable in the low-level condition (M = 6.08) than the high-level condition

(M = 5.67; F(1, 243) = 5.08, *p* < .05; η² = .03). On the other hand, for secret-affair relationships,

brand evaluations were significantly more favorable in the high-level condition (M = 5.20) than

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in the low-level condition (M = 4.71; F(1, 243) = 6.74, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .02$).

Processing fluency. We conducted a conditional process analysis with the PROCESS macro

(Model 8; Hayes 2018) using a bootstrap procedure (5,000 draws) to construct bias-corrected

confidence intervals. Results suggest that *processing fluency* mediates the focal relationship

since the indirect effect of the highest-order interaction (brand-relationship type × construal

level) through fluency was significant (B = .25, SE = .10, 95% CI = .09, .48). That is, the effect

of *construal level* on *brand evaluations* through *processing fluency* is conditional upon

relationship type. For committed relationships, results show a significant indirect effect (B = .09,

SE = .06, 95% CI = .0004, .2224) while for secret-affair relationships, the direction of the

indirect effect reverses (B = -.16, SE = .07, 95% CI = -.31, -.05).

Discussion

Study 1 provides evidence that consumers' relationships with brands can be effectively

managed by attending to the associated degree of psychological distance. For consumers who are

in psychologically close brand relationships (e.g., committed), claims made using low-level,

concrete language result in increased processing fluency, leading to the brand being perceived

more favorably than when high-level abstract claims are made. Conversely, for consumers who

are in a more distant relationship with a brand (e.g., secret affair), high-level abstract claims

result in increased processing fluency, leading to the brand being perceived more favorably than

when low-level concrete claims are made. However, it should be noted that past research

associating construal level with positive affect (e.g. Labroo and Patrick 2009) suggests a

potential alternative explanation for our congruency effect. To address this, we conducted a

replication of our congruency effect to experimentally and statistically rule out the role of affect

and to enhance robustness by using a stronger, direct manipulation of construal level (see

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Replication Study in Web Appendix W7). Finally, although the evidence of mediation by

processing fluency supports our contention that our results are attributable to a construal–mindset

congruency effect (Allard and Griffin 2017; Lee and Aaker 2004; White, MacDonnell, and Dahl

2011; 2019), in Study 2 we aim to provide further evidence that this congruency effect is driven

by the brand's psychological distance and address selection concerns.

Study 2

Study 1 examined the impact of the mindset-congruency effect on brand evaluations. It

remains to be seen whether the effect is strong enough to affect consumer spending. To this end,

Study 2 employs a more realistic application of construal level by embedding a construal-based

manipulation in an advertisement for a charitable cause. We examine differences in consumer

donations as a joint function of the construal level of brand communications and the

psychological distance of the target brand. Finally, Study 2 uses a single target brand assigned to

all respondents, an approach that avoids selection effects and more closely represents the type of

decisions typically made by a marketer managing a single brand.

Method and Procedure

We recruited 156 student and non-student community volunteers (75% female, M_{age} = 22.2

years) through a large public university in exchange for $8.00. Participants were informed that

they would be taking part in a study to assess their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards a

brand. Following general demographic questions, participants rated their *brand closeness* using

two measures (Choi and Winterich 2013; Escalas 2004; α = .94). We chose the brand Molson

Canadian because a pretest (N = 48) suggested it elicited considerable variance in self–brand

distance in the study population. Next, participants viewed a fundraising advertisement entitled

"Lend a Hand to Man's Best Friend" (Web Appendix W8) that was co-branded by Molson

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Canadian and the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). We created a

between-subjects *construal level* manipulation by embedding "how" versus "why" language

similar to that used in Study 1. In the low-level-construal condition, the advertisement featured

the question *"How does your donation make a difference?"* along with four statements

answering the question (e.g., "by providing medical care"). In the high-level construal condition,

the advertisement featured the question *"Why is your donation important?"* along with four

statements (e.g., *"*because it ensures healthy animals"). Finally, after viewing the advertisement,

participants were told that Molson Canadian was raising money for the SPCA and asked how

much of their $8.00 payment they would like to donate to the cause, with their donation to be

deducted from their payment at the end of the study (*donation amount*). Though all participants

actually received payment of the $8.00 at the end of the study, they did not know this at the time

they were asked to make a donation.

Results

We regressed *donation amount* on *construal level, brand closeness*, the two-way interaction

term, and the age and gender covariates. The expected *construal level × brand closeness*

interaction was significant (B = .70, t(150) = 2.85, $p < .01$; $f^2 = .05$). A floodlight analysis

revealed that the effect of *construal level* was significant and negative for *brand closeness* scores

below 1.77 (B = -1.00, t(150) = -1.98, $p = .05$) and significant and positive for *brand closeness*

scores above 5.12 (B = 1.35, t(150) = 1.98, $p = .05$). That is, for more distant brands, donations

were at least 67% higher when the advertisement featured high-level (versus low-level)

language, whereas for closer brands, donations were at least 88% higher when the ad featured

low-level (versus high-level) language.

Discussion

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Study 2 measured consumers' perceived closeness to a brand in order to demonstrate that

the construal–mindset congruency effect can impact the amount of money donated to a charity

affiliated with a target brand. These findings reveal that the mindset-congruency effect is strong

enough to shift consumers' brand-endorsed donation behavior, providing behavioral support for

our primary finding. Furthermore, it shows that embedding a construal-level manipulation in an

advertisement is a practical, effective means of establishing a construal–mindset congruency

effect. Importantly, the effect is replicated using a different brand-selection procedure

(experimenter-provided versus self-selected brand) that guards against idiosyncratic brand

effects.

Study 3

Study 3 was designed to address key brand-level moderators to provide greater insight into

the practical application of our mindset congruency effect. Since our congruency effect is

predicated on the construal level of brand information, we focus on two brand-level moderators

that pose specific implications for how consumers process this brand information. First, we

examine search versus experience brands to examine how our congruency effect is impacted by

differences in the availability and diagnosticity of brand information. Second, we examine how

strongly held brand stereotypes (e.g. warmth, competence) can inhibit the processing of new

brand information.

Prediction

Search versus experience brands. Search attributes (Nelson 1970) are those "qualities of a

brand that the consumer can determine by inspection prior to purchase" (Ford, Smith, and Swasy

1990 p. 434) and can be effectively discovered without the consumer interacting with the brand

or product (Huang, Lurie, and Mitra 2009). In contrast, experience attributes refer to those

product attributes that cannot be determined prior to inspection as they typically require purchase

to understand (Alba et al. 1997). Adapting these definitions to the brand level, we define search

(experience) brands as those for which the brand attributes most important to consumers can be

effectively evaluated using the information available before (only after) purchase – that is, the

brand is primarily characterized by search (experience) attributes.

Recall that our theorizing suggests that consumers will prefer low-level concrete information

for close brands and high-level abstract information for distant brands. However, in the context

of search brands, we expect this pattern will be reversed. For search brands, the information

typically sought by consumers is readily available prior to purchase (Nelson 1970) as consumers

will typically have extensive knowledge of (Mitra, Reiss, and Capella 1999) and be less skeptical

of claims made by such brands (Ford, Smith, and Swasy 1990). Therefore, search brands are

likely to be characterized by information saturation: close (distant) search brands provide all

concrete (abstract) information consumers need in advance. Since most CBRs are based on

consumers' regularly interacting with brands, additional construal-congruent information

becomes highly redundant and is unlikely to gain attention or be processed extensively. Rather,

with search brands, we expect that the novelty of being exposed to information that is

incongruent with the associated construal mindset—that is, abstract information for close brands

and concrete information for distant brands—will better capture consumer attention and

influence their subsequent evaluations. This view is supported by research suggesting that

information is novel when it breaks from pre-existing schemas and can lead to heightened

attention, arousal, and more favorable responses (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007).

On the other hand, since the qualities of experience brands are difficult to evaluate in

advance of purchase, consumers tend to expend more effort gathering information about them

(Mitra, Reiss, and Capela 1999) and undertake more processing in relation to them (Huang,

Lurie, and Mitra 2009), yet they still often end up in a state of greater ambiguity and uncertainty

compared to search brands (Hoch and Deighton 1989). Thus, as a result of this subjectivity, it is

less likely that consumers will reach a point of information saturation when considering

experience brands, meaning that information that is congruent with their construal-mindset will

continue to be evaluated more favorably. Therefore, we expect to obtain our construal–mindset

congruency effect for such brands.

Brand stereotypes. Building on the Stereotype Content Model of interpersonal interaction

(Fiske et al. 2002), extant literature suggests that consumers typically maintain two fundamental

perceptions or beliefs about brands (Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). The first is brand *warmth*,

which captures the extent to which a brand is perceived as having positive intentions. The second

is brand *competence*, indicating whether the brand is perceived to have the ability to carry out

these intentions. Both warmth and competence share characteristics with other constructs such as

a brand's personality (i.e., sincerity and competence; MacInnis and Folkes 2017) and power (i.e.,

communion and agency; Yang and Aggarwal 2019). Warmth and competence are pivotal in the

management of product, service, human, and destination brands (Anholt Ipsos Nation and City

Brands Indices 2020; Bennett et al. 2019; Malone and Fiske 2013; Packard, Moore, and

McFerran 2020) due to their importance in shaping consumer evaluations and behaviors (e.g.,

Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010).

Brands that are consistently positioned over time (e.g., Sam Adams) may become

stereotyped by virtue of being perceived as being very warm and/or competent (Freling and

Forbes 2005; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012), a situation that we expect will present a

boundary condition for our mindset-congruency effect. Specifically, we anticipate that highly

stereotyped brands will lead consumers not to attend to information provided to them in

marketing communications but to rely on their existing brand beliefs. These strongly stereotyped

beliefs are highly accessible, stable, enduring (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Freling and

Forbes 2005; Puzakova, Kwak, and Taylor 2013) and "resistant to change, regardless of the

nature of the new information" (Johar, Sengupta, and Aaker 2005, p. 468). As a result, people

with very strongly held stereotypes tend to expend less cognitive effort on stereotype-consistent

information (Sherman et al. 2005). In the current context, any mindset-congruency effect that

results from a matching of self–brand distance with the concreteness of brand communications

would be eliminated for those with strong beliefs about the warmth or competence of a brand,

since this new information would not change existing stereotyped beliefs about the brand.

Method and Procedure

Two hundred and one participants (59% female, M_{age} = 38.0 years) were recruited from

Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for a nominal fee. Of those participants, seven were

removed for failing an attention check (N = 194). Participants were randomly assigned to

conditions in a 2 (*brand closeness*: close, distant) × 2 (*construal level*: low, high) between-

subjects design. We used the same *International Standard* approach as Study 1 with three key

differences. First, rather than using specific brand-relationship types (i.e., committed versus

secret affair) to manipulate *psychological distance*, we took a more direct approach by eliciting

psychologically close versus distant brands. Pilot Study B and extant research (e.g., Fournier

1998) show that brand relationships vary on dimensions other than *psychological distance*, such

as their valence, hierarchy, and whether the products or services tend to be publicly consumed.

Because some of these dimensions are uncorrelated with *psychological distance* (e.g., hierarchy,

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public/private—see Web Appendix W2), they are unlikely to confound our results. Still, for the

remaining studies, we thought it prudent to take different approaches, which is why going

forward we either explicitly manipulate or measure *psychological distance*. Participants were

shown an image of Aron, Aron, and Smollan's (1992) IOS scale with *large overlap* (close) or

separate (distant) pairing circled (see Web Appendix W9) and asked to think of a brand they use

in their daily lives that they felt best characterized this high level (low level) of self–brand

overlap.

Second, we strengthened our "how versus why" *construal level* manipulation by altering the

concreteness of the information returned by the *International Standard* procedure (see Web

Appendix W10). Prior research shows that construal level can be manipulated by varying the

level of concreteness or abstraction of written language (e.g., Trope and Liberman 2010; White,

MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011) such that concrete language engages low-level construals and

abstract language engages high-level construals. Third, we measured brand stereotypes of

warmth (α = .95; e.g., "warm", "friendly") and *competence* (α = .93; e.g., "competent",

"effective"; both 4-item scales from Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010) on 1-7 scales (not at all –

very much). We further captured the extent to which the brand is primarily a *search* versus

experience good (α = .85; lower scores = experience good; higher scores = search good; Sharma,

Sivakumaran, and Marshall 2014) and single-item measures[1] of *public/private*,

symbolic/utilitarian, and *political orientation* (1 very liberal – 7 very conservative). Two sample

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[1] Symbolic/functional (*p* = .40) and public/private (*p* = .12) were included on an exploratory basis and were found to
not moderate the construal level × brand closeness interaction. We also explored whether Political Orientation (Jost
2003) moderated our mindset-congruency effect. The results show a significant three-way interaction with the
congruency interaction significant for more liberal respondents and not significant for more conservative
respondents, but the key spotlight analyses were non-significant (for liberal participants [-1 SD], the effect of
concreteness was negative for distant brands (*p* > .10) and positive for close brands (*p* > .13)). We further
investigated this effect using a separate replication of Study 3 (see Web Appendix W11) where all the spotlight
analyses are significant (*p* < .05).

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items for *search* versus *experience* are: "I can get all the information about this brand before

buying it" and "I can evaluate the quality of this brand before buying it". In all other respects,

this study mirrored Study 1.

Results

First, a manipulation check revealed that the *brand closeness* manipulation was

successful. A *brand closeness* × *construal level* condition ANOVA on self-brand connection

revealed only a significant main effect of brand closeness $F(1, 190) = 134.05$, $p < .001$.

Participants in the close condition perceived the brand to be closer to the self (M = 5.87) than

those in the distant condition (M = 3.30). Next, we created a *brand evaluations* composite (α =

.98) based on brand attitude (α = .97), trust (α = .89), and satisfaction (α = .97). Second, results

from detailed analyses indicate that the focal *brand closeness*, *search* versus *experience*, and

brand stereotypes variables represent independent constructs (see Web Appendix W12). Finally,

each of the three moderators were examined in separate regression analyses in which we used

PROCESS Model 3 (Hayes 2018) to regress *brand evaluations* on *construal level* (dummy

coded), *brand closeness* (dummy coded), the continuous moderator, all two-way interactions, the

three-way interaction term, and age and gender covariates.

Search versus Experience brands. Results indicated a significant three-way interaction (B =

-1.41, t(184) = -5.71, $p < .001$; $f^2 = .11$) (see Figure 1). Floodlight analysis indicated two

significant Johnson-Neyman inflection points. Specifically, the simple interaction effect of

construal level and *brand closeness* was significant and positive for any *search* score below 5.31

(B = .64, t(184) = 1.97, $p = .05$) and significant and negative for any *search* score above 6.34 (B

= -.83, t(184) = -1.97, $p = .05$). That is, while the congruency effect holds for brands containing

some level of *experience* attributes, the effect reverses for brands characterized predominantly by

search attributes. Next, we used spotlight analyses to probe the simple interaction of *construal level × brand closeness* at two levels: *experience* (-1 SD) and *search* (+1 SD). Supporting our mindset-congruency hypothesis, for *experience* brands the effect of *concreteness* was significant and positive for *close* brands (B = 1.41, t(184) = 4.58, *p* < .001) and significant and negative for *distant* brands (B = -1.02, t(184) = -3.20, *p* < .01). Thus, for *experience* brands, evaluations of *close (distant)* brands were higher when *concrete (abstract)* information was used. In contrast, for *search* brands the effect of *concreteness* was significant and negative for *close* brands (B = -.69, t(184) = -2.02, *p* < .05) and marginally significant and positive for *distant* brands (B = .61, t(184) = 1.85, *p* < .07). Thus, for *search* brands, evaluations of *close (distant)* brands were higher when *abstract (concrete)* information was used.

--Insert Figure 1 HERE--

Brand stereotypes. For *competence*, there was a significant three-way interaction (B = -.69, t(184) = -2.25, *p* < .05; f^2 = .01). Floodlight analysis indicated that the simple interaction effect of *construal level* and *brand closeness* was significant and positive for any *competence* score below 6.22 (B = .58, t(184) = 1.97, *p* = .05). That is, the mindset-congruency effect was attenuated at high levels of *competence*. Next, a spotlight analysis showed that for low-*competence* brands (-1 SD) the effect of *concreteness* was significant and negative for *distant* brands (B = -.57, t(184) = -2.31, *p* < .05) and significant and positive for *close* brands (B = .82, t(184) = 2.16, *p* < .05). Thus, *evaluations* of *close (distant*) brands were higher when *concrete (abstract)* information was used. In contrast, no significant effects were found for high-*competence* brands (+1 SD).

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For *warmth*, the results yielded a similar three-way interaction (B = -.73, t(183) = - 4.00, *p* <

.001; f^2 = .04). Floodlight analysis indicated that the simple interaction effect of *construal level*

and *brand closeness* was significant and positive for any *warmth* score below 5.23 (B = .59,

t(183) = 1.97, *p* = .05). A spotlight analysis showed that for low-*warmth* brands (-1 SD), the

effect of *concreteness* was significant and negative for *distant* brands (B = -.45, t(183) = -1.94, *p*

= .05) and significant and positive for *close* brands (B = 1.60, t(183) = 4.70, *p* < .001). In

contrast, no significant effects were found for high-*warmth* brands (+1 SD). Thus, the results

indicate that our mindset-congruency effect is effectively attenuated at high levels of either the

warmth or *competent* brand stereotype (see Web Appendix W13 for figures).

Discussion

Study 3 provides further replication of our mindset-congruency effect, identifies boundary

conditions to inform its practical application, and highlights the unique implications of search

brands, for which our effect is reversed. Specifically, our findings suggest that marketers can

enhance the success of strategies that match brand closeness with construal level by focusing on

brands *without* strongly developed brand stereotypes. Furthermore, we argue that managing

brands predominantly characterized by search attributes necessitates that marketers follow a

reversed strategy by matching close (distant) search brands with abstract (concrete) language.

Study 4

Study 2 demonstrated that the impact of the mindset-congruency effect was sufficient to

positively influence consumer spending. However, this effect was observed indirectly in the

context of a charity co-brand, using dollars donated to the charity partner as the dependent

variable. In contrast, Study 4 was conducted to increase the robustness and ecological validity of

our findings through a field study examining direct purchase behavior. Furthermore, while our

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previous studies primarily employed more subtle "how versus why" construal-based manipulations, Study 4 adopts a purely concreteness-based manipulation of construal level in order to improve the practical application of our effect. Finally, Study 3 examined how brand-based differences in the availability of brand information (i.e. search versus experience brands) and the strength with which this brand knowledge is held in memory (i.e. brand stereotypes) moderate our mindset congruency effect. In Study 4, we build on our exploration of boundary conditions by examining a brand-level moderator, *category usage rate,* that affects consumers' motivation to process brand information.

Prediction.

Category Usage Rate. We use category usage rate, capturing the amount of a product consumed by an individual in an average week, to tap the notion of category involvement and to reflect a useful segmentation variable (Dillon and Gupta 1996). Extant research has found that low involvement levels are associated with a lack of active information seeking, little motivation to compare across product attributes, and limited personal relevance of what the product has to offer (Zaichkowsky 1985). We suggest that consumers who are less involved (i.e., low-volume, light users) are unmotivated and unlikely to be sufficiently attentive to the content of a brand communication effort for the mindset-congruency effect to emerge. On the other hand, more regular and involved users should be more able and willing to attend to (and be impacted by) subtle differences in how brand information is presented. Thus, we expect that since light users are comparably less involved in the category, they will be less likely to attend to and process brand communications, mitigating any potential effect that the concreteness or abstractness of this message may have.

It may be useful to compare this prediction to Study 3, where we suggested that search

brands are characterized by information saturation, meaning consumers should pay attention to

and process construal-incongruent (versus congruent) information. Here, we propose that when

consumers are uninvolved with a product category, they will be less motivated to process *any*

brand information. Rather than flipping the mindset-congruency effect as search brands did in

Study 3, we anticipate the lack of attention associated with low involvement consumers will

eliminate the mindset-congruency effect.

Method and Procedure

One hundred fifty-eight student and community volunteers were recruited through a large

public university. Eighteen were removed, as they had not heard of the target brand prior to the

study (N = 140, 51% female, M_{age} = 22 years). In a central location on the university campus, we

set up a trade table for a well-known, high-end tea brand, TWG. Prior to completing our study,

participants had received $5.00 for taking part in an ostensibly unrelated study. Upon receiving

payment, participants were informed that TWG was promoting a new line of teas for the

upcoming season, and they were asked to stop by the trade booth as they went on their way.

TWG was selected because a pretest (N = 32) showed that it elicited considerable variance on the

focal *brand closeness* variable (M = 3.52, SD = 1.89), and that this variability was not correlated

with how positively the brand was viewed by the study population (r = -.25, *p* = .19).

Upon approaching the TWG booth, participants were greeted by a confederate acting as a

TWG employee who provided information about the company and its products. Participants

were shown an advertisement (Web Appendix W14) that invited them to *"accept our invitation*

to experience our new tea collection." They were randomly assigned to conditions that varied

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the *concreteness* of the messaging in the ad (concrete versus abstract). In the *concrete* condition,

the advertisement used more concrete language (e.g., *"allow the teabag to steep for four*

minutes—no more, no less. During this time the tea leaves open, hydrate, and infuse the cup with

the essence and aroma of tea fruit and flowers"). In the *abstract* condition the advertisement

used more abstract language (e.g., *"while the tea steeps, the ethereal essence envelops and*

soothes because of each tea's playful yet calming aromas").

After viewing the advertisement, participants were given an opportunity to purchase a

sample pack of three of the featured teas using a "pay what you will" structure. Those who opted

to purchase the product (any amount higher than $0) paid as much as they were willing for a

TWG-branded package. Importantly, all brand payment decisions were binding such that the

branded package was always provided in exchange for the indicated amount. All participants

were then asked to complete a short feedback card that captured demographic information,

category usage (i.e., *"*how many cups of tea do you drink per week*"*, continuous), and the IOS

measure of *psychological distance* (Choi and Winterich 2013) as well as perceived *similarity to*

the spokesperson (1 not at all similar – 7 very similar) and perceived *usefulness of information* (1

not at all useful – very useful)[2]. Lastly, participants were asked if they would be interested in

providing their email address to receive future communication for the TWG brand as an

additional behavior-dependent variable (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Results

Mindset-congruency effect. We first wanted to ensure that the *concreteness* manipulation did

not inadvertently affect perceptions of *psychological distance*. A one-way ANOVA verified that

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[2] Usefulness of information was examined as an alternative mechanism and found not to mediate the effect of the construal level × brand closeness interaction on brand evaluations (β = .02, 95% CI = -.03, .08). Salesperson similarity was also included as an exploratory moderator. Results are reported in Web Appendix W15.

there was no significant effect of *concreteness* on self–brand distance (F(1, 138) < 1).

To examine the mindset-congruency effect on consumer spending, we first regressed *purchase price* on *concreteness* (dummy coded), *brand closeness*, the two-way interaction term, and age and gender included as covariates. Results indicate significant main effects of *concreteness* (B = -1.91, t(134) = -2.74, *p* < .01), *brand closeness* (B = -.77, t(148) = -2.61, *p* < .05), and the two-way interaction (B = .56, t(134) = 3.10, *p* < .01; f^2 = .07). A floodlight analysis revealed that the effect of *concreteness* was significant and negative for *brand closeness* scores below 2.04 (B = -.77, t(134) = -1.98, *p* = .05) and significant and positive for *brand closeness* scores above 4.63 (B = .68, t(134) = 1.98, *p* = .05). That is, for more *distant* brands, the amount paid was at least 35% higher when the ad featured *abstract* (versus *concrete*) language, whereas for more *close* brands, the amount paid was at least 28% higher when the ad featured *concrete* (versus *abstract*) language.[3]

Boundary condition. First, PROCESS Model 3 (Hayes 2018) was used to regress *purchase price* on *concreteness* (dummy coded), brand *closeness*, *category usage rate*, all two-way interactions, the three-way interaction term, and age and gender covariates. Results reveal a significant three-way interaction (B = .10, t(130) = 2.02, *p* < .05; f^2 = .03). Floodlight analysis indicates that the simple interaction effect of *concreteness* and brand *closeness* was significant and positive for any *category usage rate* above 3.28 (B = .39, t(130) = 1.98, *p* = .05). That is, the mindset-congruency effect was attenuated for individuals with an average *category usage rate* of 3.28 cups/week and below. Next, we used spotlight analyses to test the effect of *concreteness* across *closeness* scores at two levels of *category usage*: light user (-1 SD) and heavy user (+1

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[3] A binary logistic regression yielded a similar interaction for participants' likelihood to engage with the brand via email (B = -3.93, χ^2(1) = 9.27, *p* < .01, see Web Appendix W16). Floodlight analyses indicate that the pattern of the interaction matches that of the dollars spent DV.

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SD). Supporting our mindset-congruency hypothesis, for heavy users the effect of *concreteness* was significant and negative for those who perceived the brand to be psychologically distant (B = -1.86, t(130) = -2.40, $p < .05$) and significant and positive for those who perceived the brand to be psychologically close (B = 1.47, t(130) = 2.77, $p < .01$). In contrast, no significant effects were found for light users (see Figure 2).

--Insert Figure 2 HERE--

Discussion

Study 4 was a field study designed to boost managerial relevance by showing behavioral outcomes in an ecologically valid setting. Our results suggest that our core mindset-congruency effect persists for consumer spending in a realistic and branded trade booth setting. For close (distant) consumers, the amount paid for the brand was greater, and consumers were more likely to engage with the brand when the message used concrete (abstract) language. The results shed light on a boundary condition to the observed mindset-congruency effect: category involvement. Consumers with lower category involvement (i.e. those that drink tea rarely) attend to category-related information less, regardless of their distance to the focal brand, mitigating any benefit of matching message concreteness to brand distance.

General Discussion

It is unlikely that consumers will ever care about as many brands as marketers would want, so it is imperative that marketers learn to thrive within the constraints of existing brand relationships, many of which are rather distant. Our findings suggest that marketing communications promoting such brands are more successful if they employ high-level, abstract language. Across all studies (see Table 2), we underscore that self–brand distance is a thread

weaving through many major CBR measures, including brand attachment, brand love, self–brand connection, brand commitment, and brand identification. This in turn establishes the groundwork for specific consumer-based strategies to extract value from pre-existing brand relationships using the theoretical lens of social psychological distance. We show that level of psychological distance associated with a brand relationship can trigger a favorable congruency effect when matched with the appropriate level of construal or concreteness of a marketing message, resulting in enhanced processing fluency, more favorable brand evaluations, higher donations, and more spending. We also identify several theoretical and practical moderators of our effect.

Marketing Implications

We contribute to the understanding of how marketers can better manage the full spectrum of consumer–brand relationships. It is well understood that a high level of closeness between the consumer's self and a brand is a desirable marketing outcome and an effective input to brand loyalty (Escalas and Bettman 2003). However, as the current research shows, it is not only the distance between the consumer and the brand that matters—it is the manner in which this distance interacts with how marketers speak to consumers about brands. Our mindset-congruency effect sheds light on a significantly overlooked aspect of brand relationships by demonstrating how managers can better realize value from relationships in which the brand is not close to the self.

Importantly, the flip side of this congruency effect demonstrates how marketers can better leverage close brands. We find that the use of concrete language within marketing communications results in more positive brand attitudes and increased trust, satisfaction, and spending. That is, while a high level of closeness between the consumer and the brand is beneficial, this outcome is made even more positive by tailoring the concreteness of brand

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language to match the psychological distance implied by that relationship.

Psychological distance should thus be given due consideration as a segmentation variable. For example, consider Walmart, which was listed by different respondents in several of our samples as a psychologically close or psychologically distant brand. People who exhibit a close relationship likely comprise a segment of working families who rely on Walmart's low prices to accommodate budgets. Conversely, those who relate to the brand along the lines of a distant relationship are likely younger and more brand-conscious, relying on Walmart's prices but preferring to avoid being seen using Walmart-branded products. Our results imply that Walmart can profit from both groups by leveraging its accumulated customer relationship management databases pertaining to psychographics (e.g., spending and shopping habits) and demographics (e.g., age) to customize the concreteness of their marketing messaging.

In fact, identifying segments of consumers based on their relative self–brand distance should be fairly straightforward. For example, using what consumers write on social media, market research firms or in-house research teams could easily develop real-time monitoring tools based on dictionaries that reflect relative distance and then target consumer segments accordingly. Another approach could be based on surveying consumers directly. Firms already do this prolifically with the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which is essentially a future-looking word-of-mouth metric. Like the IOS scale used in our studies, NPS is a single-item metric, but the former has advantages. For example, unlike NPS, which lacks a "strong theoretical development" (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, p. 81), IOS boasts a rich theoretical tradition, does not require transformation (in our samples it tended to be normally distributed), does not disregard the middle of the scale, and can be treated as a continuous measure. We were curious about whether NPS could be used in place of IOS and conducted a high-powered online experiment (cell sizes

~130) that failed to find anything resembling the results we demonstrate in the studies above. We

ran an additional study (cell sizes ~100) using trust instead of psychological distance and again

the results were not promising.

Importantly, the approach implied by our research involves minimal investment. For

example, in Studies 2 and 4 we found that simple changes in how information was presented in

brand communications (e.g., Molson and TWG ads) caused distant consumers to donate and

spend more than they otherwise would have and to even spend as much as close consumers. To

illustrate, the Study 4 spotlight analyses showed that distant participants spent an average of

$2.98 after viewing an ad with abstract language, whereas close participants spent an average of

$2.79 across both information types. This result may be surprising when framed in light of

marketers' enthusiasm for relationship building, but other scholars working in the construal-level

domain have found similar tangible advantages emerging from simple changes to message

framing (e.g., White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011). Compared to the resource-intensive process

of solidifying relationships, we document a comparatively low threshold for making changes that

should have positive and immediate financial impact. Of course, we are not suggesting that

marketers abandon relationship-building efforts, but different tactics may be more beneficial

with distant consumers. Future research could assess the comparative value of these two

strategies.

Our studies also identify both brand-level and segmentation moderators with relevant

implications for the application of our congruency effect. First, the recommendation implied by

our mindset-congruency effect is contingent upon the level of search versus experience attributes

that characterize the brand. While our standard congruency effect holds for brands that possess

even reasonably small levels of experience attributes (experience/search < 5.30), the effect is

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reversed for brands characterized by predominantly search attributes (experience/search > 6.34).

For high-search brands—those where consumers can reliably evaluate the brand before purchase

(e.g., clothing, jewelry, furniture)—managers should focus on aligning close (distant) search

brands with abstract (concrete) brand communications. Second, when the brand possesses a well-

developed brand stereotype (e.g., very high levels of warmth or competence), our mindset-

congruency effect is mitigated. Such stereotypes are already prominent brand-management

considerations (Bennett et al. 2019; Malone and Fiske 2013; Packard, Moore, and McFerran

2020) and extant research (e.g., Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012) suggests that only a few

exemplary brands like Coca-Cola and Campbell's ever reach high levels—according to our data,

6.22/7 on competence and 5.22/7 on warmth—where our mindset-congruency effect is unlikely

to work. It also might be noted that a few select brands reach superior levels on *both* dimensions

(Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012), but we would anticipate the same basic mitigation result:

such brands are so resolutely positioned in this "golden quadrant" (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs

2012, p. 191) that they would resist updating through the types of marketing communications

examined in this paper. We would advise brand managers that using a mindset-congruency

strategy in such a situation would be wasteful.

Additionally, consumers with lower category involvement are unlikely to demonstrate a

mindset-congruency effect. For example, when consumers report a low category usage rate (i.e.,

drink tea rarely), they attend to category-related information less, regardless of their distance to

the focal brand. Here, it is important to note that while consumers are less likely to form

connections in low-involvement product categories (e.g., Reimann and Aron 2009), they still

often do (e.g., Warrington and Shim 2000), meaning that psychological distance with a brand is

not confounded with category involvement. For example, in our Study 4 we found only a small

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correlation between the measures of category usage and self–brand distance (r = .26, *p* <. 01),

suggesting that consumers have separate sentiments about brands and categories.

Theoretical Contributions

We contribute to the marketing literature on consumer–brand relationships (Fournier 1998).

By laying out how the social psychological distance associated with a brand relationship is a core

dimension of numerous brand-relationship types, we perform a useful *phenomena-to-construct*

mapping (MacInnis et al. 2020), which allows us to develop a simplifying strategy. In contrast to

research where brand dimensions proliferate without an attendant level of clarity concerning how

to put those dimensions to optimal use, we posit that psychological distance is inherent to brand

relationships, is functionally synonymous with many concepts that scholars use to explore self–

brand linkages, and is statistically unidimensional. Furthermore, in demonstrating mindset-

congruency effects, our findings suggest that brand relationships parallel interpersonal

relationships in terms of level of psychological distance associated with the relationship partner.

Second, we contribute back to Construal Level Theory (Trope and Liberman 2010). Past

literature examining the social dimension of psychological distance has predominantly focused

on the effects of in-groups versus out-groups (e.g., Linville, Fischer, and Yoon 1996; Liviatan,

Trope, and Liberman 2008), such that in-groups are perceived as close while out-groups are

perceived as distant. In contrast, we demonstrate that the norms that constitute a given

relationship can offer subtle variations to these effects. That is, even positive, in-group

relationships can be psychologically distant if the norms that govern the relationship imply

distance (e.g., *secret affair*). Furthermore, we identify the search versus experience nature of the

brand as a boundary condition of Construal Level Theory that is unique to the marketing context.

We show that the mindset-congruency effect is overridden and reversed for high-search brands

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where, over the course of a brand relationship, consumers have reached a point of information

saturation. Thus, for high-search brands, construal-incongruent information better captures

consumer attention, leading to more favorable brand evaluations.

Third, our paper provides the first empirical application of the social dimension of

psychological distance to non-human targets. While the psychological distance of inanimate

objects can be altered along temporal, spatial, and hypothetical dimensions (e.g., Trope and

Liberman 2010), the social dimension has been applied only to human targets due to an

underlying assumption that non-human entities are not truly social. However, through our

examination of brand relationships, our insights suggest that the psychological distance of such

objects can be influenced by social concepts such as ascribed relational norms. This in turn

advances the possibility for psychological distance-based construal effects that would otherwise

not be predicted by extant literature. These effects are made possible by consumers' tendency to

anthropomorphize brands and see them akin to a relationship partner (e.g., Fournier 1998).

Future Research Directions

First, we propose a simplifying strategy that rests on a single idea: many of the somewhat

disparate, even fragmented constructs appearing in the CBR literature share a latent feature tied

to social psychological distance. Given the proliferation of brand constructs in the marketing

literature, future research may productively adopt a similar approach. That is, researchers would

benefit from taking a step back from or looking across the many measures and constructs in the

CBR literature to identify those that have unique meaning versus those that have shared

meaning, and to understand whether there are other latent lenses through which the field may

continue to consolidate and clarify. Doing so would likely improve relationship marketing

practice, make marketing spending more efficient, and reduce some of the redundancies that

seem apparent in the CBR literature.

Second, we focus primarily on brand-specific consequences of our mindset-congruency effect (i.e., evaluations, spending) across our studies, but it is possible that the effect may similarly influence aspects of consumer judgment and decision making. For example, research could build on existing self-control (Wan and Agrawal 2011) and gift-giving studies (Baskin et al. 2014), which report that construal level is associated with a preference for feasibility or desirability attributes. Thus, the closeness of a consumer's relationship with a brand may represent a way to identify and cater to consumer attribute preferences during the decision-making process, such that as close (distant) relationships evoke a low-level (high-level) mindset they should lead to a greater emphasis on feasibility (desirability) attributes.

Third, our findings suggest a nuance in social-based construal-level effects in that they may depend on the real versus fictional nature of the relationship. While extant research has shown that the priming of specific relationship norms can influence construal for fictional relationships (e.g., Aggarwal and Law 2005), we show that when the relationship is lived and experienced, effects due to perceived psychological distance appear to supersede the priming effect. Thus, future research should examine the juxtaposition of these two competing effects in order to disentangle relationship norm predictions based on real versus fictional brands.

Fourth, we find evidence to suggest that our mindset-congruency effect is effectively mitigated for brands that are strongly positioned. In Study 3 we examine this boundary condition using two fundamental brand stereotypes (i.e., warmth and competence; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012) for which the stereotype literature predicts that consumers will rely on existing beliefs rather than new information when forming object evaluations (Sherman et al. 2005). To further ground this finding in the branding literature, it would be worthwhile to examine whether

the same pattern of results extends to other brands that are superlatively positioned but on less

fundamental, non-stereotype dimensions, such as brands that are viewed as very exciting or

powerful (MacInnis and Folkes 2017; Yang and Aggarwal 2019).

Finally, although we examine a number of factors, the complexity of consumer

interactions with brands necessitates that further research explore moderating variables or

boundary conditions to our brand closeness-based congruency effect. For example, there may be

situations in which a consumer's construal mindset does not align with the traditional predictions

of construal level theory. Consider a frequent user of the Tide brand who feels that the brand is

distant from their self-concept.[4] As a result of their use of the brand (to do laundry), they tend to

think most often about more concrete aspects of using the brand (e.g., measuring out detergent;

adding to a wash). Thus, it is possible that this consumer would tend to view this distant brand in

a more concrete as opposed to abstract manner. While we address this empirically by ruling out

any moderating role of functional versus symbolic and public versus private products, additional

research should explore this potential occurrence for distant brands.

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[4] We thank the Associate Editor for this suggestion.

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Table 1: Self–Brand Distance Across a Selection of CBR Constructs

| CBR Construct (focal component)	Sources	Sample Items
Attachment-Aversion Relationship *(Brand Self-Distance)*	Park et al. 2013	I am personally connected to [personally disconnected from] the brand; The brand is very close to me [very far away] and [not] who I am.
Brand Attachment *(Brand Self-Connection)*	Park et al. 2010	To what extent is [brand] part of you and who you are? To what extent do you feel personally connected to [brand]?
Brand Commitment *(Affective Commitment)*	Fullerton 2005; Lee et al. 2007	[Brand] has a great deal of personal meaning to me; I feel a strong sense of identification with [brand]; I feel emotionally attached to [brand].
Brand Identification	Homburg et al. 2009; Einwiller et al. 2006; Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012	I strongly identify with this [brand]; I feel attached to this [brand]; Being a customer of [brand] is part of my sense of who I am.
Brand Love *(Self–Brand Integration)*	Bagozzi et al. 2017; Batra et al. 2012	My personal identity and this brand's identity match; Using this brand says something 'true' and 'deep' about who I am as a person.
Brand Relationship Quality *(Self-Connection or Self-Concept Connection)*	Aaker et al. 2004; Swaminathan et al. 2007	This brand says a lot about the kind of person I would like to be; This brand makes a statement about what is important to me in life.
Brand Self-Expression	Carroll & Ahuvia 2006	This brand symbolizes the kind of person I really am inside; The brand is an extension of my inner self.
Brand Self-Relevance	Eisingerich & Rubera 2010	[Brand] means a great deal to me; I cannot imagine life without [brand].
Ego Involvement	Beatty & Kahle 1988; Beatty et al. 1988	I can make many connections or associations between my use of [brand] and experiences in my life; The brands I use say a lot about who I am.
Inclusion of Brand in Self (IOS)	Reimann et al. 2012; Aron et al. 1992	*zipper scale*
Psychological Distance	Choi & Winterich 2013	*zipper scale*
Self–Brand Congruence *(Actual, Ideal)*	Malar et al. 2011	The personality of [brand] is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self); The personality of [brand] is a mirror image of the person I would like to be (my ideal self).
Self–Brand Connection	Escalas & Bettman 2003; Escalas 2004	I consider this brand to be 'me'; This brand reflects who I am.

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Table 2: Overview of Studies

	Sample	Construal Variable	Psychological-Distance Variable	DVs	Covariates	Moderators / Mediators
Study 1: Embedded Construal	Undergrad (N = 249)	*International Standard:* Construal manipulation embedded within brand information.	Brand relationship: *Committed* (close) vs. *Secret Affair* (distant).	Brand evaluations: Attitudes, trust, satisfaction	Age Gender	*Mediator:* Processing fluency
Replication Study: Web Appendix W7	MTurk (N = 126)	*"How vs. Why":* Construal mindset manipulation.	Brand relationship: *Committed* (close) vs. *Secret Affair* (distant).	Brand evaluations: Attitudes, trust, satisfaction	Affect Age Gender	
Study 2: Donation Study	Undergrad & community volunteers (N = 156)	*Charity co-brand:* Construal manipulation embedded within brand communications.	Measured	Donation behavior	Age Gender	
Study 3: Eliciting Close vs. Distant Brands	Undergrad (N = 201)	*International Standard:* Concreteness manipulation embedded within brand information.	Elicited brands via IOS manipulation.	Brand evaluations: Attitudes, trust, satisfaction	Age Gender	*Moderators:* Search vs. Experience Brand Stereotypes
Study 4: Field Study	Undergrad & community volunteers (N = 140)	*Trade show materials:* Concreteness manipulation embedded within brand communications.	Measured	Purchase behavior, email engagement	Age Gender	*Moderators:* Category involvement

*Study 3 also included functional/symbolic, private/public brands, and political orientation (moderators included on an exploratory basis). Study 4 also included usefulness/relevance of information (alternate mediator) and salesperson similarity (exploratory moderator).
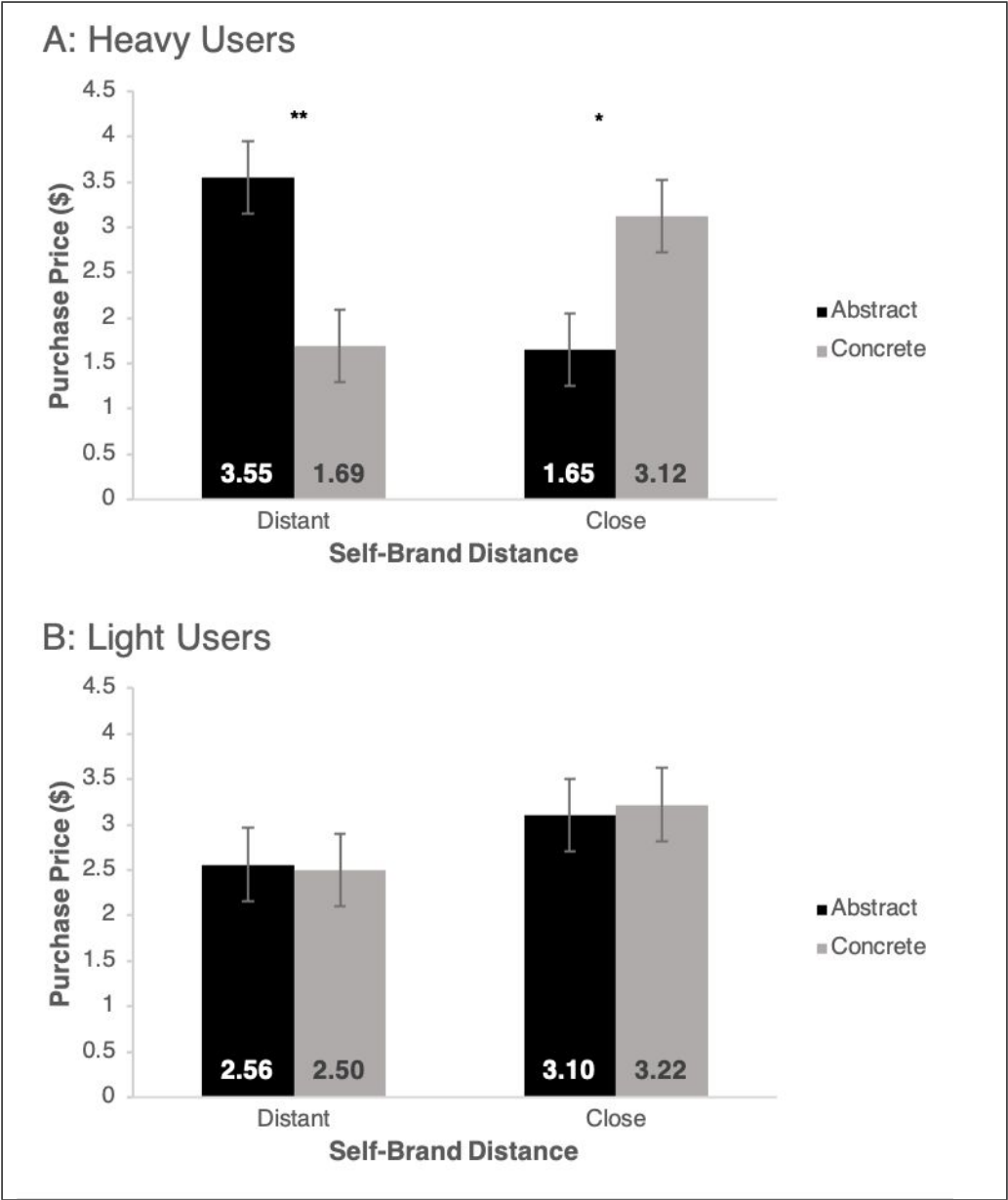
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Figure 1: Brand Relationship Type × Construal Level Effect for Search vs. Experience Brands (Study 3)
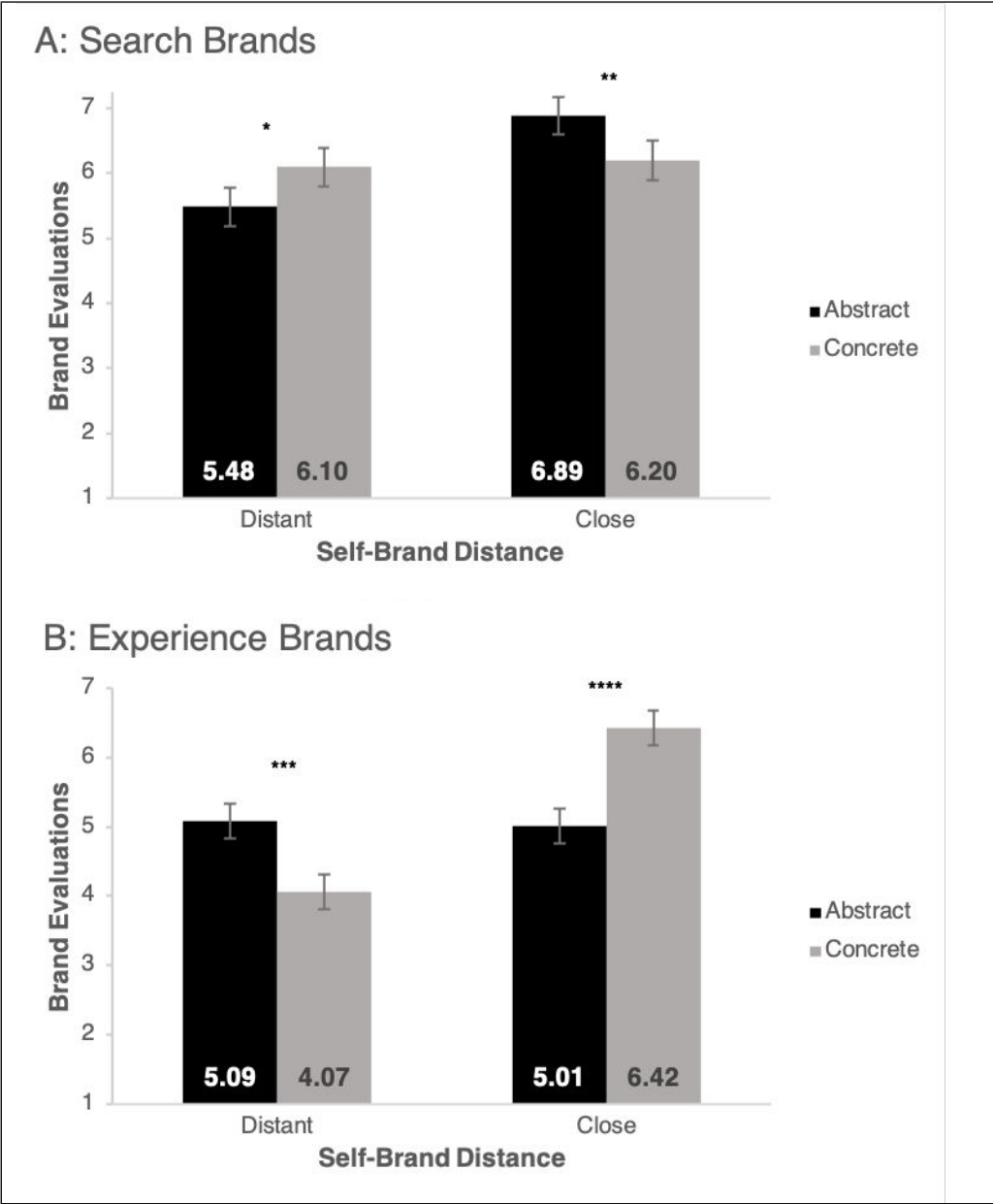
Note: Error bars = +/- 1SEs.
*$p < .07$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, ****$p < .001$

Figure 2: Brand Relationship Type × Construal Level Effect for Light vs. Heavy Users (Study 5)

A: Heavy Users

■ Abstract
■ Concrete

Purchase Price ($)

3.55   1.69   1.65   3.12

Distant   Close
Self-Brand Distance

**

*

B: Light Users

■ Abstract
■ Concrete

Purchase Price ($)

2.56   2.50   3.10   3.22

Distant   Close
Self-Brand Distance

Note: Error bars = +/- 1SEs.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

They're Just Not That Into You: How to Leverage Existing Consumer–Brand Relationships through Social Psychological Distance

Scott Connors, Mansur Khamitov, Matt Thomson, Andrew W. Perkins

Web Appendices

TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR WEB APPENDICES

APPENDIX W1: PILOT STUDY A

We conducted a pilot study to provide support for the notion that the same underlying idea that is interpretable as psychological distance (PD) pervades the major CBR measures, which in turn would support the use of one or more of these measures as manipulation checks of psychological distance in the studies below. Fundamentally, all the measures included in this pilot pertain to constructs that are explicitly measures of CBR strength. For example, attachment is a construct that describes the "strength of the bond connecting the consumer with the brand" (Park, et al. 2010, p. 1); self-brand connection is the "degree to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concept" (Escalas and Bettman 2003, p. 340) and measures "brand relationship strength" (Swaminathan et al. 2007, p. 251); and self-connection (BRQ) is a "relationship strength indicator" (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004, p. 8).

We created descriptions of 12 types of brand relationships based on previous work (Miller et al. 2012; Aggarwal and McGill 2012; Alvarez and Fournier 2012; Fournier 1998):

> *Abusive Relationship***:** Think of a brand that you use or have used which meets the following characteristics: the brand just doesn't treat you right; the brand does not seem to value you as a customer; no matter what you do to change or ignore the situation, the wrongful treatment continues just the same.
>
> *Adversarial***:** Think of a brand that you adamantly refuse to buy, support or use. You think of this brand as an opponent or rival. This is a brand that you are actively 'against' in some way.
>
> *Committed***:** Think of a brand that you are committed to in some significant and lasting way. This is a brand that you expect to be using for years to come. Although your brand has competitors, you stick only with 'your brand'.
>
> *Communal***:** Think of a brand that you go out of your way to support. This is a brand that you really care about. You have a strong desire to help this brand succeed in the marketplace.
>
> *Dependent***:** Think of a brand that you 'cannot live without'. This is a brand you feel is truly irreplaceable. It is uncomfortable for you to think about being separated from this brand for a long period, or being prevented from using it ever again.
>
> *Exchange***:** Think of a brand that you buy and use regularly and that meets the following characteristics: this brand provides a straightforward benefit for a reasonable cost; this brand simply 'does its job'… nothing less, nothing more.
>
> *Master Slave***:** Think of a brand you use on a regular basis, but are somehow 'stuck with', trapped into using or otherwise forced to use. This is a brand that you would say you use only because there is no alternative that is readily accessible and available to you. This is a brand you wish you didn't 'have to' purchase or use. You would probably not select

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this particular brand if you had other options.

*Secret Affair***:** Think of a brand whose usage you downplay or keep hidden from certain others for one reason or another. While you may use this brand regularly or often, this is a brand that you really do not want others associating with you in a significant way.

*Best Friend***:** Think of a brand that consistently gives you positive benefits and that meshes really well with your image. You might even think of this brand as a 'best friend'.

*Casual Friend***:** Think of a brand that you use occasionally or irregularly. While you have positive feelings about this brand, you don't feel particularly emotional about it. You expect and receive little from it.

*Fling***:** Think of a brand that you expect to use only for a short period of time. You might be really 'into' this brand now, but it's likely that those feelings will fade away and you'll move onto something else.

*Servant***:** Think of a brand that serves and works for you as a customer -- it that takes care of what's important to you.

Next, we randomly assigned respondents to self-select a brand that corresponded to that description. Then, respondents completed six measures: the IOS measure (i.e. zipper scale; Choi and Winterich 2013) and measures of brand self-connection (part of Park et al. 2010 attachment scale), self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman 2003), self-connection (part of Aaker et al. 2004 Brand Relationship Quality scale), two subscales of brand love (Bagozzi et al. 2017) and brand commitment (Fullerton 2005). A total of 1,305 Prolific Academic panelists completed all measures. The results reveal high correlations among all measures, ranging from .71 to .96 (p< .001):

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) IOS (Choi and Winterich 2013)	-	.73	.73	.74	.75	.71
(2) Brand Self-Connection (Park et al. 2010)	.73	-	.91	.91	.92	.86
(3) Brand Commitment (Fullerton 2005)	.73	.91	-	.90	.92	.88
(4) Brand Love subscale (Bagozzi et al. 2017)	.74	.91	.90	-	.96	.92
(5) Self-Brand Connection (Escalas and Bettman 2003)	.75	.92	.92	.96	-	.93
(6) Self-Connection (Aaker et al. 2004)	.71	.86	.88	.92	.93	-

Note: all correlations significant (p< .001)

Then we conducted two factor analyses. The first reveals a single factor:

Source	Item	Factor: Social Distance
Brand Commitment	I feel a strong sense of identification with this brand.	.91
Self-Brand Connection	This brand reflects who I am.	.90
Self-Brand Connection	I identify with this brand.	.90
Brand Love	This brand is an important part of my self-identity.	.89
Brand Attachment	I feel personally connected to this brand.	.89
Brand Attachment	This brand is part of me and who I am.	.88
Self-Brand Connection	I consider this brand to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).	.88
Self-Brand Connection	I feel a personal connection to this brand.	.87
Brand Love	My personal identity and this brand's identity match.	.87
Brand Love	This brand is an important part of how I see myself.	.87
BRQ: self-connection	This brand says a lot about the kind of person I would like to be.	.87
Brand Commitment	This brand has a great deal of personal meaning for me.	.85
Brand Love	My image and the brand's image overlap.	.84
Brand Commitment	I feel emotionally attached to this brand.	.83
Brand Love	Using this brand says something 'true' and 'deep' about who I am as a person.	.83
Self-Brand Connection	I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be.	.83
Brand Love	This brand helps me present myself to others as the person I want to be.	.82
BRQ: self-connection	This brand makes a statement about what is important to me in life.	.82
Self-Brand Connection	I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people.	.82
Brand Love	This brand makes me feel like I want to feel.	.81
BRQ: self-connection	This brand connects with the part of me that really makes me tick.	.78
Self-Brand Connection	This brand suits me well.	.78
IOS	(*zipper scale*)	.77
Brand Love	This brand makes me look like I want to look.	.77
BRQ: self-connection	Using this brand lets me be a part of a shared community of like-minded consumers.	.75
BRQ: self-connection	This brand fits well with my current stage of life.	.68

Note: Principal Axis Factoring; variance explained = 70.24%

A second factor analysis using the composite measures also reveals one factor.

Construct	Psychological Distance
Self-Brand Connection	.97
Brand Love	.96
Brand Attachment	.95
Brand Commitment	.94
BRQ: Self-Connection	.94
IOS	.83

Note: Principal Components Analysis.

Jointly these results suggest that any of these metrics can be reasonably employed as a manipulation check of PD since they all represent a synonymous underlying idea. It also suggests that PD is interpretable as a measure of CBR strength.

APPENDIX W2: PILOT STUDY B

Our proposed congruency effect is based on the assumption that various types of brand relationships are associated with differing levels of psychological distance. To verify this view, we conducted a second pilot study to explore these differences and to examine psychological distance in relation to some of the dimensions currently used to conceptualize CBR types.

721 participants recruited from Amazon's *Mechanical Turk* were randomly assigned to one of the same 12 brand relationship conditions used in Pilot Study A. Next, participants completed measures of psychological distance (1= distant, 8 = close; Choi and Winterich 2013), valence, hierarchy, and public/private consumption based on adaptations of prior work (Wittenbraker et al. 2015):

Valence	Negative – Positive; Bad – Good; Harmful – Helpful.
Hierarchy	I am the 'boss' of this brand; The brand and I are 'equal partners'; Using the brand makes me feel vulnerable; I am highly dependent upon this brand; In some ways, the brand acts 'superior' to me; I have little choice but to use this brand.
Private (vs. public)	I mostly use this brand in private; I try to hide the fact that I use this brand from other people; I am comfortable with many people knowing I use this brand.

Overall, psychological distance correlated with valence ($r = .61$, $p < .05$), but not hierarchy ($r = -.01$, $p > .10$) or private/public dimension ($r = .03$, $p > .10$):

Type of Brand Relationship	CBR Dimension		
	Valence	Hierarchy	Private
Adversarial ($M_{PD} = 1.34$)	.45*	.24	.41*
Abusive ($M_{PD} = 1.79$)	.44*	-.05	.04
Master-Slave ($M_{PD} = 2.65$)	.48*	-.04	-.06
Casual Friend ($M_{PD} = 2.76$)	.13	.04	-.17
Secret Affair ($M_{PD} = 3.41$)	.47*	.17	.09
Fling ($M_{PD} = 3.59$)	.29*	.37*	.21
Exchange ($M_{PD} = 4.12$)	.34*	.37*	.05
Committed ($M_{PD} = 4.63$)	.30*	.22	-.07
Communal ($M_{PD} = 4.83$)	-.01	.03	-.15
Servant ($M_{PD} = 4.85$)	.26*	.04	.13
Best Friend ($M_{PD} = 5.08$)	.21	.30*	.14

Dependent (M$_{PD}$ = 5.15)	.28*	.35*	-.18

p< .05; Means of Psychological Distance (PD) appear beside each type of brand relationship.

Examining the correlations between psychological distance and the three CBR dimensions within each type of brand relationship reinforces the idea that psychological distance is a unique construct. For example, there is no correlation between PD and valence within the *communal*, *best friend* and *casual friend* relationship types. Further, there is no correlation between PD and either hierarchy and private/public in a majority of the brand relationship types. As a whole, these results reduce concerns that PD is merely a proxy for one of the dimensions already identified in the literature.

The figure below was used to inform the selection of our brand types in Studies 1 and the replication study. Specifically, we selected 'secret affair' and 'committed' as proxies for more distant and less distant brand relationship types.

FIGURE 1: PD, CBR DIMENSIONS, AND TYPES
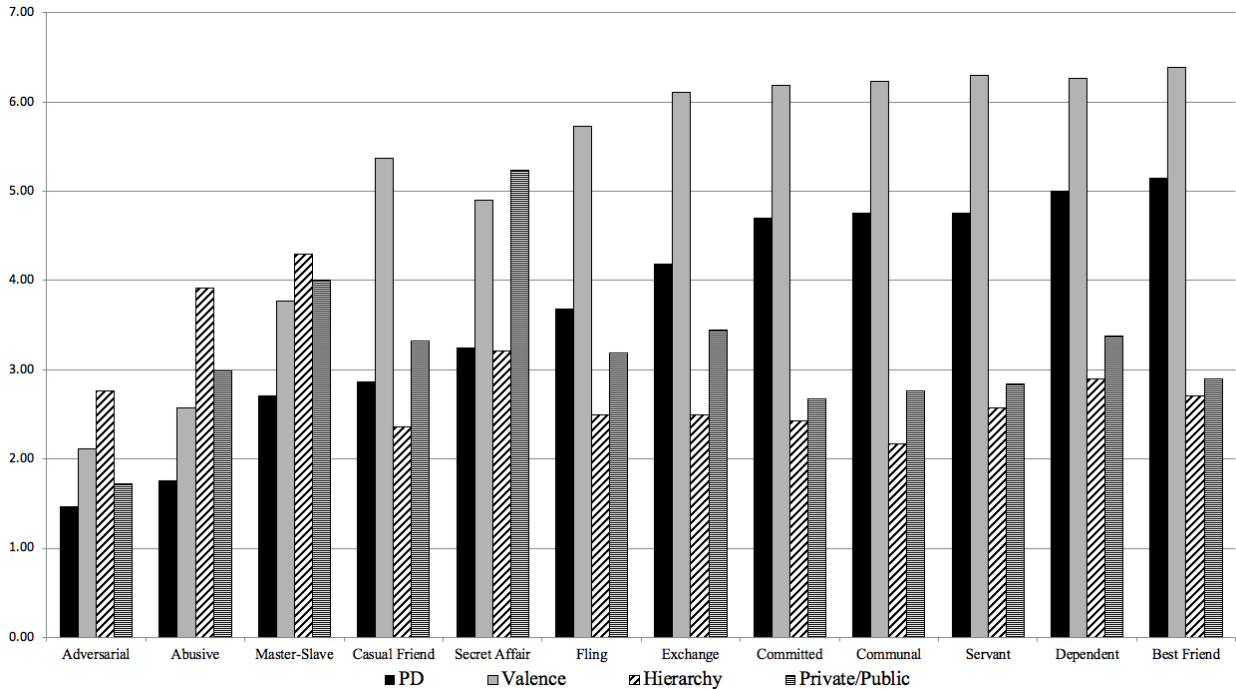
APPENDIX W3: INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SYSTEM INFORMATION (STUDIES 1, 3)

Today we will be using the *International Standard®* system to assess some of the products and brands that you use in your daily life.

The *International Standard®* system uses a unique search algorithm to compile information on products and brands. This information includes consumer reports, online customer feedback, repeat purchase figures, and professional product reviews. This information is then compiled and compared across competing products and brands to provide a relative evaluation of product quality.

The brand is given an overall score ranging for 0 (Poor) to 10 (Excellent). Each year products and brands that receive a score above 9.0 out of 10 on the *International Standard®* metric are awarded the Medal of Excellence in Product Quality.

The following *International Standard®* score was calculated for [INSERT BRAND] as of [DATE]

ISQC
9.2
RATING

Based upon the ISQC score of 9.2 [INSERT BRAND] stands to receive a [YEAR] *International Standard®* award for excellence in brand quality

APPENDIX W4: PRETESTS OF CONSTRUAL LEVEL OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION

BY CONDITION

S1: "Please read the following advertisement and then indicate how concrete/abstract you find the content to be using the scale provided:" (1: abstract, 7: concrete; adapted from Keller and Block 1997).

Replication study: Linguistic coding task adapted from Freitas et al. (2004). Two independent raters coded responses to the three stages of the "how vs. why" construal mindset elicitation task based on the types of verbs and adjectives used (see Semin and Fiedler 1988). The two coders were unaware of the hypotheses being tested. Their combined results are reliable (IRR = .86). Scores reflect mean level of response abstraction (1= concrete to 4= abstract).

Study: Manipulation (N)	Low Construal Mean (SD)	High Construal Mean (SD)	F	p
S1: International Standard (N = 90)	4.17 (1.66)	3.36 (1.70)	5.22	< .05
Replication study: How vs. Why construal mindset (N=80)	1.82 (1.09)	3.81 (.54)	110.41	< .001
S2: Molson / SPCA (N = 99)	5.27 (1.51)	4.43 (1.65)	6.93	= .01
S3: International Standard (N = 80)	5.14 (1.77)	3.63 (2.01)	12.48	< .001
S4: TWG tea (N = 79)	5.76 (1.19)	4.44 (1.79)	15.27	< .001

NOTE: In the replication study linguistic coding task higher values indicate higher levels of abstraction.

Freitas, Antonio L., Peter Gollwitzer, and Yaacov Trope (2004), "The Influence of Abstract and Concrete Mindsets on Anticipating and Guiding Others' Self-Regulatory Efforts," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40 (6), 739-52.

Semin, Gün R. and Klaus Fiedler (1988), "The Cognitive Functions of Linguistic Categories in Describing Persons: Social Cognition and Language," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, (4) p.558-568.

APPENDIX W5: PRETESTS OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS MARKETING COMMUNICATION

BY CONDITION

"What is your overall impression of this information:" (1 to 7; bad/good, unfavorable/favorable; positive/negative)

Study: Manipulation (N)	Low Construal Mean (SD)	High Construal Mean (SD)	*F*	*p*
S1: International Standard (N = 90)	4.61 (.70)	4.71 (.63)	< 1	= .46
S2: Molson / SPCA (N = 99)	4.93 (.51)	4.81 (.70)	< 1	= .34
S3: International Standard (N = 80)	4.90 (.76)	4.58 (.93)	2.77	= .10
S4: TWG tea (N = 80)	4.82 (.84)	4.72 (.84)	< 1	= .58

APPENDIX W6: MAIN MEASURES ACROSS STUDIES

<u>Processing Fluency</u>	How easy was this information to comprehend?
	How difficult was this information to understand?
	How easy was this information to process?
<u>Attitudes</u>	Unpleasant-Pleasant; Bad-Good; Negative-Positive; Unfavorable-Favorable; Dislike-Like; Useless-Useful; Not beneficial-Beneficial; Worthless-Valuable; Disagreeable-Agreeable.
<u>Trust</u>	I trust XYZ; I rely on XYZ; XYZ is an honest brand.
<u>Satisfaction</u>	How satisfied are you with XYZ? How content are you with XYZ? How happy are you with XYZ?
<u>Closeness to the Self</u>	Imagine that one of the circles at the left in each row represents your own self-definition or identity and the other circle at the right represents XYZ brand. Please indicate which case best describes the level of overlap between your own and XYZ brand.
<u>Self-Brand Connection</u>	XYZ reflects who I am; I can identify with XYZ; I feel a personal connection to XYZ; I (can) use XYZ to communicate who I am to other people; I think XYZ (could) help(s) me become the type of person I want to be; I consider XYZ to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others); XYZ suits me well.
Category Involvement	Of no concern to me – Of concern to me; Means nothing to me – Means a lot to me; Unimportant to me – Important to me; Irrelevant to me – Relevant to me.
Search vs. Experience	I can get all the information about this brand *before* buying it. I can evaluate the quality of this brand *before* buying it. I can get all the information about this brand *only after* buying it (R).
Brand Stereotypes	To what extent to the following words describe the _____ brand. Warmth: Warm, Kind, Generous, Friendly Competence: Competent, Effective, Efficient, Successful.

APPENDIX W7: REPLICATION STUDY

The replication study lends further support for the brand-relationship mindset-congruency effect using an established, direct manipulation of construal mindset. If different brand-relationship types are associated with varying levels of closeness to the self, this should result in a construal–mindset congruency effect when information about the brand is processed at the appropriate construal level. To achieve this, we elicit two types of brand relationships—"committed" and "secret affair"—based upon the results of Pilot Study B (see Appendix W2) that examined twelve brand relationships along the psychological-distance dimension in addition to other dimensions currently used to conceptualize CBRs. As committed relationships are closer to the self (Fournier 1998; Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012), we expect to see improved brand evaluations when consumers are in a low-level construal mindset. Conversely, since "secret affairs" are more distant from the self (Fournier 1998; Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012), brand evaluations should be more positive when consumers are in a high-level construal mindset.

Past research also suggests a potential alternative explanation based on varying levels of affect associated with different types of brand relationships. In this study, we address this competing account through both experimental design and statistical control. Since *committed* brand relationships are characterized by a low level of psychological distance and a high level of positive affect, an affect-based explanation would predict effects opposite those of our psychological-distance account. Positive affect has been shown to be associated with abstract, high-level thinking (e.g., Labroo and Patrick 2009), so this affect-based alternative explanation would predict that a mindset-congruency effect would result when a *committed* brand relationship is matched with a high level of construal. In contrast, we argue that *committed* relationships are psychologically close, and thus our account predicts that the mindset congruency instead occurs when it is paired with a low level of construal. We also rule out this alternative explanation by measuring affect and accounting for it statistically.

Method and Procedure

We recruited 137 participants (28.9% female, M_{age} 32.3 years) via Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for a nominal fee. Seven participants were removed for failing an attention check, three were removed due to duplicate IP addresses, and one was removed due to incomplete responses, resulting in a usable sample of 126 participants. To test the construal–mindset congruency hypothesis, participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2

(brand-relationship type: committed, secret affair) × 2 (construal mindset: low level, high level) between-subjects design.[1] Participants first completed an established brand-relationship elicitation task in which they were asked to nominate a brand that fit the given brand-relationship type: committed or secret affair (Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012; see Appendix W1). In all conditions, participants were asked to reflect upon brands that they use regularly in their daily life, so the only difference between the conditions was the nature of the brand relationship elicited.

To manipulate construal mindset, we then had participants complete a "how" versus "why" construal-level manipulation designed to alter their mindset when thinking about the brand. Repeatedly focusing on the "why" frames an object in terms of its primary purpose, and thus the high-level information is elicited. Repeatedly focusing on the "how" frames the object in terms of its process, and thus low-level, secondary information is elicited (Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004). In the low-level construal condition, participants were asked to list three examples of *how* they use the focal brand in their daily life and then elaborate on one particular situation that involved their use of the brand and to describe specifically how they use the brand. In the high-level condition, participants were asked to list three reasons *why* they use the focal brand and then elaborate on one particular situation that involved their use of the brand and to explain specifically why they use the brand. We pretested this manipulation by coding participants' responses from each step of the elicitation task based on linguistic indicators of abstraction vs. concreteness (adapted from Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004; for pretest results for the construal manipulations used in this and other studies, see Appendices W14 and W15).

After completing the construal manipulation, participants completed measures of three dependent variables: brand attitude (α = .97; Batra and Stayman 1990), trust (α = .82; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001), and satisfaction (α = .90; Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas 2000). Next, participants completed measures of age and gender, along with manipulation checks of psychological distance (IOS; Choi and Winterich 2013) and self–brand connection (α = .95;

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[1] Based on Pilot Study A we included "exchange" relationship as a mid-distance condition on an exploratory basis. However, the condition was removed as there was no significant effect of construal level for brands that were neither close nor distant. We thank the review team for this suggestion.

Escalas 2004), and a three-item measure of positive affect (α = .92; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; see Appendix W4 for measures used in all studies).

Results

Manipulation checks revealed that the brand-closeness manipulation was successful. A brand relationship type × construal level condition ANOVA on psychological distance revealed a significant main effect of brand relationship type on the IOS measure of self-brand distance $F(1, 122) = 9.11$, $p < .01$. Participants in the committed brand relationship condition perceived the brand to be closer to the self (M = 4.82) than those in the secret affair condition (M = 3.81). We also examined self-brand connection (Escalas 2004) as a manipulation check for self-brand distance. Results again show a significant main effect of brand relationship type on self-brand connection $F(1, 122) = 30.43$, $p < .001$. Participants in the committed brand relationship condition perceived a higher level of self-brand connection (M = 4.98) than those in the secret affair condition (M = 3.53).

Next, we conducted a principal components analysis on the attitude, trust, and satisfaction measures, with results revealing a single factor (all loadings > .93), allowing us to create a "brand evaluations" composite (α = .88). A MANOVA indicates that the hypothesized construal level × brand closeness interaction was significant for each of the three dependent variables individually. A 2 (brand relationship type: committed, secret affair) × 2 (construal mindset: low-level, high-level) MANOVA yielded a significant multivariate main effect of brand relationship on brand evaluations ($F(3, 120) = 11.88$, Wilk's $λ = .771$, $p < .001$). In general, brands were evaluated more positively in the committed condition than those in the secret affair condition. Importantly, the results show a significant multivariate interaction ($F(3, 120) = 4.12$, Wilk's $λ = .907$, $p < .01$) and this interaction remained significant controlling for both age and gender ($F(3, 117) = 3.93$, Wilk's $λ = .909$, $p < .01$). Follow-up ANOVAs were conducted to examine the nature of the interaction, which was significant across all three dependent variables: attitudes ($F(1, 122) = 12.00$, $p < .01$), trust ($F(1, 122) = 7.67$, $p < .01$), and satisfaction ($F(1, 122) = 8.90$, $p < .01$). Planned contrasts examining the effect of construal level at each level of brand relationship type can be found in the table below for all three dependent variables.

SUMMARY STATISTICS (REPLICATION STUDY)

Dependent Variable	Relationship Type	High Construal Level			Low Construal Level			
		M	SD	N	M	SD	N	*Sig.*
Attitudes	Committed	6.06	1.20	35	6.55	.47	33	$p = .05$
	Secret Affair	5.79	1.06	32	4.99	1.27	26	$p < .01$
Trust	Committed	5.85	1.01	35	6.37	.68	33	$p < .05$
	Secret Affair	5.25	1.18	32	4.71	1.41	26	$p = .05$
Satisfaction	Committed	6.12	1.03	35	6.61	.56	33	$p < .05$
	Secret Affair	5.81	1.04	32	5.23	1.29	26	$p < .05$

We use a composite in all remaining analyses in order to economize reporting, though the choice is bolstered by research showing strong correlations and theoretical links across these variables (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson 1999). A 2 (brand-relationship type: committed, secret affair) × 2 (construal mindset: low level, high level) ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of brand relationship on brand evaluations ($F(1, 122) = 33.31$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .21$). In general, brands were evaluated more positively in the committed condition than in the secret affair condition. Importantly, the results show a significant interaction ($F(1, 122) = 11.68$, $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .09$) that remained significant after controlling for both age and gender ($F(1, 119) = 11.04$, $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .09$), which we include as covariates in all further studies.

Next, we examined the nature of the interaction using simple effects. For committed brand relationships, evaluations were more favorable in the low-level construal condition (M = 6.54) than the high-level condition (M = 6.00; $F(1, 119) = 5.66$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .05$). Conversely, for secret-affair brand relationships, evaluations were significantly more favorable in the high-level construal condition (M = 5.59) than in the low-level condition (M = 5.02; $F(1, 119) = 5.29$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .04$).

To statistically address the affect-based alternative explanation, we included affect as a covariate. While affect yielded a significant effect on brand evaluations ($F(1, 121) = 84.02$, $p < .001$), the brand-relationship type × construal mindset interaction remains significant with this inclusion ($F(1, 121) = 7.39$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The replication study provides further support for our assertion that brand relationships can be more effectively managed when the psychological distance associated with the type of relationship is aligned with the appropriate construal mindset. For psychologically close brand relationships (e.g., committed), evaluations are more positive when the brand is thought of in a concrete, low-level manner. In contrast, for psychologically distant brand relationships (e.g., secret affair), evaluations are more positive when the brand is thought of in an abstract, high-level manner. Finally, while affect is related to construal level (Labroo and Patrick 2009), we rule out this competing account using both experimental and statistical means.

APPENDIX W8: STIMULI (STUDY 2) (DISGUISED FOR REVIEW PURPOSES)
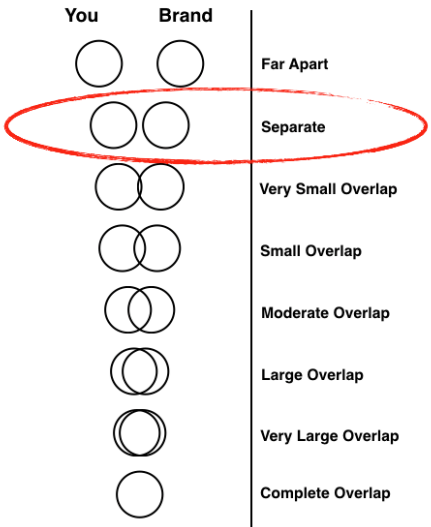*Construal manipulation: High-level, abstract condition*

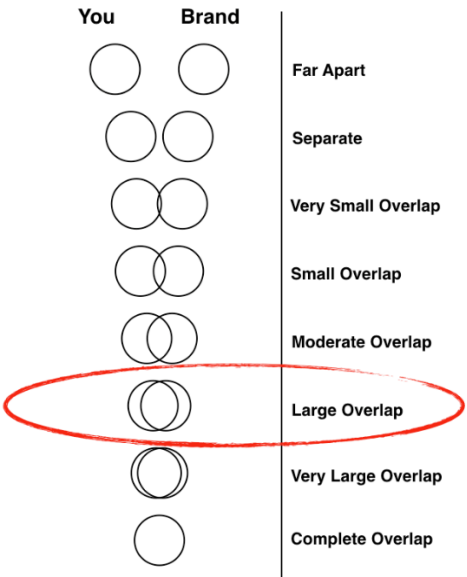
Construal manipulation: Low-level, concrete condition

APPENDIX W9: SELF-BRAND DISTANCE MANIPULATION (STUDY 3)

Distant Condition

Close Condition

APPENDIX W10: INTERNATIONAL STANDARD CONCRETENESS MANIPULATION
(STUDY 3)

Abstract Condition

The International Standard® system has reported the following as the top five factors contributing to **WHY** the [INSERT BRAND] brand earned this high quality rating:

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **because its products are reliable** (according to online consumer panels).

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **because it has high consumer loyalty**.

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **because its products are of professional quality**.

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **because of its high-performing product lines**.

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **because it maintains happy customers** (according to consumer reports).

Concrete Condition

The International Standard® system has reported the following as the top five factors contributing to **HOW** [INSERT BRAND] earned this high quality rating:

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **by creating products that perform consistently each time they are tested** (according to online consumer panels).

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **by having customers that repeatedly purchase its products**.

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **by creating products that continually surpass professional testing standards**.

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **by passing industry performance benchmarks across all of its product lines**.

- [INSERT BRAND] has earned a 2020 ISQC award **by continually meeting or exceeding the expectations of its customers** (according to consumer reports).

APPENDIX W11: THE MODERATING ROLE OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION
(STUDY 3B)

Study 3b focuses on the role of political ideology as a moderator of the mindset congruency effects. *Political Ideology* reflects the degree to which a person is relatively more conservative or liberal. The variable has potential for segmentation because it is reliably assessed with a single item measure (Jost 2006) and because it has strong behavioral implications (e.g. Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018; Fernandes and Mandel 2014). A large body of research documents that compared to conservatives, liberals process information more deliberately, are less likely to rely on heuristics in decision making and are more accepting of uncertainty and ambiguity (Jost 2017). Together, these findings suggest that among more conservative respondents, new information about familiar brands may be more likely to be avoided as it may be seen as irrelevant or possessing the potential to conflict with or create uncertainty around existing attitudes. Given that our congruency effect is predicated on consumers processing subtle differences in new information provided about a brand, it is likely these differences in information processing styles will moderate our mindset congruency effect: that is, the mindset congruency effect should persist for liberal consumers but be mitigated for conservative consumers.

Method and Procedure.

281 undergraduates (53% female, M_{age} = 18.8 years) were recruited from a large public university in exchange for partial course credit. Of those participants, 38 were removed for failing an attention check (n = 243). We used the same *International Standard* approach as Study 3. We measured Political Orientation based on Jost (2003).

Results.

A manipulation check indicates that the brand closeness manipulation was successful. A brand closeness × construal level condition ANOVA on self-brand connection revealed only a significant main effect of brand relationship type $F(1, 239) = 118.06$, $p < .001$. Participants in the close condition perceived the brand to be closer to the self (M = 5.29) than those in the distant condition (M = 3.30). Next, we created a single composite of brand evaluations (α = .97). We examined moderation using PROCESS Model 3 (Hayes 2018) to regress brand evaluations on construal level (dummy coded), brand closeness (dummy coded), the continuous moderator, all two-way interactions, the three-way interaction term, and age and gender covariates.
Political Orientation. We obtained a significant three-way interaction ($B = -.36$, $t(233) = -2.17$, $p < .05$). Floodlight analysis indicates that the simple interaction effect of construal level and brand closeness was significant and positive for any political orientation score below 4.08 ($B_{JN} = .44$, $t(233) = 1.97$, $p = .05$). That is, the mindset congruency effect was attenuated for those on the conservative side of the political spectrum. A spotlight analysis examined the interaction at two levels of political orientation: liberal (-1 SD), conservative (+1 SD). Supporting our mindset congruency hypothesis, for liberal participants the effect of concreteness was significant and negative for distant brands ($B = -.57$, $t(233) = -2.42$, $p < .05$) and significant and positive for close brands ($B = .43$, $t(233) = 2.07$, $p < .05$). Thus, for liberal participants evaluations of close (distant) brands were higher when concrete (abstract) information was used. In contrast, no significant effects were found for conservative participants.

*APPENDIX W12: INDEPENDENCE OF KEY CONSTRUCTS (STUDY 3)*

Search vs. Experience. First, a confirmatory factor analysis of the closeness manipulation check (*self-brand connection*) and the *search vs. experience* measure shows a model with a single latent (i.e., they are the same construct) fits the data worse (DF= 35, Chi-Sq.= 419.91, CMIN/DF= 12.00, CFI= .82, NFI= .81) than a model with two correlated latents (DF= 34, Chi-Sq.= 136.94, CMIN/DF= 4.03, CFI= .95, NFI= .94). We can therefore conclude that these are independent constructs. Second, the correlation between the two is not strong (r= .32, $p<$ .01). Third, a 2 (brand-relationship type: *committed*, *secret affair*) $\times$ 2 (construal level: low, high) ANOVA with search/experience as the dependent variable yields a non-significant effect of the closeness condition (M_{close} = 5.57 vs. $M_{distant}$ = 5.41, p = .43) and no other significant effects (all p's > .29). Therefore, it is unlikely that a self-selection bias or confounding with closeness explains the search/experience moderation of our mindset congruency effects.

Brand Stereotypes. The pattern of results with warmth and competence is more complex, in part because consumers tend to like and form relationships with brands they perceive as warm or competent (e.g., Proksch, Orth and Cornwell 2015; Eisend and Stokburger-Sauer 2013). A confirmatory factor analysis of self-brand connection loading onto the same latent as warmth and competence fits the data poorly (DF= 90, Chi-Sq.= 1166.06, CMIN/DF= 12.96, CFI= .67, NFI= .66), while a model that treats them as three correlated constructs fits well (DF= 87, Chi-Sq.= 163.34, CMIN/DF= 1.88, CFI= .98, NFI= .95). Thus, warmth, competence, and closeness are independent constructs. However, the correlations between self-brand connection and both warmth (r= .62, $p<$ .01) and competence (r= .49, $p<$. 01) are moderate and positive. Compared to the distant condition, brands in the close condition are viewed as warmer ($M_{distant}$= 4.24 vs. M_{close}= 5.34, p< .01) and more competent ($M_{distant}$= 5.79 vs. M_{close}= 6.35, p<. 01). This result lines up with research showing warmth and competence tend to be positively correlated (e.g., Ivens et al. 2015; Sung and Kim 2010).

APPENDIX W13: BRAND RELATIONSHIP TYPE × CONSTRUAL LEVEL EFFECT (STUDY 3)

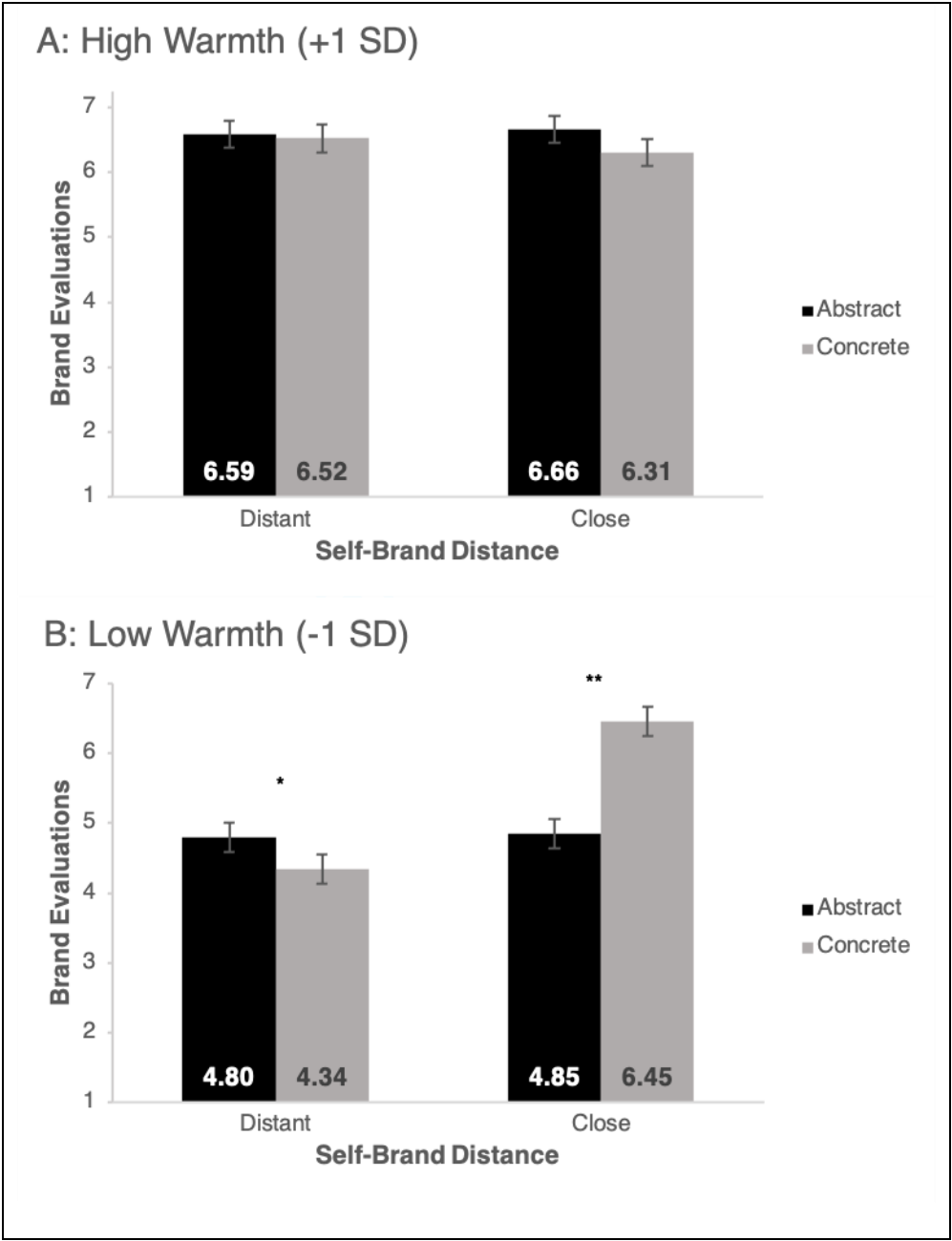FIGURE 2: INTERACTION EFFECT AS A FUNCTION OF BRAND COMPETENCE
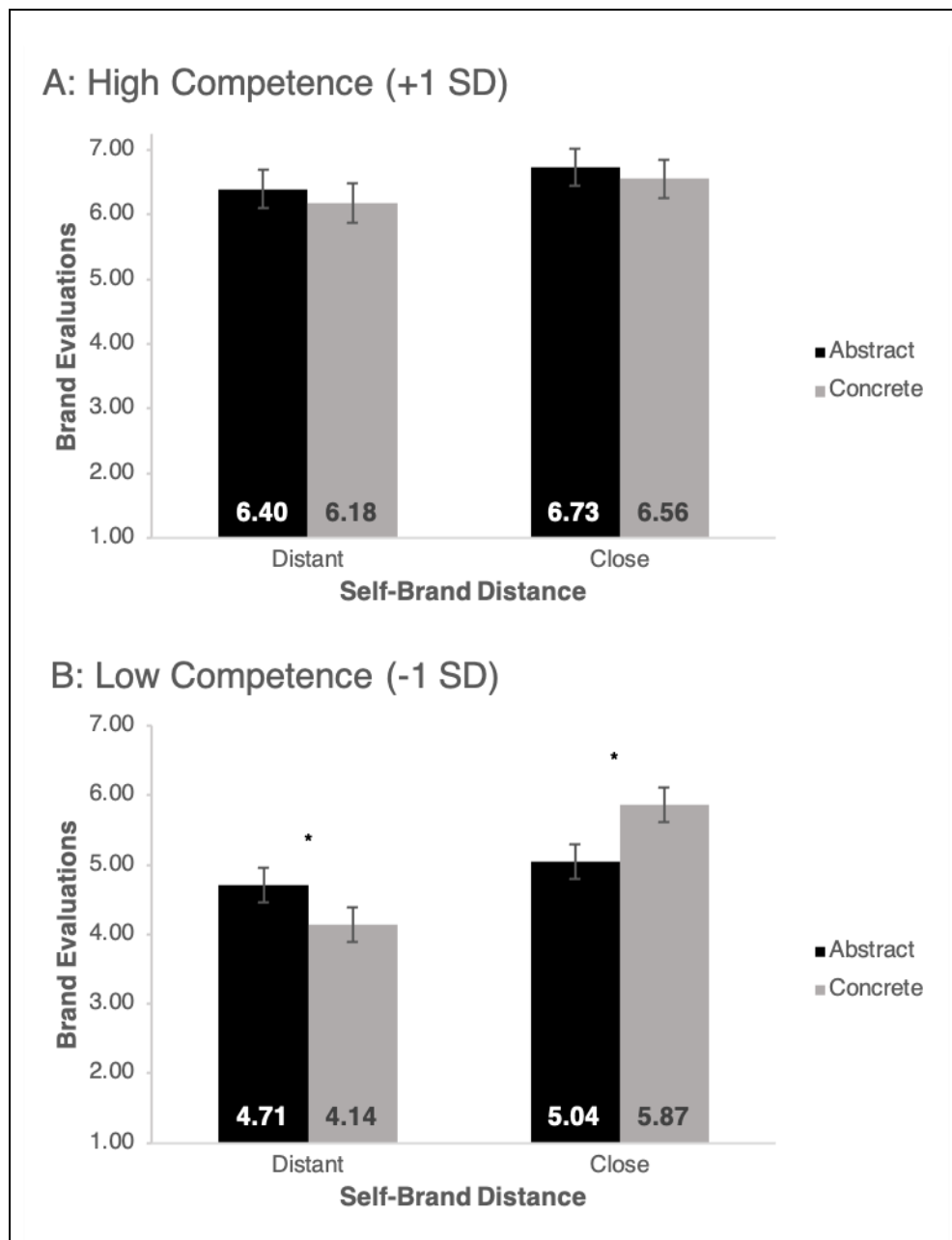
Note: Error bars = +/- 1SEs.
* *p* < .05

FIGURE 3: INTERACTION EFFECT AS A FUNCTION OF BRAND WARMTH

Note: Error bars = +/- 1SEs.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

APPENDIX W14: STIMULI (STUDY 4)

Message concreteness manipulation: Abstract condition

INVITATION

Accept our invitation to experience our new tea collection. First, purchase a sample pouch of our new teas because they are unparalleled. While the water boils, appreciate the iconic TWG packaging because it means each cup of tea will have exquisite flavor. While the tea steeps, the ethereal essence envelops and soothes because of each tea's playful yet calming aromas. Accept the invitation because one can only find this brilliance in TWG teas.

The 2020 collection.

Message concreteness manipulation: Concrete condition

INVITATION

Accept our invitation to experience our new tea collection: First, purchase a sample pouch of our new teas. Next, use a kettle to heat water to precisely 84F and remove the teabag from its iconic TWG packaging. Each packet ensures that the tea is kept free of moisture by preserving its freshness and flavor until the moment it hits the cup. Next, allow the teabag to steep for four minutes – no more, no less. During this time the tea leaves open, hydrate, and infuse the cup with the essence and aroma of tea, fruit, and flowers that one can only find in TWG teas.

The 2020 collection.

APPENDIX W15: EXPLORATORY MODERATOR SALESPERSON SIMILARITY (STUDY 4)

We regressed purchase price on concreteness (dummy coded), brand closeness, salesperson similarity, all two-way interactions, the three-way interaction term, and age and gender covariates. Results indicate a significant three-way interaction ($B = .28$, $t(130) = 2.21$, $p < .05$) and a floodlight analysis indicates that the simple interaction effect of concreteness and brand closeness was significant and positive for any salesperson similarity score above 3.17 ($B_{JN} = .40$, $t(130) = 1.98$, $p = .05$). That is, the congruency effect was attenuated when participants viewed the salesperson as dissimilar from themselves. Next, we used spotlight analyses to test the effect of concreteness across closeness scores at two levels of salesperson similarity: high (+1 SD), low (-1 SD). Supporting our mindset congruency, for high salesperson similarity the effect of concreteness was significant and negative for those that perceived the brand to be psychologically distant ($B = -1.79$, $t(130) = -2.88$, $p < .01$) and was significant and positive for those that perceive the brand to be psychologically close ($B = 1.17$, $t(130) = 2.38$, $p < .05$). In contrast, no significant effects were found when salesperson similarity was low.

APPENDIX W16: THE MINDSET CONGRUENCY EFFECT ON CONSUMER CHOICE TO

ENGAGE WITH THE BRAND VIA EMAIL (STUDY 4)

To examine the effect of the mindset congruency on consumer choice to engage with the

brand via email, we conducted a binary logistic regression of the email opt-in variable on

concreteness (dummy coded), brand closeness, the two-way interaction term, and age and gender

covariates. Results indicate a significant effect of concreteness ($B = -3.93$, $\chi^2(1) = 9.27$, $p < .01$),

brand closeness ($B = -1.13$, $\chi^2(1) = 6.29$, $p < .05$), and importantly, a significant two-way

interaction ($B = .99$, $\chi^2(1) = 10.43$, $p < .01$). A floodlight analysis reveals that the effect of

concreteness was significant and negative for brand closeness scores below 2.86 ($B_{JN} = -1.00$,

$z(134) = -1.96$, $p = .05$) and was significant and positive for brand closeness scores above 5.19

($B_{JN} = 1.13$, $z(134) = 1.96$, $p = .05$). That is, for lower levels of brand closeness the probability of

email opt-in was higher when the advertisement featured abstract (versus concrete) language,

whereas at higher levels of brand closeness the effect is reversed, and the opt-in is higher when

the advertisement featured concrete (versus abstract) language.