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 aim to move consumers from "weak or indifferent" relationships

(Fournier and Alvarez 2013, p. 253) to stronger ones in which the consumer is more attached to, 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.

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

Scott Connors, Mansur Khamitov, Matthew Thomson, and Andrew Perkins

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 that it is capable of affecting donation behaviors. Study 3 documents two brand-level factors (search vs. 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

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

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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." To underscore this point, we conducted a simple test: we recruited 323 consumers from a private research panel (M_{age} = 37 years; 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), 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 on 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 on 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 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, previous 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 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, 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. In support of 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], self-connection [Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004]) load on a single factor interpretable as psychological distance (see Pilot Study A, Web Appendix W1).

While psychological distance can vary based on 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 in-group member (psychologically close; e.g., sister) and larger for an out-group 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

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, Eisingerich, and Park (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, Huang, and Hsu (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	Einwiller et al. (2006); Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer (2009); Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen (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, Batra, and Ahuvia (2017); Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (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)	Lee and Aaker (2004); Swaminathan, Page, and Gurhan-Canli (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 and 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 and Rubera (2010)	[Brand] means a great deal to me; I cannot imagine life without [brand].
Ego involvement	Beatty, Homer, and Kahle (1988); Beatty and Kahle (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)	Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992); Reimann et al. (2012)	Zipper scale
Psychological distance	Choi and 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 (2004); Escalas and Bettman (2003)	I consider this brand to be "me"; This brand reflects who I am.

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 out-group 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 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.

Because 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 previous research should vary predictably along the social dimension of psychological distance, based on 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 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 toward the brand, secret affair brands will be perceived as more psychologically distant because 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, on the one hand, 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 language 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 toward psychologically close brand relationships will be more favorable when consumers are presented with low-level, concrete brand information, whereas evaluations and behavior directed toward 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, Habib, and Hardisty 2019; White, MacDonnell, Dahl 2011). 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 that 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 on the results of Pilot Study B (see Web Appendix W2) that examined 12 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, because "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 undergraduate students (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 on 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 on 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 toward 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 from 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 Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) zipper scale (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"; for measures used in all studies, see Web Appendix W6).

Results

Manipulation check. Manipulation checks revealed that the brand closeness manipulation was successful. A brand relationship type × construal level condition analysis of variance (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 we 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, and 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 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, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .17$). 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, $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .05$) that remained significant after controlling for both age and gender (F(1, 243) = 11.73, $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .05$), 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 = 5.66; F(1, 243) = 5.08, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .02$). On the other hand, for secret-affair relationships, brand evaluations were significantly more favorable in the high-level condition (M = 5.20) than in the low-level condition (M = 4.72; F(1, 243) = 6.74, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .03$).

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 because the indirect effect of the highest-order interaction (brand relationship type × construal level) through fluency was significant (B = .25, SE = .10, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.09, .48]). That is, the effect of construal level on brand evaluations through processing fluency is conditional on relationship type. For committed relationships, results show a significant indirect effect (B = .09, SE = .06, 95% CI = [.0004, .2224]), whereas 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 prior research associating construal level with positive affect (e.g., Labroo and Patrick 2009) has suggested 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 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 nonstudent 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 toward a brand. Following general demographic questions, participants rated their brand closeness using two measures (Choi and Winterich 2013; Escalas 2004; $\alpha = .94$). We chose the brand Molson Canadian because a pretest (N = 48) suggested that it elicited considerable variance in self–brand distance in the study population. Next, participants viewed a fundraising advertisement titled "Lend a Hand to Man's Best Friend" (Web Appendix W8) that was cobranded by Molson Canadian and the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. 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 Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals 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). Although 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 (vs. low-level) language, whereas for closer brands, donations were at least 88% higher when the ad featured low-level (vs. high-level) language.

Discussion

Study 2 measured consumers' perceived closeness to a brand 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 vs. 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. Because 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 to 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. Because 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 preexisting schemas and can lead to heightened attention, arousal, and more favorable responses (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007).

However, because 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 with 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 (Bennett et al. 2019; Malone and Fiske 2013; Packard, Moore, and McFerran 2020; Volos 2020) due to their importance in shaping consumer evaluations and behaviors (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010; e.g., Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012).

Brands that are consistently positioned over time (e.g., Samuel 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, because this new information would not change existing stereotyped beliefs about the brand.

Method and Procedure

We recruited 201 participants (59% female; $M_{age} = 38.0$ years) from Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for a nominal fee. Of those participants, 7 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 vs. 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, 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 has shown 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 ($\alpha = .95$; e.g., "warm," "friendly") and competence ($\alpha = .93$; e.g., "competent," "effective"; both four-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 ($\alpha = .85$; 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, and 7 = "very conservative"). Two sample 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 ($M = 3.28$). Next, we created a brand evaluations composite ($\alpha = .98$) based on brand attitude ($\alpha = .97$), trust ($\alpha = .89$), and satisfaction ($\alpha = .97$). 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

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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 et al. 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 nonsignificant (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 ($p < .05$).

A: Search Brands

B: Experience Brands
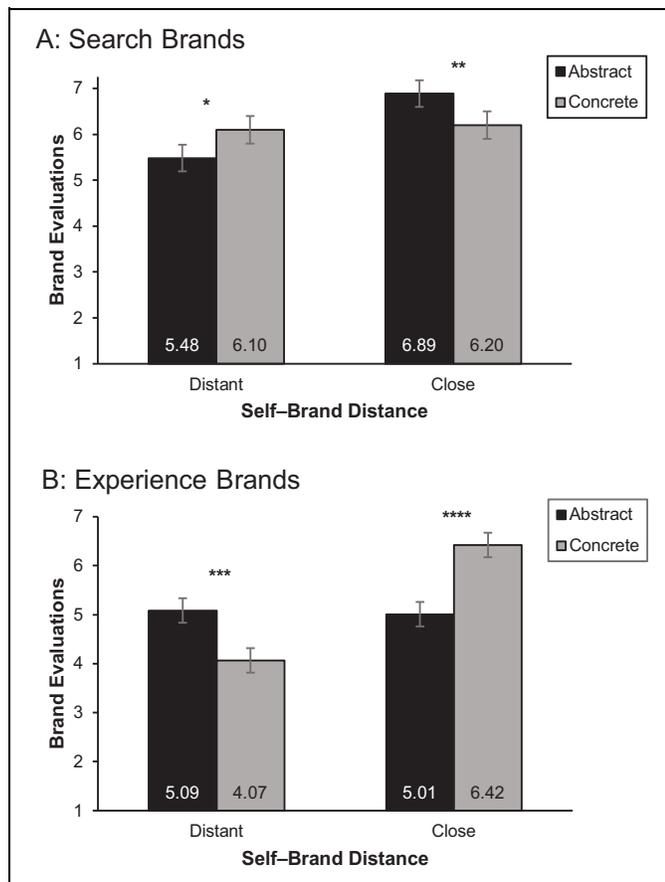
Figure 1. Brand relationship type × construal level effect for search versus experience brands (Study 3).

*$p < .07$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.
****$p < .001$.
Notes: Error bars = ± 1 SE.

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.

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).

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 (for figures, see Web Appendix W13).

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 cobrand, 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 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 vs. 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. In contrast, 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 because 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 with Study 3, in which we suggested that search brands are characterized by information saturation, meaning that consumers should pay attention to and process construal-incongruent (vs. 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 the concreteness of the messaging in the ad (concrete vs. 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," and 7 = "very similar") and perceived usefulness of information (1 = "not at all useful," and 7 = "very useful").[2] Finally, 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 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 ($B = -.77$, $t(134) = -2.61$, $p < .05$), and the two-way interaction ($B = .56$, $t(134) = 3.10$, $p < .01$; $f^2 = .07$). A floodlight

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[2] We examined usefulness of information as an alternative mechanism and found that it did not mediate the effect of the construal level × brand closeness interaction on brand evaluations ($\beta = .02$, 95% CI = $[-.03, .08]$). Salesperson similarity was also included as an exploratory moderator. Results are reported in Web Appendix W15.
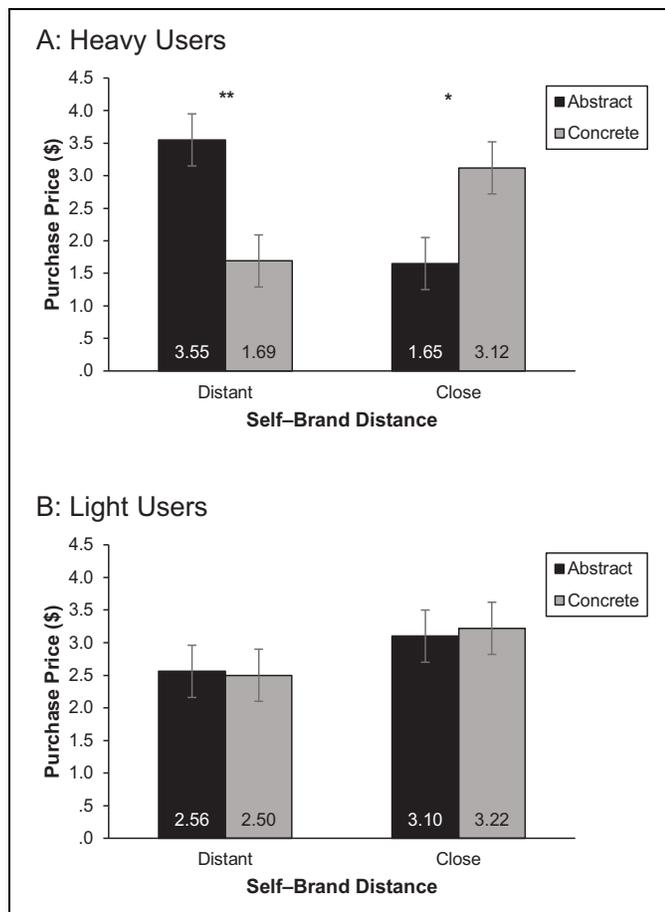
Figure 2. Brand relationship type × construal level effect for light versus heavy users (Study 4).
*p < .05.
**p < .01.
Notes: Error bars = ±1 SE.

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 4.64 (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 (vs. concrete) language, whereas for closer brands, the amount paid was at least 28% higher when the ad featured concrete (vs. 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 SD). In support of 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).

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 preexisting 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.

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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 dependent variable.

Table 2. Overview of Studies.

	Sample	Construal Variable	Psychological Distance Variable	DVs	Covariates	Moderators/ Mediators
Study 1: Embedded construal	Undergraduate students (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	Amazon's Mechanical Turk (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	Undergraduate students and community volunteers (N = 156)	Charity cobrand: construal manipulation embedded within brand communications	Measured	Donation behavior	Age, gender	
Study 3: Eliciting close vs. distant brands	Amazon's Mechanical Turk (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[a]
Study 4: Field study	Undergraduate students and community volunteers (N = 140)	Trade show materials: concreteness manipulation embedded within brand communications	Measured	Purchase behavior, email engagement	Age, gender	Moderators: category involvement[b]

[a]Study 3 also included functional/symbolic, private/public brands, and political orientation (moderators included on an exploratory basis).
[b]Study 4 also included usefulness/relevance of information (alternate mediator) and salesperson similarity (exploratory moderator).

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 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, 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 our studies. 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 (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 with 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 on 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 reversed for brands characterized by predominantly search attributes (experience/search > 6.34). For high-search brands—those that 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 such as 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 article. We would advise brand managers that using a mindset-congruency strategy in such a situation would be wasteful.

In addition, 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 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 enables us to develop a simplifying strategy. In contrast to research in which 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). Previous 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, whereas 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 for which, 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 article provides the first empirical application of the social dimension of psychological distance to nonhuman 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 nonhuman 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 could 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. Although 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, nonstereotype dimensions, such as brands that are viewed as very exciting or powerful (MacInnis and Folkes 2017; Yang and Aggarwal 2019).

Finally, although we examine several 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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