# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

**The Effect of Temporal Distance on Self-Presentation By Brand**

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This paper reveals that a brand's ability to serve as a means of presenting the consumer's actual self versus ideal self is affected by whether the consumer's mindset is temporally proximal or distant, which results in a more favorable attitude toward a symbolic brand and influences the choices consumers make.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we examine how consumers' self-presentation of self-brand connections is affected by the temporal distance. Although the research on self-brand connections and consumer-brand relationship have been well documented (MacInnis and Folkes 2017), the effect of temporal distance on self-brand connections is less well understood. We are particularly interested in the extent to which the temporal distance influences the brand's ability to serve as a means of consumers' self-presentation.

Consumers make choices based on their self-construal via the attitude object, which is influenced by their judgment of how far into the future the event will happen (Trope and Liberman 2010). Further, consumers assess the value of a symbolic brand depending on how they construe themselves with the brand hypothetically (Sung and Tinkham 2005). Thus, the interesting question is—does people's temporal distance determine his or her self-presentation?

The current paper suggests that the way the consumer perceives, comprehends, and interprets a brand's ability to serve as a means of *self-presentation by brand* (SPB) is dependent on whether the brand is to be used in a near-future event or in a distant-future event—in other words, it depends on temporal distance. As such, our research contributes to the self-brand connections literature, which emphasizes the effect of temporal distance on consumers' self-construal via the brand as a means of presenting their actual self or ideal self.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### SPB

Self-presentation relates to impression management with interactions involving close relationships, those of the same-sex, those of the opposite-sex, and strangers (Leary et al. 1994; Tice et al. 1995). Apart from verbal presentation, non-verbal expression, and purposive behaviors, people use artifactual displays for self-presentational tactics (Schneider 1981). To illustrate this point, people tend to project their desired images on cues for physical appearance (Schneider, Hastorf, and Ellsworth 1979), clothing and jewelry (O'Guinn, Tanner, and Maeng 2015), and conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption (Berger and Ward 2010).

SPB is defined as the connection of the self with a brand—the self-brand connections—in which the consumer utilizes the brand as a means of self-presentation to create a positive impression in the social world (Escalas and Bettman 2009). SPB engages the consumer's self with a brand by involving the signifying and connecting processes (Schmitt 2012). Thus, SPB enables consumers managing their self-presentation by associating with a symbolic brand, which serves as a means of presenting their actual self and ideal self (Cialdini and De Nicholas 1989).

### Effect of Temporal Distance on SPB

We adopt temporal distance because it has a significant effect on the use and effectiveness of self-presentational strategy (Carter and Sanna 2008). Temporal distance refers to the judgment of an upcoming event in terms of how far into the future the event will happen (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). It has a significant influence on people's evaluations, predictions, and choices (Trope and Liberman 2003). Wakslak et al. (2008) state that people perceive self-concept more abstractly in the temporally distant condition than in the temporally proximal condition and tend to perceive a wider form of self-concept due to broader self-reflection.

When construing near-future events, people tend to think more concretely as they are currently engaged with low-level construals and are inclined to utilize all the rich and contextualized details (Trope et al. 2007). Therefore, their psychological distance from the direct experience of reality should be closer when compared to people who are considering a distant-future event. Consequently, people in the temporally proximal condition are motivated to engage with an actual self because the event is closer to the "here and now" and therefore at a smaller psychological distance (Malär et al. 2011).

People tend to conceptualize objects more abstractly while they think about distant-future events (Trope et al. 2007). Thus, people in the temporally distant condition are likely to engage with an ideal self because they are motivated toward involvement in self-enhancement activities (Malär et al. 2011). Furthermore, self-enhancement involves moving toward one's ideal self by promoting self-presentation and exaggeration of one's strength (Alicke and Sedikides 2011). Therefore, we hypothesize:

> When considering events in the near future (vs. distant future), people exhibit more favorable attitudes and choices towards a brand that serves as a means of presenting their actual self (vs. ideal self) rather than a brand that serves as a means of presenting their ideal self (vs. actual self).

## STUDY 1A AND STUDY 1B

The goal of Study 1a was to examine whether considering a near-future (vs. distant-future) event; people tended to exhibit more favorable attitudes towards a brand that served as a means of presenting their actual self (vs. ideal self). The objective of Study 1b was to examine the effect of temporal distance on the choices of familiar brands that served as a means of presenting consumer's self.

### Study 1a

One hundred twenty adults from across the US (63 men; age 18–69, $M_{age}$ = 32) were recruited from an online panel to participate in this study in exchange for a fee. The study was a 2 (temporal distance: near vs. distant) × 2 (consumer's self: actual vs. ideal) between-subjects design. The participants were randomly assigned to a near-future or a distant-future event (Appendix). They were then asked to indicate three items on a temporal thought index (TTI, α = .91; adapted from Spassova and Lee 2013). Next, the participants were told to imagine they were currently inside in a shopping complex to search for clothing for the event. A sales assistant approached them by showing four clothing items (i.e., Tommy Hilfiger, Gant, Clarks, and Esprit) that could serve as a means of presenting their actual self or ideal self. The participants were then asked to rate a manipulation check item. We assessed brand attitude as dependent measure by asking the participants to evaluate the fashion brands using a three-item, 7-point scale (α = .88; adapted from Spassova

and Lee 2013). All the measurement items were listed in the methodological details appendix.

## Results

The results revealed successful manipulations of temporal distance ($t = 14.33$, $p < .001$) and consumer's self ($t = 5.44$, $p < .001$). Table 1 showed that the participants in the temporally proximal condition evaluated the brands more favorably when they were offered the brands that served as a means of presenting their actual self ($M_{actual} = 1.75$ vs. $M_{ideal} = 1.04$; $t(58) = 2.57$, $p < .05$), whereas the participants in the temporally distant condition evaluated the brands more favorably when they were offered the brands that served as a means of presenting their ideal self ($M_{actual} = .87$ vs. $M_{ideal} = 1.49$; $t(58) = -2.53$, $p < .05$).

## Study 1b

One hundred adults from across the US (52 men; age 18–62, $M_{age} = 34$) were recruited from an online panel to participate in this study in exchange for a fee. The participants first were told to choose three brands that could serve as a means of presenting their actual self and three brands that could serve as a means of presenting their ideal self from a pool of fifteen familiar brands (i.e., Nike, Adidas, Levi's, Calvin Klein, Michael Kors, GAP, Coach, Armani, Forever21, Gucci, Old Navy, H&M, Ralph Lauren, Zara, and Puma). They were then randomly assigned near- or distant-future travel prizes (Appendix) and were asked to indicate their TTI ($\alpha = .93$). Next, the participants were informed that they had bought the selected six

brands and they wanted to use the clothes of the brands during the trip. We assessed brand choices as dependent measure by asking the participants to allocate a percentage of how much time they would spend wearing the clothes for the trip, and the total percentage had to add up to 100%. The participants then answered a brand-checking question.

## Results and Discussion

The result revealed successful manipulation of temporal distance ($t = 11.54$, $p < .001$). All the participants scored at least 50% correct answers for the brand-checking section and the average percentage of correct answers was significantly above the 50% ($t = 26.53$, $p < .001$). The participants in the temporally proximal condition allocated a significantly higher percentage to the brands that served as a means of presenting their actual self ($M_{actual} = 54.78\%$ vs. $M_{ideal} = 45.22\%$; $t(49) = 1.98$, $p < .05$). In contrast, the participants in the temporally distant condition allocated a significantly higher percentage to the brands that served as a means of presenting their ideal self ($M_{ideal} = 55.16\%$ vs. $M_{actual} = 44.84\%$; $t(49) = 2.35$, $p < .05$).

Study 1 provides empirical evidence that the participants construed themselves via the brands to present their actual and ideal self, which then influences brand attitude and choices. However, there is no evidence whether temporal distance shifts the way people construe a brand's ability to serve as a means of self-presentation. Further, Study 1 did not cover such effect reflected on a comparison with a brand that might not relate to self-presentation. Thus, we addressed these issues in the next study.

### Table 1: Key findings from studies 1–2

| Studies & Dependent Variables | Near future | | | | Distant future | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Study 1a | Actual self M (SD) | | Ideal self M (SD) | | Actual self M (SD) | | Ideal self M (SD) | |
| Brand attitude | 1.75 (.96) | | 1.04 (1.16) | | 0.87 (1.02) | | 1.49 (.89) | |
| | $t(58) = 2.57$* | | | | $t(58) = -2.53$* | | | |
| Study 1b | Actual self M (SD) | | Ideal self M (SD) | | Actual self M (SD) | | Ideal self M (SD) | |
| Brand choices | 54.78% (17.11) | | 45.22% (17.11) | | 44.84% (15.53) | | 55.16% (15.53) | |
| | $t(49) = 1.98$* | | | | $t(49) = -2.35$* | | | |
| Study 2 | Actual self M (SD) | | Ideal self M (SD) | | Actual self M (SD) | | Ideal self M (SD) | |
| Brand attitude | 2.29 (.64) | | 1.57 (1.35) | | 1.97 (.83) | | 2.53 (.51) | |
| | $t(38) = 2.17$* | | | | $t(38) = -2.58$* | | | |
| SPB | 5.99 (.89) | | 5.38 (.91) | | 5.58 (1.13) | | 6.28 (.72) | |
| | $t(38) = 2.12$* | | | | $t(38) = -2.34$* | | | |
| Study 2 | Actual self M (SD) | Listed brand M (SD) | Ideal self M (SD) | Listed brand M (SD) | Actual self M (SD) | Listed brand M (SD) | Ideal self M (SD) | Listed brand M (SD) |
| Brand choices | 61.94% (21.71) | 38.06% (21.71) | 60.64% (26.02) | 39.37% (26.02) | 58.84% (21.97) | 41.16% (21.97) | 69.04% (18.57) | 30.96% (18.57) |
| | $t(19) = 2.46$* | | $t(19) = 1.83$ | | $t(19) = 1.80$ | | $t(19) = 4.59$** | |

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$

## STUDY 2

To minimize potential confounding effects, we used a fictitious brand to prompt the SPB. A self-customization procedure was adopted because this method enables consumers to construct a customized offer for each of the brand's attributes that best fits their preference (Valenzuela, Dhar, and Zettelmeyer 2009).

### Method

Eighty adults from across the US (46 men; age 18–64, $M_{age}$ = 30) were recruited from an online panel to participate in this study in exchange for a fee. The study was a 2 (consumer's self: actual vs. ideal) × 2 (temporal distance: near vs. distant) between-subjects design. The participants were first asked to list three fashion brands that they preferred. They have subsequently invited to an imaginary near- or distant-future event and have been asked to indicate their TTI ($\alpha$ = .93). The participants have been asked to imagine they had entered a new fashion outlet called Zeemiata. Next, they were randomly assigned to customizing Zeemiata clothing that could serve as a means of presenting their actual self or ideal self (Appendix). The participants were first asked to report on their brand attitude ($\alpha$ = .94) and three items on SPB for Zeemiata ($\alpha$ = .90; "I believe that Zeemiata could help me to present myself effectively in front of my friends," "I believe that Zeemiata could help me to present myself effectively in front of strangers," "I believe that Zeemiata could help me to give a positive impression of myself in front of the public"; ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), they were then informed that they had finalized two clothing options for the event: a customized Zeemiata clothing and clothing item produced by the first fashion brand listed by the participants. The participants were asked to allocate a percentage of their choices to both Zeemiata and the listed brands, ranging from 0% to 100%. This was followed by answering one manipulations item of consumer's self.

### Results and Discussion

The results revealed successful manipulations of temporal distance ($t$ = 14.11, $p$ < .001) and consumer's self ($t$ = 12.16, $p$ < .001). As predicted, Table 1 showed that the participants in the temporally proximal (vs. distant) condition evaluated Zeemiata more favorably and had significantly higher levels of SPB when it served as a means of presenting their actual self (vs. ideal self). Participants in the temporally near condition chose Zeemiata that served as a means of presenting their actual self ($M_{actual}$ = 61.94% vs. $M_{listed}$ = 38.06%; $t(19)$ = 2.46, $p$ < .05), but there was an insignificant difference in the participants' choice of Zeemiata that served as a means of presenting their ideal self ($M_{ideal}$ = 60.64% vs. $M_{listed}$ = 39.37%; $t(19)$ = 1.83, $ns$). In contrast, the participants in the temporally distant condition chose Zeemiata that served as a means of presenting their ideal self ($M_{ideal}$ = 69.04% vs. $M_{listed}$ = 30.96%; $t(19)$ = 4.59, $p$ < .001), but there was an insignificant difference in the participants' choice of Zeemiata that served as a means of presenting their actual self ($M_{actual}$ = 58.84% vs. $M_{listed}$ = 41.16%; $t(19)$ = 1.80, $ns$).

Study 2 provides convergent evidence for our proposed effects, people in the temporally proximal (vs. distant) condition are more likely to have favorable attitude and make choices that concur with a brand that serves as a means of presenting the consumer's actual self (vs. ideal self). We conclude that this effect has strong evidence of causality because it shows a high degree of internal validity.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our work contributes to the self-brand connections literature (Escalas and Bettman 2009), which addresses the consumer's self-construal via a brand as a means of presenting their actual self and ideal self. Current research moves the examination of self-brand connections beyond an association of brand personality and brand image (Aaker 1999; Malär et al. 2011) toward an understanding of how the symbolic attributes of a brand could be further enhanced by tapping the psychological distance that results from the shift in the temporal distance. We demonstrate fine-grained insight into how the consumers' self-construal via the brand as a means of self-presentation is affected by their thoughts about events in the near or distant future, which results in a more favorable attitude toward a symbolic brand and influences the choices consumers make.

An important remark is that we found that the consumers' choice of near- and distant-future events is not influenced by the brand's ability to serve as a means of presenting their actual self or ideal self (Appendix for an additional study). This is because consumers are more likely to wear a purchased product of a brand to a near-future event once they have received positive comments about using the brand.

This research is relevant to the practical implication of authentic branding strategy (i.e., a strategy that targets on the fit of the perception of consumer's actual self with the brand's personality) and aspirational branding strategy (i.e., a strategy that focuses on consumer's ideal self-congruence). To enhance SPB, marketing managers should consider individuals' construals of future events while emphasizing a brand personality related to actual self or aspirations, especially on product self-customization, remarketing, and retargeting.

The samples of this research were recruited from the US. Thus, it limits the universality of SPB in Eastern cultures. In the third study by Ryder, Alden, and Paulhus (2000), the results show an unrelated independent self-concept for Chinese and East Asian samples, and this could be due to the self-criticism found in Eastern cultures, wherein people are vigilant about their self-presentation and try to fulfill their roles in the eyes of their parents, family, relatives, and friends rather than trying to be self-sufficient and autonomous (Heine 2001). Further, Eastern consumers may heavily emphasize status consumption, which is significantly influenced by the power distance belief (Gao, Winterich, and Zhang 2016). Future research is needed to generalize the findings to different cultures.

## A SUMMARY OF AN ADDITIONAL STUDY

Our framework proposes that consumers tend to evaluate a brand that serves as a means of presenting their actual self (vs. ideal self) more favorably when they are thinking about events in the near future (vs. the distant future), but it does not rule out an alternative explanation for this effect. We argue that consumers are excited to wear or use purchased products in the near future once they have received positive comments from others, regardless of whether the brand serves as a means of presenting their actual or ideal self. Thus, this study set out to test the effect of a brand's ability to serve as a means of presenting the consumer's self on a choice regarding a near-future event versus a distant-future event. One hundred twenty adults from across the United States (62 men; age 18–69, $M_{age}$ = 33) were recruited to participate in this study in exchange for a fee. The participants were randomly assigned to imagine that they had bought a dark suit or gown that highly recommended by their friends and family members, which was also served as a means of presenting their actual self, their ideal self, or no specific self-concept. The participants then were required to make a decision about wearing the dark suit or gown for either a near- or distant-future event and were asked to provide a brief description of their choices.

*Results and Discussion*

The results showed that the participants wished to wear the purchased black suit or gown for a near-future event; either it served as a means for presenting their actual self (83%), their ideal self (75%), or they were in the control condition (85%; $\chi^2$ (1.40), $p > .10$). We crosschecked the written explanations with the event choice, and the given reasons were reasonable because the dark suit or gown was perfect and the participants were excited to wear it to a near-future event. In contrast, the participants who wished to keep the dark suit or gown for a distant-future event had provided various reasons that were not related to the consumer's self.

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## METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS APPENDIX

### Temporal Distance Scenarios

| | |
|---|---|
| **Study 1a and 2** | Imagine that you have been invited to a significant annual event that will be held *on next Friday* (*after six months*). Assume that you have accepted the invitation and that there is no particular dress code for the event. |
| **Study 1b** | Imagine that you have won a trip for five days and four nights to Barcelona from American Airlines, and the travel prize includes two flight tickets, accommodation, and other packages such as two nights' fine-dining and tickets to various attractions and shows. Assume that you have accepted the travel prize and have found a person to go with you *on next Friday* (*after six months*). |

### Manipulation of Self-customization

| | |
|---|---|
| **Study 2** | Imagine that you are currently in a new fashion brand store called Zeemiata; a sales assistant approach you by introducing a mobile application that can customize offerings to your preferences. Kindly use the online clothing design studio to customize a Zeemiata clothing style that best fits your *actual self* (*ideal self*) by tailoring it to a particular size, color, clothing material, and by adding personalized texts to the clothing. |

### Measurements

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Study 1a, 1b, and 2** | **Temporal Thought Index** (Spassova and Lee 2013) | This event is going to happen (1 = *soon*, 7 = *not so soon*) I will be going to this event (1 = *in a few days*, 7 = *in a few months*) I have (1 = *limited time*, 7 = *a lot of time*) to plan for this event |
| **Study 1a and 2** | **Brand Attitude** (Spassova and Lee 2013) | bad (-3) versus good (+3) unpleasant (-3) versus pleasant (+3) unfavorable (-3) versus favorable (+3) |
| **Study 1a** | **Manipulation Check of Consumer's Self** | Just now, the sales assistant was trying to present me with fashion brands that could serve as a means of presenting my (-3 = *actual self*, 3 = *ideal self*) |
| Study 2 | Manipulation Check of Consumer's Self by Self-Customization | Generally, Zeemiata could serve as a means of presenting my (-3 = *actual self*, 3 = *ideal self*) |

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