

Implicit distancing in Auction: When name letter branding backfires

LUKE KACHERSKY*

HYEONG MIN (CHRISTIAN) KIM*

SANKAR SEN

*Both authors equally contributed and authorship is alphabetical. Luke Kachersky is an Assistant Professor of Marketing, Fordham University, 414 E. Fordham Rd., Bronx, NY 10458, kachersky@fordham.edu and Hyeong Min Kim is an Assistant Professor of Marketing, The Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, 100 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21201, chkim@jhu.edu. Sankar Sen is a Professor of Marketing, Zicklin School of Business, Baruch College, City University of New York, One Bernard Baruch Way, NY, NY 10010. This benefited from a PSC-CUNY grant awarded to the second author.

Consumers subconsciously prefer brand names that resemble their own names - an effect called *name letter branding*. We extend it and propose that a reversal of name letter branding, wherein consumers will subconsciously avoid self-resembling seller names, is possible when the buyer anticipates self-concept damage from an association with the seller. We find evidence of such behavior, which we call *implicit distancing*, in three studies. We show name letter branding and implicit distancing in actual transactions and determine underlying causal mechanisms in two experiments. Our findings suggest that self-concept motives determine the prevalence of name letter branding or implicit distancing.

Hardware stores owners are more likely to have names beginning with the letter H, compared with the letter R, whereas the reverse is true for roofing company owners (Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2002). People are disproportionately likely to marry others whose first names are similar to theirs (Jones et al. 2004). These findings, based on archival studies, indicate that something as simple as the presence of one's own name letters in a stimulus influences major life decisions. Recent studies have extended the effect by showing that the name letters influence routine consumption decisions. For instance, Brendl et al. (2005) showed that participants had a tendency to choose fictitious brand names that resembled their own names, a phenomenon coined as name letter branding. This effect is believed to stem from implicit egotism, people's subconscious affinity to objects that resemble themselves (see Pelham, Carvallo, and Jones 2005 for a review) and seems highly persistent as evidenced by a recent finding that people show preferences for name letters even when the outcome is negative (e.g., lower grades) (Nelson and Simmons 2007). This begs the question, "Do people (e.g., Cathy) always gravitate towards name letter objects regardless of consequences (e.g., Cancer)?"

This research attempts to answer the question. In particular, we propose that name letter brand preferences can be influenced by the human motive to protect one's feelings about oneself. Extant literature implies a possibility that people may subconsciously avoid a self-resembling object under certain circumstances. It is well noted that people exert considerable effort to deny negative characteristics associated with themselves (Jung 1951/1978), and this denial may manifest itself as psychological distancing from those characteristics (Schimmel et al. 2000). The possibility of distancing is intriguing because it implies that people may implicitly avoid self-resembling stimuli under certain conditions. The finding of the reversal of implicit egotism would provide boundary conditions of research on implicit egotism and name letter branding.

Therefore, in this paper, we attempt to derive conditions under which people implicitly avoid things bearing the same name letters as theirs. In particular, we propose that when choosing among things that potentially have negative implications for the self, people, unaware of the basis, will distance themselves from those things that share the same name letters with them. Thus, we suggest that when choosing between sellers, consumers will avoid sellers with names similar to their own when the purchase involves risky characteristics related to the self-protection motive. We call this effect *implicit distancing*

By demonstrating a reversal of the name letter branding effect, we make the following unique contributions. In study 1 we offer the first field evidence of name letter branding and implicit distancing from data including real transactions. Furthermore, we provide the first evidence that this effect can manifest via non-birth-given characteristics, a possibility first suggested by Pelham et al (2005). This extends the scope of implicit egotism because it has been demonstrated only via birth-given traits. More importantly, in studies 2 and 3 we demonstrate the psychological mechanism of implicit distancing by showing that the process for both the positive and negative effects of name letters has roots in motives of maintaining the self-concept. Lastly, we discuss how our findings relate to extant research findings.

In the section that follows, we discuss in detail why implicit distancing is possible and argue that consumers will implicitly avoid seller names that have potentially negative implications.

RESEARCH RATIONALE

Implicit Egotism and Name Letter Branding

People's implicit (i.e., not consciously accessible; Wilson 2002) self-evaluations 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. More importantly, 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).

The name letter effect is explained by *implicit egotism*, a specific proposition that people's unconscious positive self-evaluations create a latent tendency to gravitate toward things that resemble the self. In a series of articles, Pelham and colleagues (Jones, Pelham, and Mirenberg 2002; Jones et al. 2004; Pelham et al. 2002; Pelham et al. 2003) have shown 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, live in cities and on streets that resemble their own, and choose romantic partners whose names resemble their own. Furthermore, they have demonstrated that implicit egotism can influence decisions through another birth-given characteristic—birth dates (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 products with brand names that resemble their own names, a

phenomenon coined name letter branding. Brendl and colleagues 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.

Critics have argued that people may consciously, rather than unconsciously, gravitate toward things that resemble the self. However, by showing that the effect still occurred when name-location matches shared only a few letters (e.g. William-Winnipeg; Pelham et al. 2002), that research participants were not aware of the basis of their decisions (Brendl et al. 2005, Jones et al. 2004), and that explicit self-esteem had no relationship with implicit egotism (Brendl et al. 2005), extant research has clearly demonstrated that the effect is indeed implicit rather than explicit. Others have argued that people may prefer stimuli that share letters with their names because they are exposed to their own name letters frequently. However, Jones et al. (2002) found that the effect of implicit egotism is stronger for people with less common name letters (e.g., Zenny compared with Jenny). Because people with uncommon names are presumably exposed to their own name letters (e.g., “Z”) less than people with common names (e.g., “J”), this finding rules out a mere exposure explanation. On the contrary, uncommon names should be stronger self-identifiers, and thus the fact that people with uncommon names demonstrate stronger implicit egotism lends credence to the idea that the effect is grounded in self-evaluation.

Implicit Distancing

As uncanny as it might seem that people implicitly seek stimuli that resemble themselves, it is at least equally provocative to think that people may implicitly avoid self-resembling stimuli. Given that implicit egotism is based on the notion that people’s positive self-evaluations

transfer to other self-resembling stimuli, most speculation about a reversal of the implicit egotism effect has centered on the idea that people with negative self-evaluations (i.e. those with low self-esteem) may avoid self-resembling stimuli (Pelham et al. 2005), although no evidence has been found to support this notion (Jones et al. 2004). In this research we propose that people may be subconsciously averse to self-resembling stimuli from which they anticipate potential risk to their self-evaluation. In summary, as articulated in figure 1 our expectations are that tendencies to gravitate to or distance from name letter brands have roots in the self, not in the stimulus, and that the direction depends on the active motive – protection or enhancement. Next we turn to a more detailed discussion of these ideas.

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Insert figure 1 about here

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People actively try to maintain positive feelings about themselves. This activity comes in two forms: self-enhancement and self-protection. First, people can try to enhance their positive self-evaluations, by attaching themselves to other positive things (Cialdini et al. 1976). Second, people can try to protect their current state of positive self-evaluations by distancing themselves from things that reflect poorly on themselves (Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford 1986). This latter activity is related to Jung's (1951/1978) suggestion that people spend much effort to deny negative characteristics in themselves. In line with Jung's argument, Schimel et al. (2000) demonstrated that people distance themselves from others who have negative characteristics that

they fear they may possess. For example, people who fear they may have violent outbursts tend to distance themselves from others who share that characteristic.

It should be noted that there is a temporal difference between these two forms of self-concept maintenance (Blaine and Crocker 1993; Sommer 2001). Specifically, when faced with immediately self-threatening stimuli, people engage in self-enhancement. Self-protection, however, is anticipatory in nature and is employed to prevent future loss of self-esteem. These temporal notions are in harmony with previous research on implicit egotism and name letter branding where an enhancement strategy, seeking out self-resembling stimuli (i.e., a stronger effect of implicit egotism), was employed in response to immediate self-concept threats (Brendl et al. 2005; Jones et al. 2004). In contrast, we propose that if people anticipate a negative implication for the self from a name-letter object, then they will employ a self-protection strategy by distancing themselves from it without being aware of the name letter. Risky decisions are potentially, though not immediately, damaging to self-esteem (Josephs et al. 1992). Therefore, we expect that when choosing among sellers that may impose future risks, consumers will implicitly avoid sellers that resemble themselves.

Next, we provide evidence for the real world existence of implicit distancing and name letter branding via a non-birth-given trait by examining actual bidding behavior on an Internet auction Web site.

STUDY 1: REAL WORLD EVIDENCE OF NAME LETTER BRANDING AND IMPLICIT DISTANCING IN EBAY SELLER CHOICE

In this study, we focused on 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. This is an ideal transaction setting to explore the effect of name letter branding and its reversal because (1) eBay screen names do not necessarily possess birth-given characteristics, and (2) it entails risk (i.e., fraud risk) to engage oneself to a binding contract by bidding on an item that an unknown seller sells¹. To help ensure that we were studying an implicit, and not an explicit effect, we 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 (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 may be one of them. Evidence indicates that people's screen names have become inexorably 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

¹ Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated that the effect of name letter branding in brand choices occurs only when product needs are moderately active. When people participate in Internet auctions, we presume that they have a product need strong enough to drive them to engage in bidding for items, but not strong enough for them to seek out more immediate consumption satisfaction by going to a local store to buy the item. Thus, the product need should not be so pressing that it eliminates the effect of name letter branding as Brendl et al. (2005) demonstrated.

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-bidder-seller combinations for auctions held on eBay. The sample included auctions from each of eBay's 31 primary product categories. Only unique auction-bidder-seller combinations were examined in order to remove the influence of individual bidders bidding multiple times on a single auction, which would result in an overrepresentation of such bidders. Thus, 123,639 unique bidding combinations were included in the analysis. The primary information in the data is the seller's screen name, each bidder's screen name, whether the bidder won or lost, and a unique identification number for each auction. We used this whole data to find if name letter branding and implicit distancing occur in actual transactions.

Analyses of rates of name letter matching are only useful when those rates can be compared to an objective standard. Continuous analyses therefore would provide us no insight into the phenomena under inquiry. Thus, in our analyses we follow a procedure developed by Jones et al. (2004) in which we calculated the random chance rate of name letter matching in the sample and compared that to the rate actually observed in the sample. To examine whether consumers implicitly distanced themselves from sellers whose screen names shared the same first character as their own under a particular condition, we needed to examine a subset of the

above data that included relatively high risk transactions. Our primary means of separating transactions in to high and low risk was by price. The reason for this is straightforward: fraud risk is the single most crucial risk felt by bidders on Internet auctions (Norrgard and Norrgard 1998). While it might seem intuitive to use seller's reputation (i.e., feedback ratings) as a proxy for fraud risk, feedback ratings on eBay are overwhelmingly positive. This has been shown in other academic studies, and indeed in our sample the median feedback rating was 98.8% positive. Therefore, the informational value of feedback ratings with respect to risk is greatly diminished. It is worth noting that while high prices may increase perceived risk, they may also serve as trust cues (Ba and Pavlou 2002). Since trust should be more apt to work against our proposed effect of implicit distancing, the use of bidding prices should be an especially strong test of our theorizing.

We designated auctions in which the final price was \$49.99 or above as high-risk auctions. When the price in an Internet auction is high, the risk of fraud, a negative characteristic, should loom particularly large to bidders. Any bidder who implicitly feels an association with the seller via a shared first character should distance themselves from that seller's auction as a mechanism of self-protection. We chose the cutoff point of \$49.99 based on a pretest of 70 participants. We successively gave participants price levels in twenty-dollar increments starting at \$10, and asked them at each price level if they begin feeling risky when participating in Internet auctions. The majority of participants began feeling risky at a \$50 price level (63%). We rounded this down to \$49.99 to get an even 20%-80% split of bids in the sample, and then proceeded with the analyses. Finally, in this subset we examined auction-winner-seller combinations rather than auction-bidder-seller combinations because the high bidders are the

ones who would have the greatest association with the seller and assume the greatest risk. This subset included data on 12,143 unique auction-winner-seller combinations.

Results and Discussion

Following Jones et al. (2004), we compared the proportion of bidder-seller pairs whose first characters should have matched if bidders and sellers paired up randomly with respect to first characters with the proportion of bidder-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 bidder proportions for each character, and summing these cross products across all characters in the sample (for a sample calculation, refer to appendix). On the basis of these calculations, the chance rate of bidder-seller name letter matching across all possible first characters in the sample was 5.13%. Based on similar calculations, the chance rate of winner-seller name letter matching across all possible characters in the high risk subset was 4.99%.

To test the prevalence of name letter branding, we first compared the observed proportion of first character seller-bidder matches with the chance rate in the sample. We expected that name letter branding would cause bidders to bid at a greater than chance rate on auctions where the seller's screen name had the same first character as their own. The chance rate of a first character match was 5.13%. The observed rate was 5.39%, about 5% greater than the chance rate [$\chi^2(1, n = 123,639) = 17.052, p < .001$]. Thus, there was a tendency for bidders to bid on auctions where the sellers' screen name has the same first character as their own. Therefore, we found the effect of name letter branding in Internet auction bidding behaviors.

Next, to test implicit distancing, we compared the observed proportion of first character seller-winner matches in auctions with final prices of \$49.99 or over with the chance rate in this subset. We expected that people would implicitly avoid winning high risk auctions when the seller's first character matched their own, as a mechanism of implicit distancing. The chance rate of a first character match was 4.99%. The observed rate was 4.58%, about 8% less than the chance rate, [$\chi^2(1, n = 12,143) = 4.331, p < .05$]. There is tendency for bidders to avoid winning high-priced auctions where the sellers' screen name has the same first character as their own, a manifestation of implicit distancing.

For completeness, we conducted a number of additional analyses. First, we explored the effects of feedback, though we did not expect to find any due to the aforementioned positive feedback bias on eBay. In the high-priced subset of seller-winner matches, we performed a median split on feedback ratings to allocate sellers into low versus high feedback groups. The expected rate of matching in the low (high) feedback group was 4.85% (5.14%) while the observed rate was 4.46% (4.69%), a difference of about 8% (9%) [p 's $> .10$]. These results confirmed our expectations, highlighting the insignificance of feedback ratings in Internet auctions.

Second, looking at winner-seller matches in auctions with a final price of less than \$49.99, we found results that, while not significant, are directionally consistent with name letter branding (observed matching rate 5.05% vs. expected matching rate 5.01%; [$\chi^2(1, n = 47,064) = 0.199, p = 0.66$]). This makes sense, however, since winning bids, often placed late in auctions, pose more risk than the more casual bidding that takes place earlier in auctions. Thus, despite the low prices, the riskiness of placing a potentially winning bid underscores self-protection motives and diminishes the effect of name letter branding. Consistent with this, when looking at bidder-

seller matches in auctions that had a final price of less than \$49.99, we find strong evidence of name letter branding (observed matching rate 5.46% vs. expected matching rate 5.16%; [$\chi^2(1, n = 81,607) = 15.04, p < .001$]). Furthermore, looking at winner-seller matches across all price ranges, we find results that are directionally consistent with implicit distancing, though they are not significant (observed matching rate 4.96% vs. expected matching rate 5.01%; [$\chi^2(1, n = 59,207) = 0.326, p = 0.57$]). Nevertheless, the implication is that placing potentially winning bids entails greater risk than casual bidding. Table 1 summarizes our key findings in the eBay data.

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Insert table 1 about here

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While few analyses of field data yield completely lucid results, we took some measures to rule out alternate explanations. By employing Jones et al.'s (2004) method of summing cross products to obtain the random chance of first character matches within the sample, we eliminated concern about the distributions of first characters among bidders and sellers in the sample. It should be noted that as in prior analyses of field data to detect implicit egotism, it was unnecessary to control for a third variable explanation. For example, sellers' feedback ratings would not have any influence on bidders' propensity to match up with or avoid sellers whose screen names have the same first character as their own. We assume that feedback ratings are randomly distributed across initial screen name characters because there is no reason to expect different letters to have systematically different feedback ratings. This assumption is further

strengthened by the fact that the feedback ratings on eBay are almost uniformly positive (Dellarocas 2003).

Study 1 presents a number of interesting findings. First, as expected we observed implicit distancing. When prices were high and presumably negative outcomes (e.g. a financial loss due to fraud) were salient, bidders whose screen names had the same first characters as the sellers' screen names avoided becoming firmly associated with that seller by becoming high bidders and engaging in a transaction. Second, we found evidence of the real world significance of the name letter branding effect. In actual bidding decisions, bidders had a propensity to bid in auctions in which sellers' screen names had the same first character as their own screen names.

Importantly, these two results combined suggest that perceptions of fraud risk moderate the influence of name letters on seller choice such that under low risk name letter branding prevails but under high risk implicit distancing prevails. Third, we show that name letter branding not only works for product brand names, but also for seller names as well. Fourth, it appears that as Pelham et al. (2005) suggested, this effect can operate through mechanisms other than one's birth characteristics such as name and date of birth.

While the results of study 1 gave initial evidence that implicit distancing was due to perceptions of fraud risk, we could not make a strong conclusion given the nature of field data. For example, we did not know with certainty that bidders indeed felt a greater degree of risk when prices were high. Also, one could argue that our observations are not due to variations in risk per se, but rather products sold at various price levels. For instance, could there be something about moderately-priced garments that induce name letter branding whereas expensive electronics induce implicit distancing? We cannot answer such a question with this data. Therefore, we transplanted the auction paradigm from study 1 and examined it

experimentally in study 2. In this study we manipulated auction prices while keeping the product constant to examine their influence on perceived risk and their role in determining the effect of name letter branding versus implicit distancing.

STUDY 2: IDENTIFYING THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED RISK IN IMPLICIT DISTANCING

Method

We recruited 94 consumers at a shopping mall in a metropolitan area in the U.S. They were assigned at random to a condition in a 2 (high vs. low price) x 2 (same vs. different name letter) between-subjects design. They received \$10 for participation in this study. Participants were exposed to a cover story that read, “You are shopping for a handbag and have come across the following auction.” Then, they saw a fictitious Internet auction in which a color photo of a handbag was displayed along with the seller’s name. Due to the nature of the product, we recruited only female consumers. Next, they provided their responses to independent, dependent, and background measures.

Independent Variables. Participants were run in yoked pairs such that the two participants were exposed to the identical seller name (e.g., Brendl et al. 2005). The experimenter created fictitious seller names – XX_Bags, where XX denote the first two letters of one of the pair’s name – by looking at participants’ names that they had printed on a bank check to be received upon the completion of the study. To illustrate, for a pair of Allison and Stephanie, the

experimenter would have used Al_Bags as the seller name for Allison to create the same letter condition, whereas the same Al_Bags would have represented the different letter condition for Stephanie. In the high price condition, the Buy-It-Now price (i.e., the price that the seller would immediately end the auction) was \$400 and in the low price condition, it was \$40. It is important to note that manipulating price may alter other constructs, such as perceived quality, and that the primary focus of study 2 was to replicate our field findings. Still, there are two primary reasons that price is a viable experimental manipulation of risk in this context. First, fraud risk looms particularly large in Internet auctions (Norrgard and Norrgard 1998). Second, if price does impact perceived quality in a positive way, then this manipulation should provide a strong test for our theory inasmuch as higher quality should engender self-enhancement and, thus, work opposite to our predicted effect. We decided on the price levels on the basis of handbag prices on eBay. The reason why we indicated the Buy-It-Now price in the auction was to give participants some idea about what it would take to win the auction because without the Buy-It-Now price, each participant might come up with her own price estimate of the handbag. Another important point is that Internet auctions generally utilize feedback ratings so that both sellers and buyers can ascertain the potential risk. To control for that, the seller in this study was described as a new seller.

Dependent Variables. We assessed all dependent measures on seven-point scales anchored by one and seven. First, we measured purchase intentions on two scales anchored by “not at all” and “very much,” and “totally unlikely: and “totally likely.” We averaged these items to form a purchase intention index ($r = .94$).

For perceived risk associated with the auction, participants indicated how much risk would be involved with the auction on four items, modified from Gürhan-Canli and Batra (2004) and anchored by “very little risk” and “a great deal of risk,” and “very low risk purchase” and “very high risk purchase.” They also indicated their level of agreements with the following two statements: “The decision to purchase this handbag involves high risk.” We averaged these four items to form a risk index ($\alpha = .85$).

We also collected several variables as confound checks. First, participants indicated their liking of the handbag that they had seen in the auction on two items anchored by, “very unfavorable” and “very favorable,” and “very bad” and “very good.” We averaged these items to form a product liking index ($r = .91$). Second, they indicated their Internet auction experience (1 = Yes, 2 = No) and their age. Third, we measured participants’ explicit self-esteem on a widely used scale (Rosenberg 1965). We converted the original four-point scales to seven-point scales and averaged these items to form an explicit self-esteem index ($\alpha = .88$). Finally, as a measure of hypothesis awareness, we asked participants to write anything that came to their mind regarding the study.

Data Exclusions. Following Brendl et al. (2005), we excluded three participants because they seemed aware of the hypothesis. This step was necessary in order to examine data only from participants who were not aware of the name letter. We further excluded 10 participants in yoked pairs who shared the same first initial (e.g., Allison and Anna). Therefore, the number of useable samples was 81.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation and Confound Checks. As expected, the high price condition led to a higher level of perceived risk ($M = 5.23$) than did the low price condition ($M = 4.33$) [$F(1, 77) = 26.87$, $p < .001$]. We did not find any other significant effect on the perceived risk across the conditions (p 's $> .28$). The product liking index ($M = 5.22$), age (ranged between 19 and 59, $M = 32.21$) and auction experience (38% had used Internet auctions) neither co-varied with the main dependent variable nor resulted in significance across the conditions (p 's $> .15$). More important, the explicit self-esteem index showed non-significant effects across all conditions (p 's $> .54$).

Purchase Intentions. We expected to observe the effect of implicit egotism (distancing) in the low (high) price condition. As expected, participants in the *low price condition* indicated *higher* purchase intentions for the *same* name letter seller than for the *different* name letter seller [M 's = 5.60 vs. 5.05, $F(1, 77) = 4.51$, $p < .04$], which is consistent with implicit egotism. In contrast, participants in the *high price condition* indicated *lower* purchase intentions for the *same* name letter seller than for the *different* name letter seller [M 's = 4.30 vs. 4.81, $F(1, 77) = 3.86$, $p < .05$], which is consistent with our notion of implicit distancing. This effect was qualified by a significant interaction of price level x name letter of the seller [$F(1, 77) = 8.46$, $p < .01$]. Figure 2 summarizes the results of study 2.

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Study 2 strengthens the result of study 1 by experimentally manipulating the risk associated with high versus low risk auctions. In studies 1 and 2 we find support for the idea that consumers in auctions implicitly avoid self-resembling sellers when high perceived fraud risk induces a self-protective mindset. Although we argued that implicit distancing stems from self-protection motives, we did not provide direct evidence for it. In study 3 we influence participants' mindsets when they choose a seller by manipulating the regulatory focus.

STUDY 3: DETERMINING THE SOURCE OF IMPLICIT DISTANCING VIA REGULATORY FOCUS

If the direction of implicit distancing goes from the stimulus to the self, then only characteristics of the stimulus should drive the effect. However, name letter branding and implicit distancing may occur for the same stimulus depending on people's self regulatory focus (Higgins 1997). People in prevention-focused mindsets should be vigilant about avoiding undesired end states. With respect to the self, this means that people in this mindset should be focused on avoiding damage to their self-concepts. Thus, if prevention-focused people become associated with an object via shared name letters, they should be more concerned about cutting off that avenue of potential damage to their self-concepts and psychologically move away from it (Snyder et al. 1986). In contrast, people in promotion-focused mindsets should be more attuned to potentially positive outcomes and should be eager to achieve those gains. Thus, if promotion-focused people become associated with an object via shared name letters, then they should be motivated to move psychologically closer to the object. Taken together, such a pattern would

indicate that both positive and negative name letter effects emanate from self-concept rather than the stimulus.

This suggests that in Internet auctions prevention-focused consumers will be more concerned about risk, whereas promotion-focused consumers will be more focused on getting a good deal. It follows that, given potential fraud risk by the seller, we will likely observe implicit distancing (name letter branding) among prevention-focused (promotion-focused) consumers. Study 3 was designed to test these ideas.

Method

We recruited 184 consumers at shopping malls in a metropolitan area in the U.S (female, $n = 128$; male, $n = 56$). They were assigned at random to a condition in a 2 (promotion vs. prevention focus) x 2 (same vs. different name letter) between-subjects design. They received \$8 for participation in this study. The experiment procedure was similar to that of study 2 and hence we will focus on differences in study 3 in the following sections.

Independent Variables. Participants were run in yoked pairs and the experimenter created fictitious seller names – XXbuying, where XX denotes the first two letters of one of the pair's name. Before looking at the fictitious auction, they were exposed to a regulatory focus manipulation adapted from Dholakia, et al. (2006). Those pairs assigned to the promotion-focus condition wrote a short essay on the concept of achievement and advancement in support of the principle: "Success in life is determined by action, not inaction." Those in the prevention-focus condition wrote an essay on the concept of security and caution by supporting the principle:

“Prevention is the best form of cure.” This manipulation task was disguised as a test for participants’ writing skills. Next, they read a cover story, “You are shopping for a cordless telephone and have come across the following Internet auction.” and they saw a fictitious Internet auction, where a color photo of a Panasonic 2 handset high-definition cordless telephone was displayed along with the product description and the seller’s name. The Buy-It-Now price was \$54.99. Finally, they provided their responses to dependent and background measures.

Dependent Variables. We assessed purchase intentions and perceived risk associated with the auction on the same scales used in study 2 (for purchase intentions $r = .85$, for risk $\alpha = .85$). To determine whether the regulatory focus was manipulated as intended, we asked the extent to which participants focused on getting a good deal from the seller (promotion) and avoiding fraud by the seller (prevention) on seven-point scales anchored by “not at all,” and “very much” (Mogliner, Aaker, and Pennington 2008). We also collected the same set of background variables as in study 2 as confound checks (product liking index, $r = .86$; explicit self-esteem, $\alpha = .82$). Finally, we assessed hypothesis awareness.

Data Exclusions. In order to examine data only from participants who were not aware of name letters in sellers, we excluded six participants because they noticed a similarity between their names and the sellers’ names (Brendl et al. 2005). We further excluded 14 participants in yoked pairs who shared the same first initial (e.g., John and Joan). The final number of useable samples was 168.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation and Confound Checks. First, to check whether the regulatory focus manipulation influenced participants' perception of risk in bidding on an auction hosted by an unknown seller, we conducted a 2 x 2 ANOVA on the promotion measure. We observed only a main effect of regulatory focus [$M_{\text{prom}} = 5.07$ vs. $M_{\text{prev}} = 3.98$, $F(1, 164) = 50.56$, $p < .01$]. Similarly, a 2 x 2 ANOVA run on the prevention measure resulted in only a main effect of regulatory focus [$M_{\text{prom}} = 4.20$ vs. $M_{\text{prev}} = 5.52$, $F(1, 164) = 74.00$, $p < .01$]. Furthermore, a 2 x 2 ANOVA conducted on the perceived risk index revealed only a main effect of regulatory focus [$M_{\text{prom}} = 4.21$ vs. $M_{\text{prev}} = 5.33$, $F(1, 164) = 52.50$, $p < .01$]. In summary, our manipulation worked as anticipated. Second, as a confound check we ran a 2 x 2 MANOVA on the background variables. No effect was significant (p 's $> .21$).

Purchase Intentions. We expected to observe the effect of implicit egotism (distancing) in the promotion-focus (prevention-focus) condition. As expected, participants in the *promotion-focus condition* indicated *higher* purchase intentions for the *same* name letter seller than for the *different* name letter seller [M 's = 5.14 vs. 4.74, $F(1, 164) = 4.10$, $p < .05$]. This is in line with implicit egotism. Conversely, consistent with implicit distancing, participants in the *prevention-focus condition* reported *lower* purchase intentions for the *same* name letter seller than for the *different* name letter seller [M 's = 4.11 vs. 4.50, $F(1, 164) = 4.16$, $p < .04$]. This effect was qualified by a significant interaction of regulatory focus x name letter of the seller [$F(1, 164) = 8.25$, $p < .01$]. This result provides strong evidence that implicit distancing stems from people's motive to protect themselves in anticipation of potential negative implications to self-concept. Figure 3 summarizes the results of study 3.

Insert figure 3 about here

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This article contributes to our understanding of the role of implicit self-judgments in evaluation and choice by providing insights into the self-concept maintenance strategies employed in response to or in anticipation of negative implications for self-concept. In particular, we proposed and demonstrated that when faced with a self-resembling stimulus that poses a potential risk to one's self-concept, one will not use an enhancement strategy but rather will implicitly distance oneself from the stimulus. Thus, due to the complementary nature of enhancement and protection, this work adds a piece to Brendl et al.'s (2005) name letter branding phenomenon rather than contradicting it. In study 1 we showed the effects of implicit distancing and name letter branding in actual Internet auction transactions. Bidders had tendencies to participate in auctions when sellers' screen names had the same first character as their own screen names, but avoided becoming committed to those auctions when prices, and thus risk became high. In study 2 we experimentally demonstrated that the high prices in study 1 created heightened perceptions of risk, thus causing the implicit distancing effect. We also demonstrated that both name letter branding and implicit distancing emanate from self-concept, not from the stimulus. In study 3 we showed that given the same stimulus, promotion-focused participants preferred a name-lettered seller but prevention-focused participants preferred a non-

name-lettered seller. In making these observations we also discovered that name letter branding and implicit distancing can work through non-birth given mechanisms, and that both influence actual purchase behavior. In summary, four unique contributions arise from this research. We will discuss implications of each contribution below.

Implicit Distancing

Our finding of implicit distancing completes the general mechanism of how self-concept maintenance influences decision-making. A considerable amount of research has demonstrated that people gravitate toward stimuli that resemble them even in the most superficial way, thus causing name letter branding (Brendl et al. 2005). Although others have speculated on the possibility of a reversal of implicit egotism (Pelham et al. 2005), no evidence had been reported. This research demonstrates that the entirety of self-concept maintenance, including enhancement *and* protection, can make people either gravitate toward or move away from self-resembling stimuli, and adds to research on the self by further showing the complex roles of the self-concept in decision making. Particularly pertinent in this point are the results of study 3. By showing that people's self regulatory focus impacts their behavior with respect to name lettered objects, we provide direct evidence that it is the self, and not the stimulus, that is at the center of the effects.

How does this research fit in with Brendl et al.'s (2005) pioneering work on the name letter branding effect? In their proposed two-stage process, people inherently like themselves and then that positive valence transfers to specific attributes of the self-resembling object. Understandably, the products in their experiments (crackers, teas, candy bars) did not have characteristics that were perceived to be risky enough to warrant a protection strategy for self-

concept maintenance. Rather, it seems that the valence transfer simply boosted characteristics that were perceived as either neutral or positive, and so name letter branding prevailed. Does implicit distancing follow a similar process? In other words, do consumers ascribe negativity to certain stimuli that resemble the self? Based on our results, the answer appears to be “yes”.

When people are concerned with protecting their self-concepts, whether it is via anticipation of risk or prevention focus, they deflate their evaluations of self-resembling stimuli as a means of distancing. This is simply another side to the self-concept maintenance coin that includes both enhancement and protection.

One may think that implicit distancing is incompatible with a recent finding that people gravitate toward negative performance outcomes that share their name letters (Nelson and Simmons 2007). For instance, *Denise* is more likely than *Alice* to earn *D* grades. On the surface, negative performance outcomes should engender self-protection and people who share name letters with the labels on negative outcomes should be particularly averse to achieving those outcomes. However, performance tasks themselves could serve as an immediate self-threat and thus invoke a response of self-enhancement, which, in turn, results in implicit egotism (Jones et al. 2004). Furthermore, since the groups of people that Nelson and Simmons examined are in general promotion-focused (Aaker and Lee 2001), it is fair to assume that most of them wanted to do well in a performance task and, therefore, they were likely to exhibit implicit egotism. Nonetheless, future work should systematically examine the role of enhancement and protection in performance tasks.

Risk Perception As the Driver of Implicit Distancing

By showing that consumers' perceptions of fraud risk drive implicit distancing we extend the previous argument that people consciously try to distance themselves from stimuli that share negative characteristics with them (Jung 1951/1978; Snyder et al. 1986). Our finding suggests that distancing is more pervasive than previously thought. That is, people even subconsciously try to distance themselves from stimuli that have highly superficial self-resemblance (i.e., name letters).

Coupled with Brendl et al.'s (2005) name letter branding, our finding of implicit distancing leads to some interesting implications. As recently noted by Simonson (2005), technology has made it possible for companies to create customized offers for individual buyers. 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 article as well as others regarding name letter preferences suggest that one way to influence choice is through the buyer's name letters. In low risk environments, sellers can 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 influenced the completion and return rate of a mail questionnaire (Garner 2005). However, our research suggests 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.

While it has been shown that Denise has a propensity to become a dentist, in light of our findings how might this effect go for professions that are 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, and thus a very risky place to live, 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 letter.

Real World Evidence and Auctions

The result of our eBay data strongly supports extant research on name letter branding, and extends Brendl et al.'s (2005) findings from product brand names to seller names. Skeptics might have been hesitant about giving full endorsement to the pioneering works on implicit egotism and name letter branding (Brendl et al. 2005; Pelham et al. 2005) because it seems absurd to believe that a superficial thing such as name letters can influence not only major life decisions but also mundane consumption decisions. However, the fact that our finding is based on behaviors of an enormous number of people with totally different demographic and psychographic backgrounds provides undeniable evidence of how tightly people are subconsciously tied up with the self-concept when making decisions.

Additionally, 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 influence bidder behavior. This article 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 price and commitment to purchase, and thus in terms of risk, bidders distance themselves from sellers whose screen names share the same first character as their own.

Non-birth-given Characteristics

The finding that even a non-birth-given characteristic (i.e., eBay screen name) leads to name letter branding and implicit distancing highlights the complexity of the self-concept. There are numerous other self-identifiers that may be a conduit for name letter branding and implicit distancing. One such self-identifier is national identity or ethnicity. For example, aside from country-of-origin effects, are Koreans over- or under-represented among Kia owners? Other such self-identifiers include the brands of products that people use. For instance, do people whose identities are tied into driving Lexus cars have a propensity to choose brands whose names begin with *L* (e.g., Lenovo vs. Dell notebook PCs)? The answers to such questions are likely to surprise, but will also help us understand the capriciousness of human decision-making.

APPENDIX

Sample calculation for random match of first character in the sample

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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TABLE 1: FIRST CHARACTER MATCHES IN EBAY DATA: EXPECTED PERCENTAGE
VS. OBSERVED PERCENTAGE

PRICE	All	<\$49.99	>\$49.99	>\$49.99	>\$49.99
FEEDBACK	All	All	Low	High	All
Winner-Seller	5.01% > 4.96%	5.01% < 5.05%	4.85% > 4.46%	5.14% > 4.69%	4.99% > 4.58%*
Bidder-Seller	5.13% < 5.39%*	5.16% < 5.46%*	-	-	-

> is consistent with implicit distancing. < is consistent with name letter branding.

* $p < .05$

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

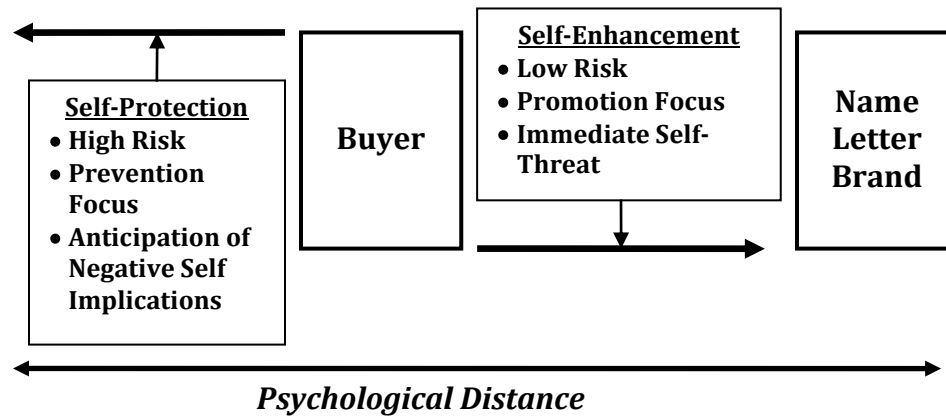


FIGURE 2: PURCHASE INTENT AS A FUNCTION OF SELLER NAMES AND AUCTION PRICE

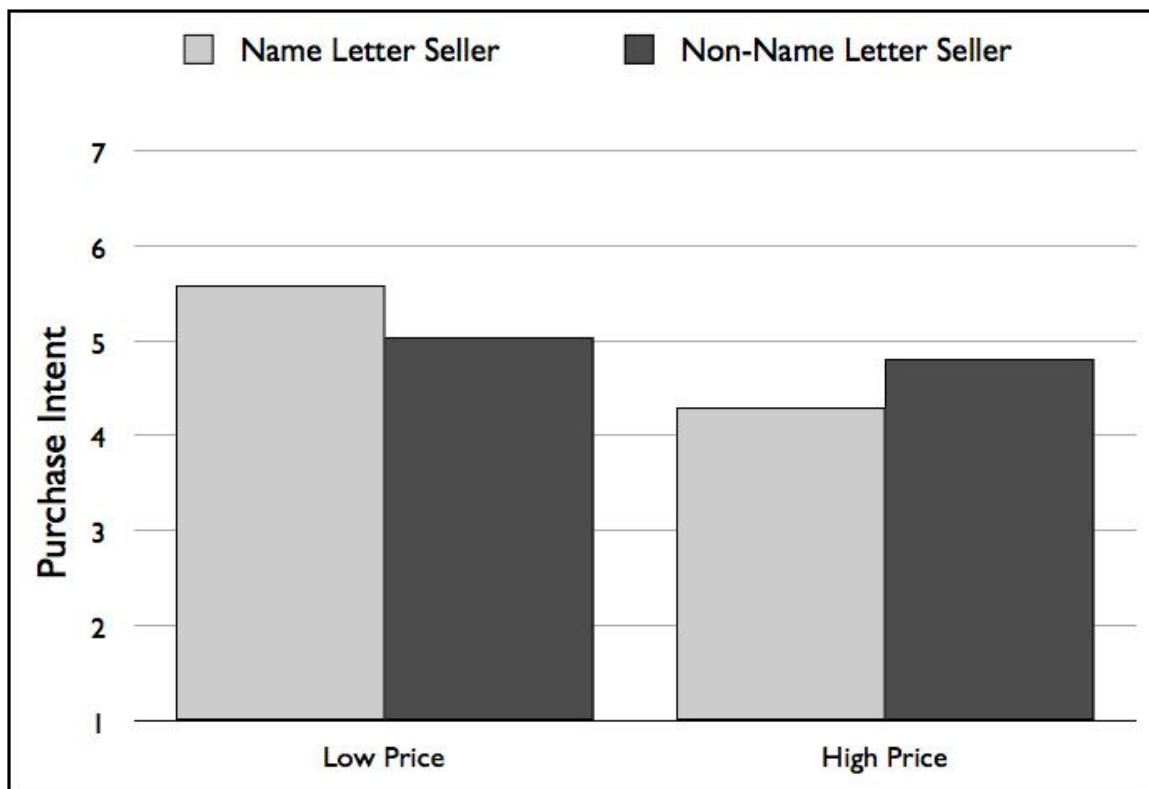


FIGURE 3: PURCHASE INTENT AS A FUNCTION OF SELLER NAMES AND SELF REGULATORY FOCUS

