

BUYER BEWARE OF YOUR SHADOW: THE ROLE OF MOTIVATION IN
PREFERENCES FOR NAME LETTER BRANDS

by

LUKE KACHERSKY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Business in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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Adviser: Professor Sankar Sen

In this research I attempt to elucidate the process underlying implicit egotism, the unconscious tendency for people to gravitate toward things, including brand names, that resemble themselves. Prior research has not systematically examined the influence of motivation on implicit egotism, though it is sometimes required to observe the phenomenon and may have been unknowingly present in prior studies. I propose a framework that casts implicit egotism as an associative, automatic phenomenon whose influence on preferences is affected by motives related to self-concept maintenance. Thus the first aim of this research is to disentangle automaticity and motivation in implicit egotism. The proposed framework predicts that implicit egotism should be stronger when people are motivated to boost self-esteem, but the effect should reverse when people are motivated to protect self-esteem. This self-protection motive has previously been unexplored in research on implicit egotism. Thus, the second goal of this research is to explore and test this new phenomenon whereby people avoid self-resembling things, an effect I call *implicit distancing*. Finally, this research aims to identify marketer-controlled

variables in the process so that name letter branding and implicit distancing can be put to practical use.

Two experiments and a field study bear out the major tenets of the framework. Self-protection is indeed an important variable in determining the effects of self-resemblance on preference. In one experiment participants preferred brand names that resembled their own for a positive product, but preferred dissimilar names for a negative product. In a second experiment, which employed an auction scenario, participants preferred sellers with screen names similar to their own names when the transaction was low risk. But when the transaction had high risk, participants preferred sellers with screen names that were different from their own names. Importantly, these implicit distancing effects observed in both experiments reverted to implicit egotism when participants were under high cognitive load. This supports the idea that implicit egotism is fundamentally an associative, automatic phenomenon. Last, in a field study examining actual Internet auction transactions, high levels of risk lead buyers to avoid sellers with screen names similar to their own.

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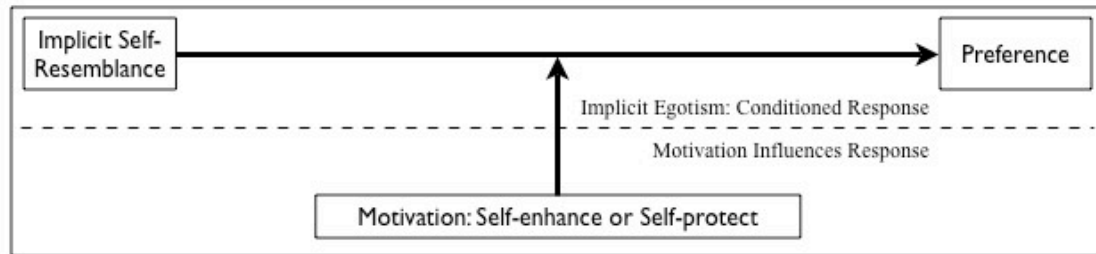
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INTRODUCTION

People love themselves, whether they know it or not (Koole, Dijksterhuis, and van Knippenberg 2001). Recently researchers have shown surprising behaviors when people are confronted with things that resemble their beloved selves. One such phenomenon is called *implicit egotism*, whereby people prefer places, professions, others, and products that resemble themselves ever so slightly, including the sharing of their name letters or birthday numbers (Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005). For example, people named Denise have a propensity to live in Denver, become dentists, marry Daniel, and eat Dove chocolate. The basic proposition underpinning implicit egotism is that people's unconscious positive self-evaluations create a similarly unconscious tendency to gravitate toward things that resemble the self. What is not entirely clear is the process by which implicit egotism works, the conditions under which implicit egotism can be expected (e.g. see Brendl et al. 2005 regarding the trouble with implicit egotism in consumption choices), and whether implicit egotism is simply a one-sided phenomenon or if an opposing effect, that people may avoid self-resembling things, is possible. Building on motivational theories of the self, I propose a framework (see figure 1) that would elucidate the current findings on implicit egotism and predict an opposite effect, coined *implicit distancing*, where people unconsciously reduce their associations with self-resembling stimuli. In short, I propose that people's preferences for self-resembling stimuli are fundamentally automatic and positive, but that the strength and direction of

the influence of self-resemblance on preferences are determined by people's motivational states.

Figure 1: Basic Theoretical Framework



Contributions

Prior research has shown that consumers' name letters influence their consumption behavior in a positive way, such that the inclusion of one's name letters in a brand name will enhance one's liking of the product (Brendl et al. 2005). However, the role of self-enhancement in this effect has not yet been entirely elucidated. This research aims to fill this gap by predicting different implicit egotism outcomes between name letter matches coincide with self-enhancement and those that do not. Additionally, research on implicit egotism has entirely ignored an equally important motive – the need to self-protect. Therefore, the present research makes further contributions by exploring the influence of self-protection on implicit egotism and by proposing the resultant opposite effect of implicit distancing.

Knowing how and why people react to self-resembling stimuli carries important implications for consumers as technology enables marketers to create customized offers for individual buyers. Prior research suggests that using consumers' name letters in communications could uniformly enhance consumers' perceptions of those communications. The proposed process of implicit egotism as essentially associative in nature, but influenced by motivational factors, suggests that the implications of earlier research are more tentative than initially thought. For one, the present framework implies that the decision to use consumers' name letters in marketing communications can have positive *or* negative effects. Further, the framework implicates not just specific conditions that can be optimized to elicit responses to self-resembling objects, but rather a class of conditions, namely, those situational and personality variables that influence the motives to self-enhance or self-protect. Such a step can help marketers take implement these effects in practice.

Research Outline

To build a framework for understanding implicit egotism and implicit distancing, this dissertation begins by reviewing the relevant literature on self-motives and implicit phenomena related to the self. In chapter 2 I will review the literature on self-concept maintenance, with a specific emphasis on self-enhancement and self-protection. Additionally, an important consumption variable, risk, is reviewed for its role in self-protection. This review provides the backdrop against which predictions will be made regarding the role of motivation in consumer responses to self-resembling stimuli. In

chapter 3 I review the literature on implicit egotism and its consumption counterpart, name letter branding. This review contrasts the surprising self-related effects researchers have found with the difficulty researchers have had in elucidating the process behind those effects. Therefore, particular attention is paid to the speculation and approximation of the process that underpins implicit egotism and name letter branding. In chapter 4, I use the literature to derive the conceptual framework and hypotheses for the present research, and in chapter 5 I report two experiments and an exploratory field study aimed at testing the framework. Chapter 6 finishes with conclusions, implications, and directions for further inquiry.

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SELF-CONCEPT MAINTENANCE

Self-concept is an important construct in consumer decision-making. Self-concept represents the interface of external events with one's thoughts, behaviors, and emotions (Leary 2007). People are actively motivated to both protect and enhance their self-concepts to maintain proper functioning in a social world. To that end, consumers purchase brands that reflect their identities (Brendl et al. 2005; Escalas and Bettman 2005), and are more easily persuaded by advertisements that are consistent with their self-concepts (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005) and by protective messages that are negatively framed (Wooten and Reed 2004). I review here the literature on self-concept maintenance, which includes the motives to enhance the self and to protect the self.

Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement is conceptualized here as the desire to improve self-concept or to increase self-esteem. Many effects have been shown to result from the need to self-enhance. Two particular classes of effects are reviewed here. First, to establish the fundamental human need for a positive self-concept I will review the literature on biased perceptions resulting from self-enhancement. Second, I will review on how this motive comes out in behaviors, particularly in the way people manage their relationships to others in the service of self-enhancement.

Biased Perceptions. Self-enhancement is often manifested in people's overly positive evaluations of themselves. Considerable research has shown that people tend to think of themselves more highly than others perceive them to be and more highly than objective criteria indicates. For example, Robins and Beer (2001) demonstrated that people tend to evaluate themselves more positively than others actually evaluate them, and more positively than they expect others to evaluate them. One manifestation of this self-enhancing bias is called the better-than-average effect, whereby people tend to rate themselves higher than the average person on positive traits. For example, Alicke et al. (1995) demonstrated that college students thought of themselves as having greater levels of positive traits than their fellow students. Similar effects have been shown to persist cross-culturally (e.g. Sedikides, Gaertner, and Vevea 2005). Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989) proposed and found evidence for the notion that self-serving biases often result from the ambiguity of the characteristics used for judgments. That is, in rating themselves on characteristics, people define the characteristic differently and, thus, use different behavioral evidence to rate themselves on the characteristic. Notably, this process is still consistent with a need to self-enhance since it involves a biased selection of evidence in support of an outcome that favors the self. In sum, these perceptual biases underscore the fundamental motive to self-enhance and its pervasiveness in human thought. Next, I turn to the topic of how this need manifests not in the mind, but in behaviors. Specifically, the self-enhancement motive has implications for how people behave with respect to the things they encounter in the world.

Self-Enhancing Management of Associations. In a seminal paper, Cialdini et al. (1976) demonstrated people's tendency to "bask in reflected glory" of their positive associations. In one study, university students had a greater tendency to wear university apparel after their football team won compared with when the team lost. In two additional studies, students used plural pronouns such as "we" more when describing a team win than when describing a team loss. The phenomenon of basking in reflected glory is apparently a way to share in another's positivity by decreasing the psychological distance between oneself and another via increased proclamations, in thoughts and actions, of the association. The results of this process include other behaviors that magnify associations with positive others, like when one points out a celebrity that was born in one's hometown.

Tesser, Millar, and Moore (1988) built their Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model based partly on the phenomenon of basking in reflected glory. In their model, affect resulting from associations with others depends on the psychological distance between the self and the other, and the importance of the evaluative domain to the self. These two processes are called the *reflection process* and the *comparison process*, respectively. As a result of the reflection process, one has greater potential to bask in another's glory as the psychological distance between the self and the other decreases. However, due to the comparison process, when another's success is in a domain that is important to the self, then one is likely to experience negative affect resulting from a social comparison threat. Thus, both processes depend on closeness and performance, but they influence self-evaluation in opposite directions. Importance of the domain determines which process is prevalent. For domains that are less important to the self, the

reflection process dominates. For more important domains, the comparison process dominates. For example, if one minor league baseball player gets promoted to the major leagues, his close friend on the minor league team might feel negative affect from comparing himself to his promoted teammate and, thus, would not bask in his teammate's reflected glory. However, another of the promoted player's friends, a salesman, is more likely to feel positive affect from the association and, thus, should bask in his friend's reflected glory.

Tesser et al.'s (1988) reasoning was fully borne out in the last of three experiments. In this study, participants completed four logical thinking tasks and four esthetic judgment tasks. Participants rated each domain, logical thinking and esthetic judgment, for personal relevance. After each task, participants were systematically told that they had done either worse or better than either a fellow participant who was either a friend or a stranger. Participants' affect was measured as the pleasantness of their facial expressions as they were receiving their feedback. Results showed that when the self was outperformed in an important domain, participants were more pleasant when a stranger outperformed them than when a friend outperformed them. This is the comparison process. Further, when the self was outperformed in a less important domain, participants were more pleasant when it was a friend that outperformed them than when a stranger outperformed them. This is the reflection process.

Self Protection

Self-protection is an equally important self-motivation. It is conceptualized here as the desire to avoid damage to the self-concept or self-esteem, and has mostly been studied in the context of psychological management of associations. Therefore, this discussion focuses primarily on increasing the psychological distance between the self and negative things associated with the self. One additional self-protective phenomenon is also explored – decision-making under risk and anticipation of regret – because it is particularly relevant to consumer behavior.

Distancing as Self-Protection. In formulating the basking in reflected glory phenomenon, Cialdini et al. (1976) suggested that an alternative corollary may exist – namely, the tendency to distance from unattractive sources. This prediction was elucidated and tested by Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford (1986), who termed the effect *cutting off reflected failure*. Participants in their study were made to be part of a group that received positive, negative, or no performance feedback. After receiving group feedback, participants gave self-reports of their desire to publicly associate with the group, and behavioral distancing was measured by allowing participants to wear a team badge after the feedback manipulation and observing in each feedback condition how many group members chose to wear the badge. Results showed that, relative to the no feedback group, the positive feedback group reported greater desire to publicly associate with the group (i.e. basked in reflected glory), while the negative feedback group reported less desire to publicly associate with the group and had fewer group members that chose

to wear a team badge. Similar mechanisms have been found since Snyder et al.'s (1986) pioneering of this effect. For example, Tesser (1988) found that people distance themselves from others who outperform them in self-important domains, because being close to such a person would diminish one's feelings about oneself.

More recently, Schimel et al. (2000) extended the cutting off reflected failure process by showing that the association can be established via a shared personality characteristic. Specifically, they show that when people fear that they will have violent outbursts, they distance themselves from those who have violent outbursts. In their studies, they demonstrate distancing via psychological associations rather than behavioral associations. That is, half of the participants were made to be fearful of their own tendency for violent outburst via a bogus personality inventory. They then indicated their perceived similarity on 20 traits to a target individual, who was described as being prone to violent outbursts himself. Those who were made to be fearful of their own violent outbursts, compared with those who were not, demonstrated greater psychological distancing by indicating lower perceived similarity to the target.

Risk and Self Protection. Of particular importance to marketers, risk perceptions have been linked to self-protection. Josephs et al. (1992) specifically linked anticipation of negative consequences to self-protective behaviors. In their studies, they manipulated this anticipation by varying participants' expectations about their knowledge of the outcomes of their decisions. In three studies, they demonstrated that when making risky decisions, expecting to know the outcome of the decision lead to self-protecting, or regret-minimizing, choices. This is because knowing the outcomes of one's decisions

poses a greater threat to self-esteem than not knowing the outcomes. In Josephs et al.'s studies, participants chose between pairs of gambles framed as either gains (e.g. \$10 sure win vs. 50% chance of winning \$20) or losses (e.g. \$10 sure loss vs. 50% chance of losing \$20). Participants chose the risky option more often in the gain condition when knowledge of the outcomes was not expected compared to when it was expected. Further, because both outcomes in the loss-framed gambles were self-damaging, no differences due to anticipation of knowing outcomes were observed; participants preferred sure (vs. risky) losses.

Josephs et al.'s (1992) results are consistent with other work in the consumption domain on the effects of anticipating negative outcomes. Simonson (1992) demonstrated that when people anticipate the negative affect associated with a bad decision outcome, they have a greater tendency to choose default options (i.e. the standard or expected options) because they diminish a sense of personal responsibility and, hence, threat to the self. Participants were told to imagine that they were buying a gift for a relative for an occasion next month. They were asked to decide whether to buy the gift during a current sale, or to wait for a potentially better sale next month. Participants in the regret condition were told that after they made their choice, they would get to see what products would be on sale next month. In the control condition 54% of respondents decided to buy during the current month, but in the regret condition 63% of respondents decided to buy during the current month. It appears that anticipating a wrong choice by waiting for a better sale caused more participants to make the default, safe choice of purchasing sooner.

A Note on Self-Concept Maintenance and Time

It is important to note that the self-concept maintenance strategy pursued with respect to an ego threat depends on the timing of the threat. Specifically, self enhancement is often employed *in response to* ego threats, while self protection is often employed *in anticipation of* ego threats (Blaine and Crocker 1993; Sommer 2001). It appears that the former is done to restore an already-damaged self-concept, while the latter occurs to prevent such damage from happening in the first place.

Conclusion

Self-motives are important in the study of human behavior. Self-enhancement refers to striving to improve the self, while self-protection refers to the desire to prevent damage to the self. Both have psychological (e.g. perceptual bias) and behavioral (e.g. choice) outcomes. Next, a surprising behavioral effect that has been posited to be at least partly a function of self-concept maintenance is reviewed.

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IMPLICIT EGOTISM

It has been demonstrated that people's implicit self-evaluations, those that are beyond conscious awareness, affect judgment and behavior. Nuttin (1985) discovered a phenomenon whereby people liked letters that were in their names more than other letters and that other people whose names did not contain those same letters did not have the same affection toward those letters. Importantly, Nuttin found that people were unaware of the basis for their judgments of the letters. This *name letter effect* is consistent with a number of other theories. Beggan (1992) demonstrated the *mere ownership effect*, showing that once people own an object they judge it more favorably than if they did not own it. Again people were not aware of the influence of ownership on their evaluations. This is further consistent with the *endowment effect*, in which people demand a higher payment to give up an object than they would be willing to pay to acquire it (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1990; Thaler 1980).

A more recent stream of research in this vein has been that on implicit egotism. Implicit egotism is the specific proposition that people's unconscious positive self-evaluations drive them to gravitate toward things that represent themselves. In a series of papers, Pelham, Jones, Mirenberg and colleagues (Jones et al. 2004; Jones, Pelham, and Mirenberg 2002; Pelham et al. 2003; Pelham, et al. 2002) have shown that implicit egotism can influence major life decisions. They have shown through studies of archival data that people have greater than chance tendencies to live in states with names that resemble their own, choose professions with names that resemble their own (Pelham et

al. 2002), live in cities and on streets that resemble their own names (Pelham et al. 2003), and choose romantic partners whose names resemble their own (Jones et al. 2004). Furthermore, they have demonstrated that implicit egotism can influence decisions through other mechanisms besides name letters. For example, they showed that people have a greater than chance tendency to live in a city when it contains a number that matches their day or month of birth (e.g. Two Rivers and February 2 (02/02); Pelham et al. 2002), and, in an experimental setting, that people liked a fellow study participant more when the other participant had an ostensibly random identification number that matched their own six-digit date of birth (Jones et al. 2004). Brendl et al. (2005) extended implicit egotism to a consumption context by showing that when product needs are moderately active, consumers have a tendency to choose brand names that resemble their own names, a phenomenon coined name letter branding. For example, they showed that when people are moderately hungry, but not sated or very hungry, study participants preferred cracker brand names that resembled their own names. Brendl et al. (2005) propose that name letter branding works because people feel good about themselves and that valence can subconsciously spill over into judgments of other objects that share some resemblance with the self.

While the majority of the research has been based on archival data, some refinement of those studies and the addition of a few experimental studies have helped rule out confounds and approximate the process underlying the implicit egotism effect. One potential confound is that the effect is explicit rather than implicit. Refining their initial study that people tend to live in locations that resemble their names, Pelham et al. (2002) refocused on name-location matches that only shared a few letters (e.g. William-

Winnipeg) rather than complete overlaps (e.g. Virginia-Virginia). It is less likely in the former example that William would base his location decision on the first few letters of his name, whereas Virginia might consciously derive pleasure from living in a state that shares her name. Despite the dilution of the manipulation, they found that people are still disproportionately likely to live in locations with names that resemble their own, lending credence to the idea that the phenomenon is indeed implicit.

Another interesting sharpening of the archival data revealed that the influence of implicit egotism is stronger for people with less common names (Jones et al. 2002). This poses an interesting moderator to the implicit egotism effect but also rules out a potential process explanation. Namely, one might have argued that people prefer stimuli that share the same letters as their names because people are exposed to their own names so frequently. In other words, it could have been argued that people like stimuli that represent the self simply due to mere exposure (Zajonc 1968). However, people with uncommon names are exposed to their own names less than people with common names. The fact that people with uncommon names exhibit stronger implicit egotism then rules out a mere exposure explanation.

Jones et al. (2004) and Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated that implicit egotism is affected by motivation. Both sets of authors showed that implicit egotism was more pronounced when study participants were asked to write something negative about themselves, a manipulation of ego-threat. Compared with participants who affirmed the ego by writing something positive about themselves, who demonstrated no implicit egotism, ego-threat participants showed more interest in an online personal ad when the ad poster had a screen name that matched the first few letters of their own surnames

(Jones et al. 2004) and had greater preference for products that had self-resembling brand names (Brendl et al. 2005). Because people try to self-enhance after damage to the self, these results indicate that implicit egotism is related to the motive to self-enhance, though its role in strengthening the effect has not been elucidated.

Despite evidence that motivation is tied to implicit egotism, it does not appear that it is a necessary condition. Brendl et al. (2005) find evidence of implicit egotism only under ego-threat in two of their four studies. But in the other two they find implicit egotism with no apparent self-enhancement motivation. In the first of these, they experimentally manipulated the need to drink by giving participants varying amounts of water after a taste test of three salty crackers. Participants in the low need to drink condition were given the most water, while those in the moderate need to drink condition were given half as much water. Those in the high need to drink condition were given no water. Following this manipulation participants drank a small amount (40 mL) of a focal beverage, and assigned it one of two brand names. The name-lettered brand choice included the first three letters of participants' own names, while the non-name-lettered brand choice included the first three letters of a fellow participant's name. They found that those in the moderate need to drink condition, but not those in the high or low need to drink conditions, preferred beverage names that began with the same three letters as their own names. It is not immediately apparent if the need to drink is related to self-enhancement, and the authors explain their results as evidence that moderate arousal, but not high or low arousal, enhances the persuasiveness or peripheral or secondary information. But even this proposition does not hold up in their final experiment. Brendl et al. (2005) asked participants to rank-order 18 different actual brands of chocolate.

Neither arousal nor the motive to self-enhance was invoked, but half of the participants were asked to trust their feelings in their rankings (*feelings condition*) while the other half were asked to carefully consider all their reasons for their preferences (*reasons condition*). Results showed a preference for name-lettered brands in the feelings condition but not in the reasons condition. This is unsurprising, however, and likely speaks more to the well-documented disruptive effects of reason-based choice (e.g. Simonson 1989, Wilson et al. 1989) than to the role of feelings or arousal in name letter branding. Nevertheless, it is not apparent that motivation was necessary, or even present, to observe implicit egotism in these experiments.

Similarly, while Jones et al. (2004) observed implicit egotism only under ego-threat in one of their experiments, ego-threat was not necessary to observe implicit egotism in another important experiment. In this experiment, Jones et al. subliminally conditioned a neutral stimulus (a number) with participants' own names. Participants were told that they were to complete a task that measured response time. Each participant sat at a computer and completed 30 trials. The trials consisted of the presentation of a row of Xs for 300 milliseconds followed by the presentation of a random letter string. Participants were told to indicate whether the string began with a vowel or consonant by pressing a key. The subliminal conditioning occurred between the presentation of Xs and the random letter string on half of the trials. On these trials after the Xs appeared, a target number appeared for 13.7 milliseconds immediately followed by the appearance of the participant's own name for 13.7 milliseconds. No participants recalled seeing their own name or any of the target numbers during this task. Following the conditioning procedure, participants rated a photograph of a woman wearing an athletic jersey.

Participants liked the woman more when the number on her jersey was the target number that had been paired with their own name. This particular experiment has a number of implications. First, it supports the notion that implicit egotism is in fact implicit, or that it occurs outside of conscious awareness. Second, it shows that implicit egotism is rooted in people's positive feelings about themselves. Third, it rules out motivation as a necessary condition for implicit egotism. Fourth, it suggests that implicit egotism may simply reflect conditioned positive associations.

The notion that implicit egotism is only an automatic, associative phenomenon was also put forth by Nelson and Simmons (2007), who showed that people with name letters associated with negative performance outcomes still gravitated toward those outcomes. This is important because these outcomes are presumably avoided at the conscious level. In baseball, a strikeout is noted as "K", and Nelson and Simmons show that batters with a K surname strike out more than other batters. In academics, grades of C and D are worse than A and B, and Nelson and Simmons show that students with C and D surnames tend to have lower grade point averages and tend to get into lesser law schools. They experimentally test these findings as well. Participants were given 10 difficult anagrams to solve, including 2 unsolvable ones. The participants were told that if they solved all 10 anagrams, then they would be entered into a raffle for a prize of more than \$100, but if they failed to solve all 10 or gave up, then they would be entered into a raffle for a prize of less than \$100. While completing the anagram task on a computer, two buttons were presented at the bottom of the screen. The *negative outcome* button read, "Click here if you cannot solve all of the anagrams. Worth **less** than \$100," while the *positive outcome* button read, "Click here if you correctly solved all of the anagrams.

Worth **more** than \$100” (Nelson and Simmons 2007, p. 1110). Each button was labeled with a letter. In a control condition, neither letter was one of the participant’s initials. In the *positive-congruent* condition, the positive outcome button was labeled with the first letter of the participant’s first name. In the *negative-congruent* condition, the negative outcome was labeled with the participant’s initial. Results showed that participants in the control and positive-congruent conditions successfully completed more anagrams than participants in the negative-congruent condition. In other words, although participants were consciously motivated to perform well, an unconscious association with the negative outcome caused negative-congruent participants to perform worse than their counterparts. The fact that the mere association overrode the conscious motivation suggests that implicit egotism is fundamentally an associative process.

All of this conflicting evidence for the role of motivation in implicit egotism leaves the underlying process still unclear. To that effect, researchers have had trouble consistently finding implicit egotism effects, which is evidenced by the fact that researchers do not observe implicit egotism without invoking self-enhancement in some experiments but not others (Jones et al. 2004, Brendl et al. 2005). Implicit egotism has been characterized as unconscious self-regulation (Jones et al. 2004), a form of narcissism (Pelham et al. 2002), transference of physiological arousal (Jones et al. 2003), and conditioned positive associations (Jones et al. 2004). Furthermore, if it is a combination of these, the relationships among these explanations have not been articulated. It is important to understand the process behind implicit egotism in order to predict when it might occur and if there are conditions under which an implicit self-resemblance will have an opposite effect. This is especially true if this stream of research

is to be employed in consumption contexts since messages can be aimed at pro-consumption (e.g. drink milk) and anti-consumption (e.g. don't smoke) behaviors. Thus, it is with these issues in mind that the proposed framework has been developed.

-4-

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

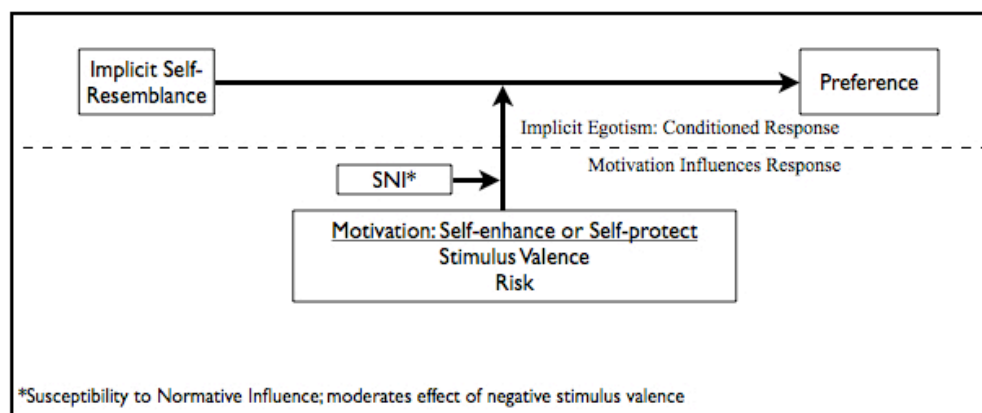
Names of brands, companies, and people, are important to marketers. For example, the sound of a brand name has been shown to influence brand evaluations (Yorkston and Menon 2004) and the semantic suggestiveness of a brand name plays a part in the way consumers develop knowledge about parent brands and their extensions (Sen 1999). Building on Pelham, Jones and colleagues' work on implicit egotism (Jones, Pelham, and Mirenberg 2002; Jones et al. 2004; Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002; Pelham et al. 2003; Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005), Brendl et al. (2005) showed that consumers evaluated products with brand names that shared a few letters with their own names more favorably than identical products with brand names that did not contain their name letters. Importantly, they found that the basis for these evaluations were implicit, meaning that they occur outside of conscious awareness.

While this finding is enticing as marketers have ever-increasing capabilities to customize offers for individual consumers (Simonson 2005), Brendl et al. (2005) caution marketers against wholesale adoption of using consumers' names as persuasion tactics due to the special circumstances that help elicit implicit egotism in consumption decisions, namely, a need to self-enhance and a moderate (vs. high or low) need for the product. Despite the evidence that these conditions strengthen implicit egotism, the process by which they do so remains unclear. In fact, the intrinsic nature of implicit egotism is still something of a mystery (Pelham et al. 2005). Recasting existing findings on implicit egotism within a framework that includes both an automatic, associative

component and a motivational component, and building on the self-concept maintenance literature, the present research tests the proposal that people have a conditioned, automatic tendency to favor things that resemble themselves, but that the strength and direction of this tendency is influenced by motives that can be marketer-controlled or identified in situational and personality variables. This framework is presented in figure 2 (next page).

The contribution of this research is threefold. First, it clarifies the roles of automatic and motivational processes in implicit egotism. Namely, I argue that implicit egotism in its most basic form is an automatic process, and that the effect is strengthened when people are motivated to self-enhance. Second, this research predicts that when people have a different motivation, the motive to self-protect, the effect of implicit egotism will reverse. In other words, people will prefer self-resembling stimuli *less than* identical, non-self-resembling stimuli. This new effect is coined *implicit distancing*. Importantly, people need sufficient mental resources to tend to such motives and presumably these resources were not available in Nelson and Simmons's (2007) studies, explaining why they did not observe this new effect. Third, this research extends Brendl et al.'s (2005) work by identifying conditions that are more easily marketer-controlled or identifiable and that can strengthen implicit egotism or implicit distancing. These conditions include the valence of the stimulus and the risk associated with the decision. Stimulus valence can create the motive to self-enhance or to self protect as people are motivated to bask in the reflected glory of their positive associations and to cut off the reflected failure of their negative associations (Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford 1986), while risk has been shown to motivate people to self-protect (Josephs et al. 1992).

Figure 2: Complete theoretical framework



Basis for the Framework: Automaticity and Motivation

The present framework proposes that implicit egotism is an automatic process, but that its influence is affected by motivation. Prior research has combined automatic and controlled processes into single frameworks. For example, Devine (1989) demonstrated that stereotyping is an automatic process given a stereotyped stimulus, but that the application of the stereotype is controllable for those who are motivated to do so. In examining self-protection motives with respect to decision-making, Larrick (1993) proposes that risk preference has both a psychophysical component and a “hotter” component based on affective and motivational variables. The psychophysical component is relatively stable across individuals and time, while situational and personality variables can cause people to depart from psychophysical patterns in order to satisfy motivational or affective needs. Thus, for example, while prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) predicts that humankind in general is risk-averse in gains and risk-seeking in losses

(i.e. a psychophysical component), it has been shown that when individuals anticipate the feelings of a bad outcome of a risky decision they are especially so (i.e. a “hotter” component; Josephs et al. 1992).

I propose that conceptualizing implicit egotism in a similar way effectively summarizes existing findings, clarifies understanding of the underlying process, and paves the way for predictions about an effect that runs counter to implicit egotism – the effect of implicit distancing. Therefore, in the following sections I propose that implicit egotism does not have its roots in self-enhancement, but that it is fundamentally an automatic, conditioned response, and that this response is strengthened by self-enhancement. Then, drawing on literature about self-protection, I predict that individuals will implicitly distance themselves from self-resembling stimuli when the stimuli has negative valence, and when making risky decisions.

Implicit Egotism: A Conditioned Response

As a whole, the experimental work on implicit egotism suggests that it is fundamentally an associative phenomenon. People’s feelings about themselves are almost uniformly positive (Koole et al. 2001). Jones et al. (2004) positively conditioned an arbitrary number by subliminally pairing experimental participants’ own names with the number. As a result, ratings of a person associated with that number were enhanced. This suggests that when something becomes associated with the self, it also becomes associated with feelings about the self. More specifically, it appears that nearly any self-relevant stimulus can activate people’s positive feelings about themselves, and that those

feelings automatically transfer to the stimulus. Furthermore, this finding that implicit egotism can occur by mere subliminal association in the absence of motivational factors falsifies any hypothesis that motivation is a necessary condition for implicit egotism to occur. Finally, it is important to note the difficulty that researchers have had in experimentally detecting implicit egotism (e.g. Brendl et al. 2005). This underscores the subtle, associative nature of implicit egotism in its most basic form. Motivation, however, has played a role in implicit egotism research. The precise nature of motivation in implicit egotism is explored next.

Motivated Implicit Egotism. It has often been necessary to activate some motivation, such as the need to boost self-esteem (Jones et al. 2004) or a physiological need such as hunger or thirst (Brendl et al. 2005) in order to observe implicit egotism in the laboratory. In light of Jones et al.'s (2004) findings that such motivations are not necessary conditions for implicit egotism, I conceptualize motivation as a moderator of the relationship between self-resemblance and preference.

There is a critical difference between the self-enhancement moderators that have been invoked in implicit egotism. Ego threat has been the most common self-enhancement manipulation used in this stream of work (Brendl et al. 2005; Jones et al. 2004). People typically respond to ego threats by enhancing the self (Greenberg and Pyszczynski 1985). In implicit egotism, ego threat has been operationalized by having experimental participants write something undesirable about themselves prior to choosing between name-lettered objects (i.e. those that share a few of the participant's name letters) and non-name-lettered objects or prior to evaluating name-lettered objects.

Though also billed as moderation via ego-threat, the other type of self-enhancement moderation employed in implicit egotism research implicates the valence of the self-resembling stimulus in the strengthening of the effect. Specifically, researchers have proposed that making major life decisions are inherently self-threatening (Pelham et al. 2005). However, in making major life decisions, such as where one will live, what career one will follow, or who one will marry, presumably many people make those choices from a positively-valenced choice set and base their decision on the expected positive, rather than negative, outcomes of their choice. For example, the top six reasons people move in the U.S. are to gain geographical benefits (United States Department of Agriculture, 1999), romantic partners are almost unerringly chosen with a blind eye toward their negative characteristics (Murray et al. 2000), and careers are chosen with an emphasis on their short-term benefits (Schoenfelder and Hantula 2003). While the notion that major life decisions are inherently ego-threatening is plausible, the valence of the stimuli seems more clearly implicated. Similarly, when Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated implicit egotism by manipulating physiological needs (hunger and thirst), they may have been manipulating the valence of the stimulus because presumably food products become more positively valenced when one is hungry, and drink products become more positively valenced when one is thirsty. Therefore, it appears that stimulus valence could play an important role in the study of implicit egotism.

Self-Concept Maintenance and the Management of Associations

Stimulus valence has implications for motivational states when the stimulus is associated with the self. Stimulus valence refers to the evaluative positivity, neutrality, or negativity of a stimulus (Reynolds, Turner, and Haslam 2000). People actively try to maintain positive feelings about themselves. One form of self-concept maintenance that has been studied extensively comes in the management of one's associations. One's associations have implications for oneself because, as a variety of theories and research findings suggest, when one perceives oneself to be similar to another on one dimension, one will tend to overestimate one's similarity on other dimensions, even if the dimensions are unrelated (e.g. representativeness; Kahneman and Tversky 1972). The ways people manage their associations in the service of self-concept maintenance were seminally articulated by Cialdini et al. (1976) and Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford (1986).

People indirectly self-enhance by strengthening their associations with positively valenced things (Cialdini et al. 1976). In the context of implicit egotism, the association is established implicitly and automatically via shared name letters. If the stimulus has positive valence, then one should be motivated to decrease the psychological distance between oneself and the stimulus, causing a greater spillover of self-feelings to the stimulus. This idea is grounded in work that has shown that people self-enhance by re-affirming symbols associated with the self (Steele 1988). In doing so, people decrease the psychological distance between themselves and self-resembling stimuli, which should cause a greater spillover of people's positive feelings about themselves to self-resembling stimuli.

The explanation that psychological distance between associatively related stimuli affects the amount of spillover is consistent with the pattern of results observed by Walther (2002). Walther had participants rate a series of white male faces from *disliked* to *liked*. Participants were then exposed to a series of pairs of faces. Embedded in this series were five exposures to a target pair of faces that the participant had independently evaluated as neutral in the first task. This was done to establish an association between the two faces. Next, another series of face pairs were presented. This time, one of the neutral faces from the target pair was paired with a face that the participant had rated as positive. Finally, participants re-rated all faces. Although only one of the target neutral faces had been paired with the positive face, both neutral faces saw an improvement in participants' liking, though the one that was directly paired saw a greater improvement.

People indirectly protect their current state of positive self-evaluations by diminishing their associations with negative things (Snyder et al. 1986). In the proposed framework, the association with the stimulus is established implicitly and automatically via unconscious self-resemblance. In an encounter with a self-resembling negative stimulus, will one's positive self-feelings then spill over to the negative stimulus, thus making it less negative? This appears to have been the case with Nelson and Simmons's (2007) finding that sharing a name letter with a negative performance outcome makes people more likely to achieve those negative outcomes, but the domains they studied – hitting a baseball, performing well in school, and solving anagrams – all tax cognitive resources. This is important because the concurrent processing of one's name letters with a negatively-valenced stimulus can be characterized as a cognitive conflict, inasmuch as the positive cognitions invoked by seeing one's own name letters should conflict with the

negative valence of the stimulus containing those name letters. In such conflicts, cognitive resources are necessary in order to resolve the conflict and continue information processing. For example, Botvinick et al. (2001) demonstrate specific brain activity when people confront stimulus-stimulus conflicts, as in a Stroop task (e.g. the word “red” presented in blue text).

In the case of shared name letters, however, this is not easily resolved because one cannot remove, deny, or inhibit one’s own name letters. Thus, psychological distance between the self and the negative self-resembling stimulus must be increased in some other way. Eidelman and Biernat (2003) demonstrated that one way people distance themselves from in-group members (i.e. when they can not deny the association) is to derogate them. Therefore, one can increase the psychological distance and diminish the self’s association with the self-resembling stimulus’s negative valence by derogating the stimulus. Importantly, this derogation would be absent if the stimulus did not share the person’s name letters. As a result, people should prefer negatively valenced self-resembling stimuli less than identical non-self-resembling stimuli.

Will this distancing be conscious or non-conscious? It has been shown that while the self-protection motive can arise non-consciously, once it is activated it triggers a higher order control system that requires cognitive resources to deal with such self conflicts (Murray et al. 2008). In other words, the resolution of the motive to self-protect requires greater cognitive resources than the activation of the motive itself. In one experiment Murray et al. (2008) showed that under high cognitive load, participants failed to tend to their motive to self protect. Further, across each of their experiments where self protection was triggered by an external stimulus, the self conflict seemed to

have occurred beyond conscious awareness, as participants did not report concerns with self protective behaviors even though they had been primed to do so and ultimately behaved accordingly.

In the present context, the non-conscious association between the self and a negative stimulus via shared name letters should subconsciously activate the motive to self-protect. In turn, the higher order control system, requiring a greater degree of cognitive resources, resolves the conflict. And, though the control system requires cognitive resources, the contents of its processes are still not likely to be consciously accessible (e.g. Wilson 2002). So while self protection and, in turn, the control system may be triggered due to self-resemblance, it is unlikely that the resemblance and its effects will be consciously noticed.

In sum an implicit similarity (i.e. one that is outside of conscious awareness), such as sharing name letters with a stimulus, creates an association between the self and the stimulus, which in turn brings a conditioned automatic positive response to the stimulus (Jones et al. 2004). Based on basking in reflected glory (Cialdini et al. 1976), when a positively valenced stimulus has an implicit resemblance to oneself, one should be motivated to self-enhance and strengthen the association by decreasing psychological distance, causing a greater spillover of self-feelings to the stimulus (Walther 2002). To the contrary, when a negative stimulus has an implicit resemblance to oneself, one should be motivated to self-protect and diminish the association by increasing psychological distance, which is accomplished via derogation. This effect is called implicit distancing. Importantly, because I propose that implicit egotism starts as an automatic, associative phenomenon, the motivated effects (i.e. strengthening of the implicit egotism when faced

with a positive stimulus and the reversal of the effect when facing a negative stimulus) should only be observed when individuals have the mental resources to tend to those motives. Based on this discussion, hypotheses 1 and 2 are derived:

H1 The availability of mental resources will moderate the influence of self-resemblance and stimulus valence on preference such that:

- a)** Without sufficient mental resources, people will prefer self-resemblance for both positively-valenced and negatively-valenced stimuli. And,
- b)** With sufficient mental resources, people will prefer self-resemblance for positively-valenced stimuli, but will prefer non-self-resemblance for negatively-valenced stimuli.

H2 Preference for self-resembling positive stimuli should be greater with sufficient mental resources than without sufficient mental resources.

Hypothesis 1 aims to test the roles of automaticity and motivation in implicit egotism and implicit distancing. If the effect is truly automatic, then taxing mental resources should prevent the motivational aspects of the framework from operating, and hence a preference for self-resemblance should emerge even for negatively valenced stimuli. But, with available processing resources, preferences for self-resemblance should diverge according to stimulus valence, with individuals preferring non-self-resemblance for negative stimuli. Finally, hypothesis 2 predicts that, with the available mental resources to tend to the motive to self-enhance, individuals should prefer self-resemblance for positive stimuli at an even greater rate than when such processing resources are not available.

Susceptibility to Normative Influence. The degree to which one is motivated to self-protect by managing one's associations with products and services should be moderated by susceptibility to normative influence. Susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) was introduced by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) and is defined as a need to maintain one's image by managing one's associations with brands or products and conforming to others' expectations in consumption choices. SNI has also been linked to self-protective behavior. Wooten and Reed (2004) asked study participants to evaluate advertisements for mouthwash. Half of the ads used a protective message, emphasizing the prevention of bad breath, while the other half portrayed an acquisitive message, emphasizing the gain of fresh breath. No differences in advertisement evaluations between high SNI and low SNI participants were observed for the acquisitive condition. But in the protective condition, high SNI participants rated the ad more favorably than low SNI participants. In light of this finding, given the requisite mental resources high SNI consumers should be especially motivated to avoid associations with negatively valenced products. More formally:

- H3** With sufficient mental resources, high SNI (vs. low SNI) people should have lower preference for self-resembling negative stimuli.

Risk: Implicit Distancing in Typical Consumption Decisions

If implicit distancing were only based on the valence of the stimulus, then it would have limited applicability in consumption decisions. Consumption stimuli are

likely to include brand names of products and sellers. Inasmuch as there are a handful of situations where consumers purchase products they perceive as negative or purchase from sellers they perceive as negative, is implicit distancing a practical matter? In this section, the influence of risk is discussed, and a related hypothesis is derived that suggests the extent to which implicit distancing is a meaningful consumption phenomenon. Moreover, if it is indeed the motive to self-protect that underpins implicit distancing, then the effect should also occur under high risk, thus providing convergent validity for the framework.

Consumers make risky decisions with respect to what they buy (Herzenstein, Posavac, and Brakus 2007), whom they buy from (Hisrich, Dornoff, and Kernan 1972), and when they buy (Simonson 1992). Risk increases as (1) the level of uncertainty about an outcome increases, and (2) the adversity of potential consequences of a decision increases (Dowling and Staelin 1994). Josephs et al. (1992) demonstrated that risky decisions can create an anticipated threat to the self, and invoking the motive to self-protect. So, when making high-risk decisions, consumers should be motivated to self-protect and therefore diminish their associations with self-resembling stimuli. Under low risk, neither self-enhancement nor self-protection should be prevalent, and so the automatic phenomenon of implicit egotism should be observed. Similar to stimulus valence, risk should non-consciously trigger self-protection, while a higher order control system, which requires cognitive resources, tends to that motive (Murray et al. 2008).

Therefore:

- H4** The availability of mental resources will moderate the influence of self-resemblance and perceived risk on preference such that:

- a) Without sufficient mental resources, people will prefer self-resemblance in both high risk and low risk situations. And,
- b) With sufficient mental resources, people will prefer self-resemblance in low risk situations, but will prefer non-self-resemblance in high risk situations.

Next, I report two experiments and an exploratory field study aimed at testing the hypothesized framework. The first experiment then aims to clarify the roles of automaticity and motivation in implicit egotism and to establish how stimulus valence strengthens implicit egotism or causes implicit distancing. The purpose of the second experiment is to further test the framework by examining how risk, which also motivates self-protection, influences preferences for self resemblance under varying levels of available mental resources. Finally, the field study explores the existence of implicit distancing as an actual consumption phenomenon by looking at the propensity of buyers and sellers on eBay to pair up with respect to screen name letters.

-5-

METHOD

STUDY 1: ASSOCIATION, VALENCE, AND MOTIVATION

This study was designed to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Like Brendl et al. (2005), participants in this study were asked to assign brand names to a series of products, and one of the name options for products of the targeted valence included the first three letters of the participant's own name. I aim to replicate and extend Jones et al.'s (2004) findings to bolster the notion that implicit egotism is essentially an associative phenomenon. This will be done by manipulating the availability of mental resources, allowing only the automatic, associative process in the framework to complete when those resources are unavailable. Therefore, when mental resources are restricted via high cognitive load, an effect of implicit egotism should be observed regardless of stimulus valence. I also aim to show the role of motivation by allowing motivated behavior via low cognitive load, and observing a stronger effect of implicit egotism for positively valenced stimuli and implicit distancing for negatively valenced stimuli.

Method

Participants and Design. Two hundred nine undergraduates at a large North Eastern university participated for either a cash payment or partial credit for an introductory marketing course. This experiment employed a 2 (cognitive load: high, low)

x 2 (stimulus valence: positive, negative) x 2 (SNI: high, low) mixed design, with cognitive load manipulated between subjects, SNI measured between subjects, and stimulus valence manipulated within subjects.

Stimuli and Pretest. Participants in the actual experiment were asked to assign brand names to a series of products. To select the target products, one of positive valence and one of negative valence, twenty-six undergraduates participated in a pretest in exchange for a cash payment. Pretest participants viewed 32 pictures of different products with no brand identifiers. Following Förster's (2004) procedure for identifying valenced products, as participants viewed each product they rated it on a seven-point scale anchored by "very negative" and "very positive", or selected an option to indicate that they did not know the product. A flat-screen television was the most positively rated product ($M = 6.24$) and was used as the positive valence target product in the main experiment. A rifle was the most negatively rated product ($M = 2.80$) and was used as the negative valence target product in the main experiment. A picture of each of these target products is available in appendix 1, shown as participants in the main experiment saw each on the computer screen.

Procedure. Participants arrived in the laboratory and were shown to an assigned desk. Waiting on a shelf at the desk was a sheet with the heading "Brand Assignment List", each of which had been customized for each participant. The "Brand Assignment List" contained two brand name choices for each of twelve products. The product types were not named on the list, but were numbered 1-12 (sample "Brand Assignment List" in

appendix 2). In verbal instructions, participants were told that the study would be primarily computer-based, but that they would use the “Brand Assignment List” when instructed. Until instructed, the sheet was to remain on the shelf above the computer. Participants then began the procedure using MediaLab software to read questions, view stimuli, and enter responses.

I first elicited participants’ SNI. Next, they were told that they would be asked to assign brand names to a series of products, similar to Brendl et al. (2005). Before they continued, however, they were asked to hold a number in memory while they completed the brand assignment task. Following Gilbert and Osborne (1989), participants in the high cognitive load condition were asked to hold an eight-digit number in memory, while participants in the low cognitive load condition were asked to hold a one-digit number in memory. After seeing the number for as long as they needed to memorize it, they then viewed each product on the computer screen, and indicated their brand name choice on the “Brand Assignment List”. Each product appeared on the screen with a number, and participants were asked to circle their brand name choice for the corresponding number on the “Brand Assignment List”. The target products appeared in positions two and eleven, and the order of the flat-screen television (positive valence product) and the rifle (negative valence product) was counterbalanced. The counterbalancing had no effect on the results and is not discussed further. For the television, the brand name choices were *XXXyvia*, where *XXX* represents the first three letters of the participant’s own name for the name-lettered option and the first three letters of a fellow participant’s name for the non-name-lettered option. To minimize differences due to the attractiveness of any particular letter combination, participants were run in pairs such that each pair saw the

same set of brand name choices. Similarly, the gun brand name choices were XXXylok. When participants were done assigning brand names, they were instructed to raise their hands. As each participant raised his hand, the experimenter collected his “Brand Assignment List”.

Participants then finished the study on the computer. To assess compliance with the cognitive load manipulation, participants were asked to type in the number they were asked to memorize. In order to ensure that I was studying an implicit effect rather than an explicit effect, participants then were asked a battery of questions to assess hypothesis awareness. Finally, they were shown pictures of the target products and asked to rate each product’s valence as a manipulation check. Participants were then paid or given a receipt for course credit, and were dismissed.

Measures. The manipulation of cognitive load was assessed by participants’ ability to recall their assigned number. 5 participants failed to recall their number and, following Gilbert and Osborne (1989), they were removed from the analysis. Hypothesis awareness was measured with four open-ended questions, based on Brendl et al. (2005) and Jones et al. (2004): (1) “List as many of the brand name choices as you can remember,” (2) “List any and all reasons you used in making your brand name choices,” (3) “What do you think was the purpose of the brand-naming task,” and (4) “Was there anything you found to be surprising in choosing brand names?” Based on their responses to these questions, 10 participants (six in the high cognitive load condition and four in the low cognitive load condition) consciously recognized their name letters in the brand assignment task. Following Brendl et al. (2005) and Jones et al. (2005), these participants

were also excluded from the analysis. The final, usable sample included 194 observations.

SNI was measured using Bearden et al.'s 8-item scale. The scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), and the items were averaged together to form an SNI score ($M = 3.05$). Participants were then split into high SNI and low SNI group around the sample median. Product valence was measured with Förster's (2004) single seven-point scale anchored by "very negative" and "very positive", with the option to indicate that they did not know the product. The rifle was rated below the neutral point of the scale ($M = 2.55$; $t(193) = -11.74, p < .001$), and the television was rated above the neutral point ($M = 5.79$; $t(193) = 21.62, p < .001$).

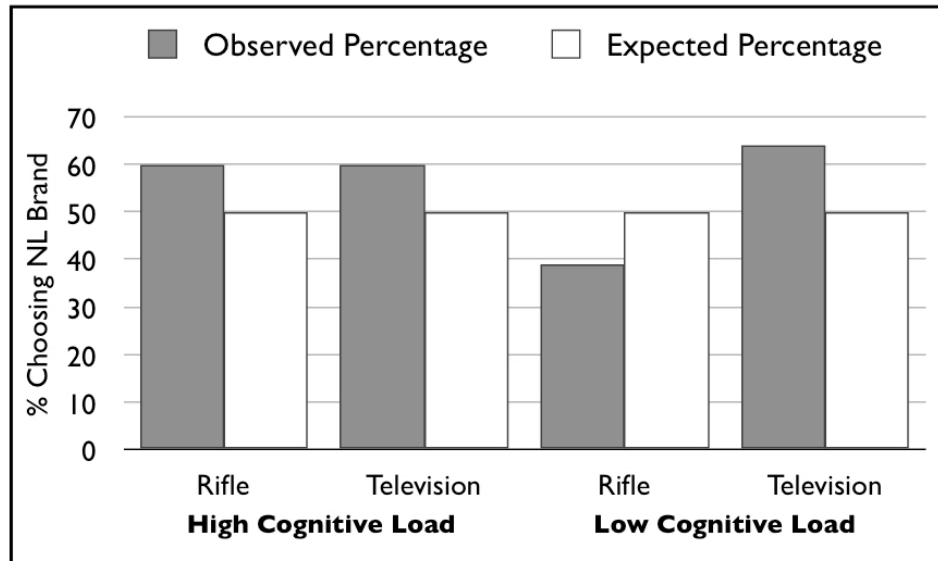
Results

If one's name letters have no influence on brand name choice, then choice rates should be split evenly between name-letter (NL) brand names and non-name-letter (NNL) brand names. Therefore, the following chi-square tests compare the observed rate of choosing a NL brand against the chance rate of 50%. As predicted in hypothesis 1a, participants in the high cognitive load condition preferred NL brand names over NNL brand names for both the television ($N_{NL} = 59, N_{NNL} = 39$; $\chi^2(1, n = 98) = 4.08, p < .05$) and the rifle ($N_{NL} = 59, N_{NNL} = 39$; $\chi^2(1, n = 98) = 4.08, p < .05$)¹. As predicted in hypothesis 1b, participants in the low cognitive load condition preferred NL brand names less than NNL brand names for the rifle ($N_{NL} = 38, N_{NNL} = 58$; $\chi^2(1, n = 96) = 4.17, p <$

¹ The number of NL and NNL choices for the television and the rifle were exactly the same.

.05), but preferred NL brand names to NNL brand names for the television ($N_{NL} = 61$, $N_{NNL} = 35$; $\chi^2(1, n = 96) = 7.04, p < .01$). These results are depicted in figure 5.

Figure 3: Rates of NL brand choice by cognitive load and product valence



Hypothesis 2 was not supported; preference for the NL brand for the television under low cognitive load (64%) was not significantly greater than under high cognitive load (60%; $t(192) = .48, p = .63$). Last, under low cognitive load, high SNI participants' preference for the NL brand for the rifle (39%) was not significantly less than low SNI participants' preference (40%; $t(94) = .88, p = .88$). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was also unsupported.

Discussion

As a whole, the results of study 1 supported the major tenets of the framework. Under low cognitive load, participants preferred name-letter brands for a positive product, but were averse to name-letter brands for negative products. Yet under high cognitive load, participants preferred name-letter brands regardless of product valence. This underscores the associative essence of implicit egotism, which was then reversed when participants could tend to the motive to self-protect. Curiously, implicit egotism did not strengthen when participants could tend to the motive to self-enhance. Although participants rated the television as positively valenced, perhaps it was not quite positive enough to motivate participants to move psychologically closer to it. Alternatively, the motive to self-protect may be stronger than the motive to self-enhance, as Snyder et al. (1986) contended in comparing “basking-in-reflected-glory” to “cutting-off-reflected-failure”.

Still, the results of this study are encouraging, particularly with respect to the self-protection motive. The goals of the next study were twofold. First, I aimed to provide convergent validity for self-protection as the motive underlying implicit distancing. If self-protection was indeed the construct responsible for the behavior observed in the product valence study, then I should have been able to observe the effect by experimentally manipulating risk, which invokes self-protection (Josephs et al. 1992). Second, establishing risk as a driver of implicit distancing highlights that it is a meaningful consumption phenomenon because, while there are limited marketing

contexts where consumers purchase products they perceive as negatively valenced, there are many marketing contexts where consumers make decisions involving risk.

STUDY 2: RISK AND NAME LETTER SELLER PREFERENCE

To achieve the objectives of this study I manipulated the ambient risk of participating in Internet auctions, a marketplace where consumers face risk. Participants read a passage that purportedly gave the results of a survey of Internet auction users, of which a certain percentage had encountered fraudulent activity. This percentage varied according to the two risk conditions. They then evaluated an auction in which the seller's name either did or did not contain their own name letters. I expected that participants in the high risk condition would prefer name-letter sellers less than non-name letter sellers, but only when they could tend to their motives to self protect (i.e. under low cognitive load). I chose to manipulate ambient risk so as not to implicate the valence of the seller, which would have confounded the two constructs.

Method

Participants and Design. One hundred seventy eight undergraduates at a large North Eastern university participated for either a cash payment or partial credit for an introductory marketing course. This experiment employed a 2 (cognitive load: high, low) x 2 (risk: high, low) x 2 (Seller name: Name-Lettered (NL), Non-Name-Lettered (NNL)) between subjects design.

Stimuli. Participants read a passage, adapted from an actual article from *ConsumerReports.org* (“Winning at eBay” 2007), that purportedly gave the results of a survey of Internet auction participants. This passage contained the risk manipulation, and read as follows (low risk in parentheses) [high risk in brackets]:

With 100 million items for sale, online auctions are very popular. The largest site has 2,000 staff members policing its site around the clock. We recently asked more than 2,500 shoppers about their Internet auction purchases in the past year.

(Only 5%) [An astonishing 80%] of buyers surveyed said they’d encountered deceptions. (Very few) [Many] sellers took the shoppers’ money and ran, failed to disclose key details about merchandise, or overstated the condition of the merchandise.

Our findings echo those of the Federal Internet Crime Complaint Center, which last year logged (few) [many] consumer complaints about Internet auction sites that were serious enough to merit criminal investigation.

Participants also evaluated an auction listing for a calculator. This item was listed by a new seller, whose screen name was *XX_Math*, where *XX* represents the first two letters of the participant’s own name in the NL condition or the first two letters of a fellow participant’s name in the NNL condition. Similar to study 1, participants were run in pairs with each pair seeing the same seller name in order to minimize differences due to the attractiveness of any particular letter combination. The seller was described as a new seller with 0 feedback, and the listing included an \$80 “Buy-It-Now” price. A picture of the listing can be seen in appendix 3.

Procedure. Participants were first given instructions that they were about to participate in a study about Internet auctions, and were asked to read the passage

containing the risk manipulations. Following the passage, participants were asked to hold a number in memory before proceeding. As in study 1 and in Gilbert and Osborne (1989), participants in the high cognitive load condition were given an eight-digit number to memorize, while participants in the low cognitive load condition were given a single-digit number to memorize. After seeing the number for as long as they needed to memorize it, they folded that particular page of the survey completely over so that it could not be seen.

On the next page of the survey packet was the critical task. Participants were asked to imagine that they had to buy a calculator for a statistics course in which they recently enrolled, and that since the calculator was expensive they decided to see if they could find a deal in an Internet auction. They were asked to imagine that, while browsing, they came across the listing as seen in appendix 3. They then rated their intent to purchase from the seller, their evaluation of the calculator, their attitude toward the seller, and their perceived risk of purchasing from the seller in the listing. To assess compliance with the cognitive load manipulation, participants were then asked to write down the number they had memorized. To assess reading comprehension of the opening passage, they were asked to recall what percentage of people in the survey experienced problems in Internet auctions. They then responded to a battery of questions regarding hypothesis awareness. Finally, participants were verbally debriefed and given a copy of the actual *ConsumerReports.org* (“Winning at eBay” 2007) article from which the opening passage had been adapted.

Measures. The success of the cognitive load manipulation was measured by participants' ability to recall their number. 11 participants (all in the high cognitive load conditions, with five in the high risk conditions and six in the low risk conditions) failed to recall their number and were eliminated from the analysis (Gilbert and Osborne 1989).

The manipulation of risk was assessed by both the ability to recall critical information from the opening passage and by a three-item scale adapted from Gürhan-Canli and Batra (2004). 10 participants (six from high-risk conditions and four from low-risk conditions) failed to recall the information and were removed from the analysis. The three-item risk scale consisted of the following items, all of which were assessed on seven-point scales [anchors in brackets]: (1) "How much risk would be involved in purchasing the calculator in this auction?" [Very little risk / Very much risk], (2) "How risky do you think it would be to purchase the calculator in this auction?" [Very low risk purchase / Very high risk purchase], and (3) "The decision to purchase the calculator in this auction involves high risk." [Strongly disagree / Strongly agree]. The scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.92$), and the items were averaged together to form a perceived risk index ($M = 5.15$). Participants in the high risk conditions did perceive the auction as more risky than participants in the low risk condition ($M_{high} = 5.60$ vs. $M_{low} = 4.69$; $t(155) = 4.97, p < .001$). Further, submitting the perceived risk index to an ANOVA with risk, NL condition, and cognitive load as the independent factors revealed that while the risk manipulation affected risk perceptions ($F_{Risk}(1,149) = 23.8, p < .001$), NL condition, cognitive load condition, and their interactions did not ($F_{NL}(1,149) = 2.08, p = .21$; $F_{Cog. Load}(1,149) = .583, p = .45$; $F_{NL \times Cog. Load}(1, 149) = .030, p = .86$; $F_{NL \times Risk}(1, 149)$

$= .491, p = .48; F_{Cog. Load \times Risk}(1, 149) = .006, p = .94; F_{NL \times Cog. Load \times Risk}(1, 149) = .689, p = .41).$

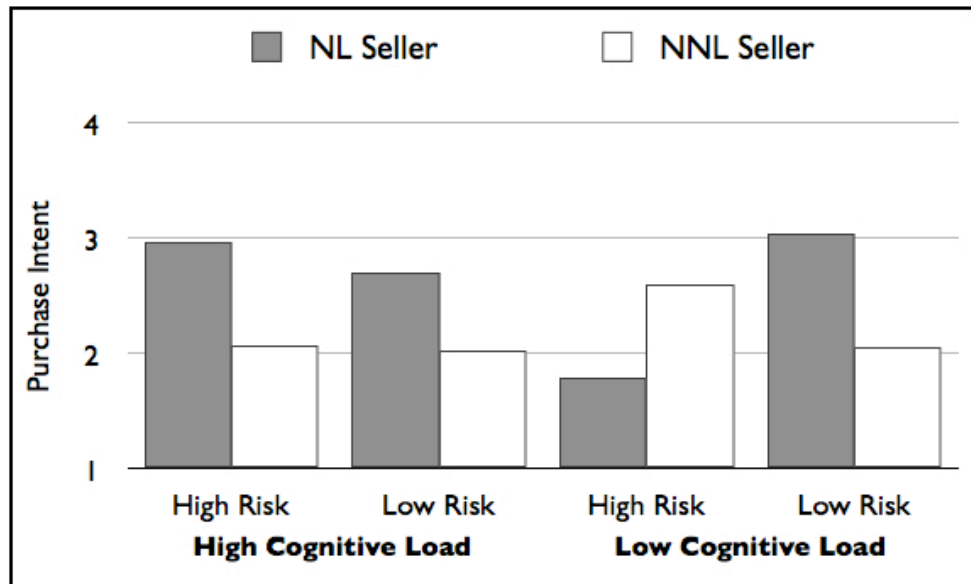
Purchase intent was measured with the following two items using seven-point scales [anchors in brackets]: (1) “How interested are you in purchasing from this seller,” [Not at all / Very much] and (2) “How likely would you be to purchase from this seller” [Totally unlikely / Totally likely]. They showed high reliability ($\alpha = 0.90$) and were averaged to form a purchase intent index ($M = 2.41$). The valence of the calculator was measured with Förster’s (2004) single item, just as in study 1. The valence did not differ significantly from the neutral point of the scale ($M = 4.13; t(156) = 1.21, p = .23$). Finally, as a measure of attitude toward the seller, participants were asked to indicate their feelings about the seller on two seven-point scales anchored by negative/positive and unfavorable/favorable. These items demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$) and were averaged to form an attitude index ($M = 2.74$).

Hypothesis awareness was measured with three of the four items from study 1, though adapted for the auction context. The three items were: (1) “List any and all reasons you used in forming your opinion about the seller in the calculator auction,” (2) “What do you think was the purpose of this study,” and (3) “Was there anything you found surprising about the calculator auction?” Based on their responses to these questions, no participants recognized their name letters in the seller’s name.

Results

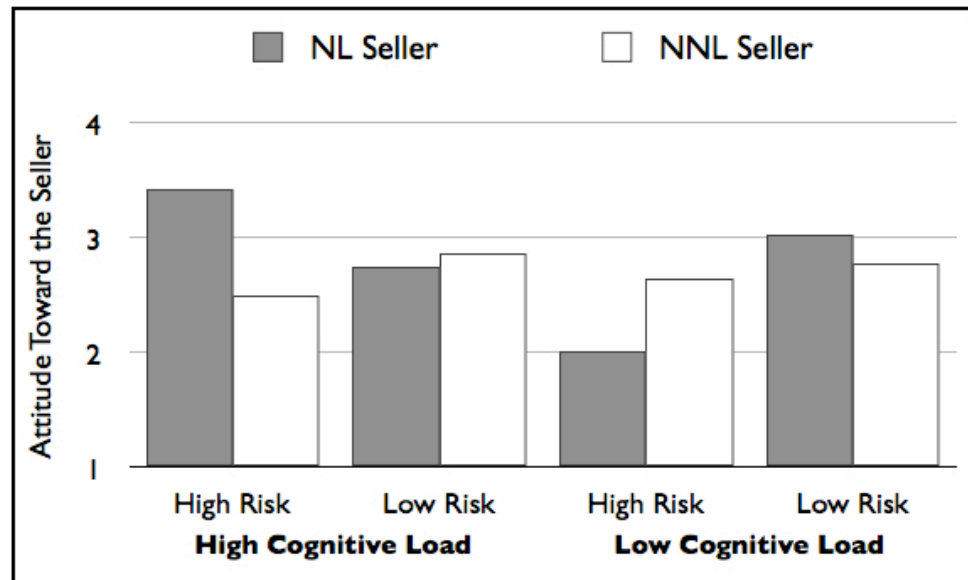
Purchase intent and attitude toward the seller were analyzed using ANOVA with risk, NL condition, and cognitive load as independent factors. I conducted follow-up contrasts using two-tailed tests when appropriate. Recall from hypothesis 4 that under high cognitive load I expected greater NL (vs. NNL) preference for both high and low risk, while low cognitive load should lead to decreased NL preference under high risk and increased NL preference under low risk. The ANOVA on purchase intent confirmed this three-way prediction ($F(1, 149) = 7.06, p < .01$). A graph of the means is presented in figure 6. Follow-up comparisons showed that under high cognitive load participants preferred the NL seller to the NNL seller for both the high risk condition ($M_{NL} = 2.97$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.08, p < .05$) and the low risk condition ($M_{NL} = 2.70$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.03, p < .05$). However, under low cognitive load participants preferred the NL seller less than the NNL seller in the high risk condition ($M_{NL} = 1.79$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.60, p < .05$), while they still preferred the NL seller to the NNL seller in the low risk condition ($M_{NL} = 3.05$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.06, p < .05$). Thus, all parts of hypothesis 4 are supported using the purchase intent measure.

Figure 4: Study 2 purchase intent ratings by experimental condition



Analyses using the attitude toward the seller measure yielded mostly similar results. In the ANOVA, the three-way interaction of NL condition, cognitive load, and risk was significant ($F(1, 149) = 7.86, p < .01$). A graph of the means is presented in figure 7. Follow up comparisons, however, yielded mixed results. Under high cognitive load, there was virtually no difference in NL seller and NNL seller attitude in the low risk scenario ($M_{NL} = 2.75$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.87, p = .72$), but in the high risk scenario participants had much more favorable attitudes toward the NL seller ($M_{NL} = 3.42$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.50, p < .05$). Under low cognitive load, participants evaluated the NL seller more favorably than the NNL seller in the low risk scenario but this difference did not approach significance ($M_{NL} = 3.03$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.78, p = .47$). Under low cognitive load and high risk, participants evaluated the NL seller less favorably than the NNL seller ($M_{NL} = 2.02$ vs. $M_{NNL} = 2.64, p = .05$).

Figure 5: Study 2 attitude toward the seller by experimental condition



Mediation analyses. If derogation is responsible for implicit distancing, as theorized here, then the feelings-based attitude toward the seller measure should mediate the effects of the independent factors on purchase intent in the high risk conditions. Therefore, the construct was tested as a mediator using the four-step procedure described by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, under high risk there was a significant interactive effect of name letter condition and cognitive load on purchase intent ($F(1, 80) = 14.49, p < .005$). Second, under high risk there was a significant interactive effect of name letter condition and cognitive load on attitude toward the seller ($F(1, 80) = 11.83, p < .005$). Third, regression analysis revealed that attitude-toward-the-seller was a reliable predictor of purchase intent ($\beta = 0.71; t = 8.95, p < .001$). Fourth, adding the attitude measure as an additional independent variable in the analysis of purchase intent resulted in a reduction of the interaction between name letter condition and cognitive load, which no longer was

significant ($F(1, 80) = 1.56, p = .22$) while the attitude measure did emerge as highly significant ($F(1, 80) = 61.66, p < .001$). Thus, these results support the notion that affective mechanisms underlie implicit distancing in high risk decisions.

It did not appear that similar affective mechanisms were at work for participants in the low risk conditions. Specifically, analyzing the data for only low risk participants in an ANOVA with name letter condition and cognitive load as the independent factors and attitude toward the seller as the dependent factor, there were no significant effects of the independent factors ($F_{BL}(1, 77) = 0.08, p = .79$; $F_{Cog. Load}(1, 77) = 0.15, p = .70$; $F_{BL \times Cog. Load}(1, 77) = 0.61, p = .44$). This result was expected because unlike the derogation required for implicit distancing under high risk, under low risk the boost in preference that name letters provide should come from an associative process.

Discussion

This study elicited a number of interesting results. Foremost, under high cognitive load study participants indicated greater intent to purchase from a name letter seller than from a non-name letter seller regardless of risk level. But under low cognitive load participants in the high risk condition indicated lower intent to purchase from a name letter seller than from a non-name letter seller. This pattern of results is consistent with that observed in study 1. A similar pattern was observed for attitudes toward the seller under high risk, but differences between attitudes toward name letter sellers and non-name letter sellers were virtually non-existent under low risk. Nevertheless, attitude mediated the effects of the independent factors on purchase intent under high risk,

suggesting that feelings-based mechanisms underlie the behavioral outcomes of implicit distancing.

Combined with the results of study 1, study 2 supports the underpinnings of the framework proposed in this dissertation. First, the results of this study indicate that risk is a driver of implicit distancing. This is important as risk plays an important role in a variety of marketing scenarios. Second, demonstrating that high risk can create a pattern of results similar to those observed for negative products lends convergent validity to the notion self-protection is the construct that drives implicit distancing.

STUDY 3: FIELD EVIDENCE – NAME LETTER MATCHING IN INTERNET AUCTIONS

With convergent validity established for the role of self-protection as the construct that underpins implicit distancing, in this study I turn to the external validity of name letter branding and implicit distancing by examining how risk influenced name letter matching rates in actual market transactions. Specifically, I look at Internet auction (i.e., eBay) participants' propensity to gravitate toward or avoid sellers whose screen names had the same first character as their own screen names. The results of this analysis will help to verify implicit distancing as a real world phenomenon that is relevant in consumption and marketing contexts. Further, this analysis represents the first test, to my knowledge, of name letter branding (Brendl et al. 2005) in a real world marketing context where money and goods are actually exchanged. This is an ideal transaction setting to explore the effect of name letter branding and implicit distancing because (1) transaction

information and results are publicly available; (2) the uncertainty component of risk can be measured by the seller's feedback rating; and (3) the adversity component of risk can be approximated by price because the hardship resulting from a bad decision should increase as prices rise. Like prior research on implicit egotism (Jones et al. 2004; Pelham et al. 2005), to help ensure that I was studying an implicit, and not an explicit, effect, I chose to examine cases where the seller's screen name had only the same first character as the bidder's screen name. It is less likely that a bidder would consciously notice a name similarity based on one character compared with several characters.

Note that previous research on implicit egotism has focused on only birth-given characteristics of the chooser (e.g., one's given name or birth date). Why might the effect work via one's self-selected screen name? Pelham et al. (2005) introduced the possibility that implicit egotism may operate through other names that are closely tied to one's everyday life, such as one's spouse's name. Screen names also fall into this class. Evidence indicates that people's screen names have become intimately tied to their owner's self-concepts. Becker and Stamp (2005) found evidence that people may create screen names that indicate their physical identity, such as their real name or their age, but that they also create screen names that represent their personalities and interests. Also, because people have superior memory for self-related material (Symons and Johnson 1997) and because people must constantly log in to different websites or online communities, people are likely to create one self-related screen name and stick with it. Therefore, evidence suggests that screen names, although not birth-given, have become an integral part of the self (Rosenbloom 2006).

Method

This study is based on unique auction-buyer-seller combinations for auctions held on eBay between November 1, 2005 and January 18, 2006. The sample included auctions from each of eBay's 31 primary product categories. 59,208 unique combinations were obtained for analysis. The primary information in the data includes the seller's screen name, each buyer's screen name, the bidders' screen names in each auction, a unique identification number for each auction, the final selling price, and the seller's feedback rating.

To examine whether consumers gravitated toward or avoided sellers whose screen names shared the same first character as their own at varying levels of risk, I needed to parse the data into high risk and low risk transactions, with risk including both adversity and uncertainty (Dowling and Staelin 1994). I use price as a proxy for adversity because the potential adversity of a bad decision can be described by financial loss. I designated auctions in which the final price was \$49.99 or above as high-adversity auctions. I chose the cutoff point of \$49.99 based on a pretest of 70 participants, who were successively given price levels in twenty-dollar increments starting at \$10, and asked at each price level if they begin feeling risky when participating in Internet auctions. Most indicated that they began feeling risky at a \$50 price level (63%). This was rounded down to \$49.99 to get an even 20%-80% split of the sample. Based on this split, there were 12,143 high adversity auctions and 47,065 low adversity auctions.

I examined different levels of sellers' feedback ratings to capture uncertainty. Feedback ratings are an aggregation of transaction partners' success or failure in previous

transactions. Therefore, they should approximate the likelihood of positive performance in the future. It is worth noting that feedback ratings on eBay are overwhelmingly positive. This has been shown in other academic studies, and indeed in this sample the median feedback rating was 98.8% positive. However, this positive feedback bias allows one to define reasonable boundaries that would indicate the relative certainty of future transactions. Specifically, buyers should be relatively certain that sellers with feedback ratings that are greater than the norm will perform well as transaction partners, while they should be relatively uncertain that sellers with lower than normal feedback rating will perform well. Here, using the sample median feedback rating as the norm, I designate auctions in which the sellers' feedback rating is 100% as relatively certain transactions, and those seller feedback ratings lower than 95% as uncertain transactions. This split resulted in 20,234 relatively certain transactions and 1,012 relatively uncertain transactions. The uncertainty and adversity groups were then crossed to create four different overall risk groups – high uncertainty/high adversity, high uncertainty/low adversity, low uncertainty/high adversity, and low uncertainty/low adversity.

Results

Following Jones et al. (2004), I compared the proportion of buyer-seller pairs whose first characters should have matched if buyers and sellers paired up randomly with respect to first characters with the proportion of buyer-seller pairs whose first characters actually matched. The expected proportion of matches was found by computing the sample proportion of screen names that began with each allowable character, multiplying

the seller and buyer proportions for each character, and summing these cross products across all characters in the sample (for a sample calculation see appendix 4).

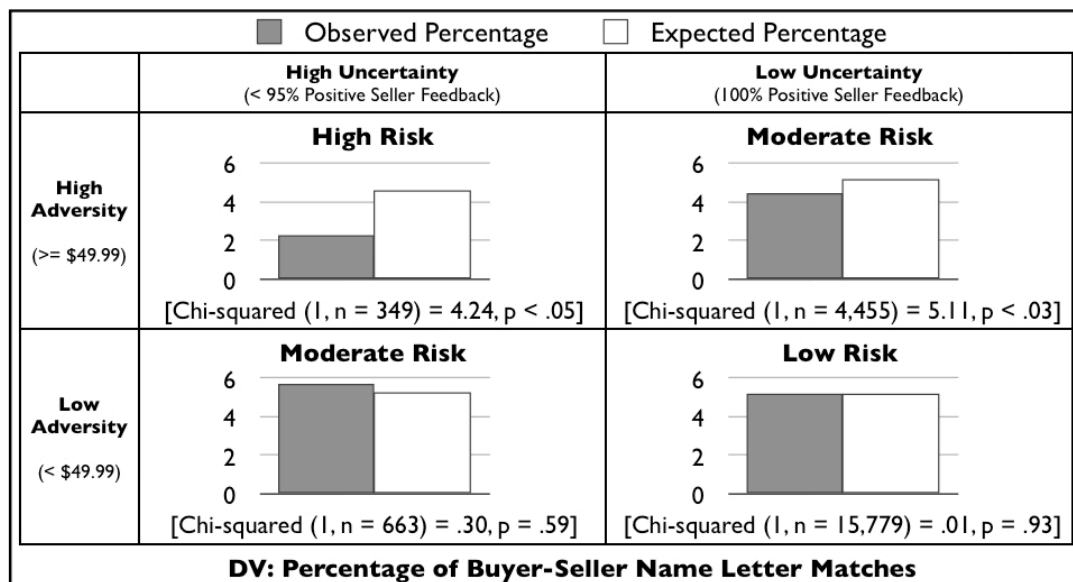
Based on hypothesis 4b there should be a greater preference for self-resemblance in the lowest risk group, and hence a greater-than-chance rate of name letter matching. This group, the low uncertainty/low adversity transactions, included 15,779 transactions. The expected rate of first character matching was 5.18% and the observed rate was 5.19%, which was not a significant difference [$\chi^2(1, n = 15,779) = .01, p = .93$]. This result, and the results for the subsequent risk groups are presented in figure 3.

The next two risk groups, low uncertainty/high adversity and high uncertainty/low adversity, have mixed levels of risk. The only thing that can be asserted is that they are more risky than the lowest risk group, suggesting that the results for these groups should be more in line with the high risk part of hypothesis 4b, that there should be a preference for non-self-resemblance, and thus a less-than-chance rate of name letter matching. The expected rate of first character matching in the low uncertainty/high adversity group was 5.22% and the observed rate was 4.47%, about 14% less than expected [$\chi^2(1, n = 4,455) = 5.11, p < .03$]. This result supports the implicit distancing predicted in hypothesis 4b. The expected rate of first character matching in the high uncertainty/low adversity group was 5.73% and the observed rate was 5.26%, about 8% less than expected [$\chi^2(1, n = 663) = .30, p = .59$]. This result is directionally consistent with hypothesis 4b, but it is not statistically significant.

The highest risk group should behave in line with the high risk part of hypothesis 4b. That is, buyers should prefer non-self-resemblance in seller names. The high uncertainty/high adversity group had an expected rate of first character matching of

4.60%. The observed rate was 2.29%, about 50% less than expected [$\chi^2(1, n = 349) = 4.24, p < .05$]. This supports the implicit distancing predicted in hypothesis 4b.

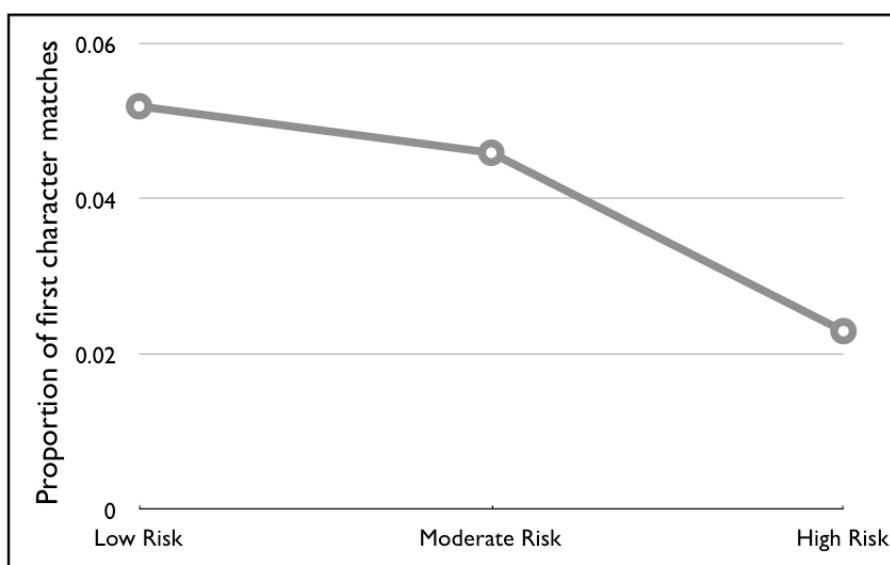
Figure 6: Observed and expected rates of first character matches by risk group



Supplementary Analyses. Three results warrant further investigation. First, if implicit distancing is a function of risk, then the rate of first character matching should decrease as risk increases. To test this, auctions in the high uncertainty/adversity group were classified as high risk, auctions in the low uncertainty/adversity group were classified as low risk, and auctions in the mixed uncertainty/adversity groups were classified as moderate risk. As depicted in figure 4, the rate of name letter matching did in fact decrease as risk increased [$F(2, 21,243) = 3.991, p < .02$]. Post hoc least significant difference tests revealed that the difference between the matching rates in the low risk group (5.19%) and the high risk group (2.29%) was significant ($p < .02$), as was

the difference between the high risk group and the moderate risk group (4.60%; $p = .05$). The difference between the low risk and moderate risk groups was not significant ($p = .12$).

Figure 7: Observed rate of first character matching across risk levels



Second, implicit distancing was observed in both sets of high adversity groups, and in neither set of low adversity groups. It appears that uncertainty matters only inasmuch as adversity is high. In fact, the chance rate of name letter matching in high adversity transactions across all seller feedback scores was 4.99%. The observed rate was 4.58%, or about 8% less than the chance rate [$\chi^2(1, n = 12,143) = 4.33, p < .05$], suggesting that adversity is indeed a driver of implicit distancing.

Third, it was surprising that implicit egotism was not observed in the lowest risk group. One possible explanation is that buyers in auctions, regardless of sellers' feedback

scores and final prices, feel some element of risk that nullifies the attraction to self-resemblance yet is not a strong enough motivator to drive one away from self-resemblance. To test this, I examined the propensity of all unique bidders, not just buyers (i.e. winners), to simply participate in low adversity auctions. This group had an expected first character matching rate of 5.16%. The observed matching rate was higher at 5.46% [$\chi^2(1, n = 81,607) = 15.04, p < .001$], offering evidence of implicit egotism and suggesting that merely bidding does pose less risk than actually buying.

Discussion

Study 3 presents a number of interesting findings. First, implicit distancing was observed in actual transactions. When adversity was high, buyers avoided sellers who shared the same first character of their screen names. This occurred under low uncertainty, and became much more pronounced under high uncertainty. Second, I found some evidence of the real world significance of the consumption version of implicit egotism, name letter branding. In actual bidding decisions with real financial implications, bidders had a propensity to bid in low adversity auctions in which sellers' screen names had the same first character as their own screen names.

-6-

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation investigated the role of motivation in people's unconscious preferences for stimuli that resemble themselves. By casting implicit egotism as an essentially associative phenomenon and broadening the scope of prior work to include both self-enhancement and self-protection, the findings make a considerable step in elucidating the process underlying implicit egotism and the new effect of implicit distancing. Specifically, the associative impact of implicit egotism is uniformly positive; that is, at the most basic level people have a preference for stimuli that resemble themselves compared with equivalent stimuli that do not. However, this preference is subject to influence by self-concept maintenance motives such that the motive to self-protect makes people averse to self-resembling stimuli compared with equivalent non-self-resembling stimuli. Importantly, the ability of self-protection to invoke implicit distancing was demonstrated in actual Internet auction transactions where real goods and money were exchanged.

Contributions to Theory

This dissertation makes important contributions to theories in both consumer behavior as well as the broader psychology literature. This first demonstration of implicit distancing adds an additional piece to the puzzle of how motivation fits into implicit preferences for self-resemblance. Prior research showed that people gravitate toward

people, places, professions, and products that resemble themselves even in the most superficial way, thus causing implicit egotism and name letter branding (Brendl et al. 2005; Pelham et al. 2005). While others have speculated on the possibility of a reversal of implicit egotism (Pelham et al. 2005), no evidence had been reported. This dissertation demonstrates that an additional part of self-concept maintenance, self-protection, can make people move away from self-resembling stimuli.

Up to this point, research on the human phenomenon of implicit egotism has not properly pitted an associative explanation against a motivational explanation. While Jones et al.'s (2004) subliminal conditioning experiment pioneered the notion that implicit egotism is fundamentally an associative process, it does not definitively do so due to the lack of comparison to motivated behavior. Nelson and Simmons (2007) took a tentative step in this direction by pitting name letter preferences against motives to perform well in various tasks. However, the specific domains they studied do not give people the requisite resources to override the associative effects of implicit egotism. In this dissertation I examined implicit preferences for self-resemblance in the presence of motives to self-protect or to self-enhance. Critically, by manipulating cognitive load I was able to parse associative effects from motivated effects, finding that in the absence of motivational factors implicit egotism dominates, but that when people can tend to the motive to self-protect implicit distancing occurs. This is a significant extension of and caveat to Nelson and Simmons's (2007) work. Further, the fact that implicit egotism occurred under high cognitive load for both negative products (study 1) and high risk decisions (studies 2 and 3) implies that the self-enhancement motive is not a necessary

condition for implicit egotism, thus fortifying Jones et al.'s (2004) seminal associative study.

This dissertation also extends prior work on conscious distancing and self-protection. Where others have reported conscious distancing from self-relevant negative stimuli (Schimel et al. 2000; Snyder et al. 1986) and self-protective behavior under risky conditions (Josephs et al. 1992), implicit distancing from negative stimuli and under risky conditions suggests that distancing behaviors are more pervasive than previously thought. That is, people even unconsciously try to distance themselves from stimuli that have highly superficial resemblance to themselves (i.e., name letters).

In prior studies, implicit egotism has been demonstrated via people's given names, surnames, and birth dates. Notably, in most of these cases people do not select any of these themselves and have lived with these identity markers for their entire lives. The finding in study 3 that even a non-birth-given characteristic (i.e. eBay screen name) can be a mechanism for implicit egotism and implicit distancing highlights the complexity of the self-concept. Further, it extends the prior work on implicit egotism and lends credence to Pelham et al.'s (2005) suggestion that implicit egotism can manifest via other names such as a significant other's.

Practical Implications

While Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated name letter branding in actual choices, they did not demonstrate it in real market transactions. The behavior of bidders in low risk auctions supports Brendl et al.'s work, while the behavior of final buyers additionally

supports the presented framework. Moreover, study 3 presents another influence on Internet auction participant behavior. Prior work has studied Internet auction participant behavior from a conscious processing perspective. Along with other, dominant factors such as reference prices (Kamins, Dréze, and Folkes 2004), it appears that understated cues also influence bidder behavior. This dissertation adds to the extant Internet auction literature by uncovering one such cue. Bidders do have a tendency to participate in auctions where the seller's screen name has the same first character as their own. However, when the stakes are high in terms of risk and commitment to purchase, bidders distance themselves from sellers whose screen names share the same first character as their own.

Technology is making it increasingly easy for companies to create customized offers for individual buyers (Simonson 2005). Thus, a pressing question as these technologies become more widespread is how to implement them. Given the myriad options businesses can offer buyers, what variables should be tailored to buyer preferences? This dissertation combined with prior work on name letter preferences suggests that one way to influence preference and choice is through the buyer's name letters. Sellers of low-risk, positively perceived products and services could endorse personal communications with names that are similar to the buyer's name (e.g. To Mary, From Mark) or recommend products with names that are similar to the buyer's name (e.g. Mary, we recommend you buy Mars candy). Indeed, research has already shown that the endorsement of a similar-sounding name in a direct communication positively influenced the completion and return rate of a mail questionnaire (Garner 2005). However, the present results indicate that the use of similar sounding names in direct communications

is more complex than this. For one, direct marketers of high-risk or potentially dangerous products should *avoid* using similar names to the buyer's name as it may drive the buyer away.

This research also has practical implications outside of marketing. While it has been shown that Denise has a propensity to become a dentist, in light of the findings in this dissertation how might this effect go for professions that are negatively valenced or risky? We would expect that if people primarily think of firefighting as a risky profession, then people named Frank should be under-represented among the population of firefighters. And while William may have a propensity to move to a nice city like Winnipeg, what about cities that people do not think of so favorably? If people think of Compton, California as a place known for gang activity and murder, then when Colin falls on hard times, he should be less likely to move to Compton than to a city of similar stature that doesn't share his name letters.

Limitations and Future Research

The most prominent shortcoming of the present investigation is the failure to find a strengthening of implicit egotism for positively valenced products under low cognitive load in study 1. While not contradicting the proposed framework, the directionally consistent result does not entirely support it either. My suspicion is that the result is an artifact of the specific stimulus used in the study, a television. I suspect that the positivity of this particular stimulus was not strong enough to invoke a subconscious manifestation of basking-in-reflected-glory. It may be more likely to observe the proposed

strengthening of implicit egotism in the traditional implicit egotism domains of major life decisions, as a sufficient level of positivity may be achieved in describing a profession, romantic interest, or living location. Therefore future work should apply the basic experimental design of study 1 to one of these domains.

Another fertile area for future work on implicit egotism and implicit distancing is the exploration of the sensory bases for these effects. In the case of name letters as the mechanism, are the effects based on the sound or sight of the name letters? For example, the work on name letter branding suggests that Katie would especially like Kit-Kat, but might Christina also have a particular fondness for Kit-Kat due to the hard “K” sound that begins her name? Additionally, it could be expected that the sensory bases for implicit egotism and implicit distancing diverge across cultures, as some cultures process language visually (e.g. Chinese logographs; Spinks et al. 2000) and others process language phonologically (e.g. English letters represent sounds; McCusker, Hillinger, and Bias 1981). Knowing this would help marketers better understand what communication media to use in employing implicit egotism and avoiding implicit distancing.

Finally, significant discoveries can be made based on the finding that implicit egotism and implicit distancing can occur via non-birth-given characteristics. As people increasingly build their identities on brand usage and consumption, could brand names themselves be a mechanism for these implicit effects? In other words, if Tiger Woods’s identity is staked on Nike golf equipment, might he especially prefer positive N-named things and be averse to negative N-named things? Perhaps you should ask his wife, Ms. Nordegren. The answers to questions such as these are likely to surprise, but will also help us understand the capriciousness of human decision-making.

APPENDIX 1: TARGET STIMULI USED IN STUDY 1

Positive valence product: television



Negative valence product: rifle



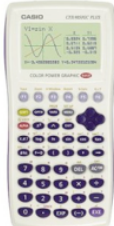
APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE “BRAND ASSIGNMENT LIST” USED IN STUDY 1

In this example, the television was product 2 and the rifle was product 11.

The prefix _NL represents the first three letters of the participant’s own name. The prefix NNL represents the first three letters of a yoked participant’s name. Each pair of participants saw the same choices.

BRAND ASSIGNMENT LIST		
For each product you see on the screen, choose one of the brand names in the corresponding line below (e.g. for product 1, choose either “Fuller” or “Millman”). Indicate your choice by circling the brand name.		
Product 1:	Fuller	Millman
Product 2:	NNLyvia	_NLyvia
Product 3:	Torary	Vivolux
Product 4:	Westera	Timbera
Product 5:	La Ferus	Grevyi
Product 6:	Bresing	Ohmling
Product 7:	Slason	Yobolop
Product 8:	Kestrel	Mulcani
Product 9:	Airdoir	Sentoir
Product 10:	Revuss	Gotix
Product 11:	NNLylok	_NLylok
Product 12:	Catoley	Foley

APPENDIX 3: AUCTION LISTING USED IN STUDY 2

<p><u>Meet The Seller</u></p> <p>NL_Math (0)</p> <p>Feedback: 0% (New Seller)</p>	 <p>Buy It Now price: \$80.00</p>
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The letters “NL” in “NL_Math” represent the first two letters of either the participant’s own first name or of a fellow participant’s first name, depending on the experimental condition.

APPENDIX 4: SAMPLE CALCULATION FROM STUDY 3

Proportion of bidders with first character “a”: 4.90%

Proportion of sellers with first character “a”: 5.13%

Random chance bidder with first character “a” will bid in auction where seller’s first character is also “a”: $4.90\% \times 5.13\% = 0.25\% = 0.0025$

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