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Seeing oneself in one's choices: Construal level and self-pertinence of electoral and consumer decisions

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ABSTRACT

Building on previous research examining the implications for self-regulation and decision making of construing action at varying levels of abstraction, the authors proposed that construing action in terms of its abstract purposes facilitates orienting one's decisions toward the standards, characteristics, and goals that define one's desired self-concept. Consistent with this proposal, desiring for oneself a political candidate's personal qualities predicted evaluating favorably (in Study 1) and voting for (in Study 2) that candidate to a greater extent among participants focused on the distal future (and presumably construing action at a relatively high-level of abstraction) than the proximal future (and presumably construing action at a relatively low-level of abstraction). Moreover, individuals chronically construing action in high-level terms responded more favorably to advertisements appealing to their desired self-concept (in Study 3) than to product quality. These findings' implications for decision making are discussed.

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Everyday life entails innumerable decisions that can be interpreted in myriad ways. Consumer purchases, for instance, can be based on a product's appearance, performance, durability, price, and environmental impact, as well as on how it was created (e.g., sweatshop-free clothing) and acquired (e.g., fair-trade coffee). Decision processing time itself also is a significant decision-making cost (Janis & Mann, 1977) that can undermine outcome satisfaction (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). How do people decide which of so many characteristics to base their decisions on? Extensive research has examined numerous factors directly impacting the salience of specific decision features, such as the scent of freshly baked cookies (Ditto, Pizarro, Epstein, Jacobson, & MacDonald, 2006) or the emotional expressivity of political candidates (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Glaser & Salovey, 1998). The present work sought to examine whether a general psychological variable, level of action construal, facilitates organizing many sorts of decisions along the single dimension of those decisions' relations to one's desired self-concept.

Action construal and decision making

Any action can be construed at varying levels of abstraction, from low levels, specifying its process, or *how* it is performed, to high levels, specifying its purpose, or *why* it is performed (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Individuals differ in their chronic tendencies to construe actions (such as "joining the army") in high-level terms

(e.g., "promoting the nation's defense") or low-level terms (e.g., "signing up"; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Increasing temporal distance also increases the salience of abstract, high-level features of actions and situations (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) has clarified the conditions under which decisions reflect desirability versus feasibility considerations (e.g., the interestingness versus admission price of a concert; Liberman & Trope, 1998), primary versus secondary considerations (e.g., whether a desired radio also includes a clock, Trope & Liberman, 2000), and outcomes versus procedures (e.g., the prize value versus selection criteria of lotteries; Sagristano, Trope, & Liberman, 2002). This research generally has shown that increasing temporal distance increases the extent to which decisions reflect the desirability of outcomes relevant to the primary identification of a particular activity. High-level action construals thus have been hypothesized to focus one's attention on an activity's essence, such that one orients one's decisions toward maximizing what one perceives to be the activity's central aim (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

Seeing oneself in one's choices

The present work examined how decisions come to reflect considerations external to the primary identification of a particular activity. Among the most abstract purposes people pursue is being the kind of person each of us aspires to be. Cybernetic models thus place desired self-concepts at the very top of goal hierarchies, with more concrete sub-goals serving as means of realizing those abstract self-standards (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1999, Fig. 1.5; Powers, 1973). Because perceiving discrepancies between actual and de-

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sired self-concepts causes negative affect (e.g., Higgins, 1987), people typically strive to behave consistently with their desired self-concepts, such that even relatively mundane actions can come to be viewed in relation to them (e.g., James, 1890; Kim & Markus, 1999; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). We propose, then, that construing an action (e.g., “joining the army”) in terms of its high-level purposes should lead one to consider not only its anticipated outcomes (e.g., “promoting the nation’s defense”), but also its relations to one’s own important self-guides (e.g., “being strong”; “being brave”; or “being responsible”). When focused on immediate, low-level details of action, in contrast, behaviors and decisions should be more likely to be viewed as compartmentalized within the domain or task at hand and therefore not pertinent to one’s self-views (see also Baumeister, 1990; Emmons, 1992), as has been speculated to be true of individuals who commit atrocities while focusing exclusively on the low-level details of their behavior (Lifton, 1986).

The present experiments tested the hypothesis that construing action in high-level terms, whether due to chronic individual differences (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) or to increases in temporal distance (Trope & Liberman, 2003), increases the extent to which one relates one’s present decisions to one’s self-standards. While potentially advancing research on decision making by showing how different sorts of decisions can become organized around the single dimension of those decisions’ relations to one’s desired self-concept, this proposal also can advance research on construal levels by showing how a high-level action construal can prompt one to go beyond the essence of a particular activity (cf. Trope & Liberman, 2003) to link that activity to one’s broader self-relevant goals. When deciding between political candidates, for example, the present analysis suggests that construing action in high-level terms should increase the extent to which one favors candidates whose characteristics are compatible with one’s own desired self-views. Analogously, consumer-product advertisements appealing to one’s desired self-views should be more effective among consumers construing action in high-level than low-level terms. These hypotheses were tested in three studies that either manipulated temporal distance (Studies 1 and 2) or measured chronic individual differences in action identification (Study 3).

Study 1: Personally admiring a presidential candidate

Participants first listed attributes of US politician Hillary R. Clinton. They next indicated the extent to which they desired possessing those attributes themselves and the extent to which they viewed H.R. Clinton to be qualified to be US President in the near or distant future. We propose that construing decisions in high-level terms facilitates linking those decisions to one’s own self-defining standards, thereby increasing one’s impetus to organize one’s behavior toward those standards. When evaluating or deciding between political candidates, construing action in high-level terms should increase attraction to candidates that embody the characteristics one strives to realize oneself. One’s choice then would be experienced as pertinent to how one sees oneself, rather than as a discrete, compartmentalized action with little bearing on one’s self-views. Accordingly, we predicted that desiring to possess H.R. Clinton’s attributes would predict perceiving her as qualified to be US president to a greater extent among participants focused on the distal rather than proximal future.

Method

One hundred twenty-four undergraduates participated in exchange for course credit. Participants first listed as many of Hillary R. Clinton’s personal attributes (defined as “her traits, her personal

strengths, and her weaknesses”) as they could. They next indicated the degree to which they personally desired possessing each attribute themselves, on a scale of 1 (“not at all”) to 6 (“extremely”). Using a scale of 1 (“Would be a terrible president”) to 7 (“Would be an excellent president”), participants in the *near-future* condition lastly were asked to “please imagine that the next election for the President of the United States could be held TODAY, RIGHT NOW. When thinking about voting today, right now, how qualified would you say Hillary Clinton is to be US president?” For participants in the *distant-future* condition, “today, right now” was replaced with “two years from now, in November 2008.”

Results and discussion

In a General Linear Model, participants’ evaluations of H.R. Clinton’s qualification to be president were modeled as a function of temporal distance, desire to possess H.R. Clinton’s attributes oneself, and the interaction between those two variables, yielding the predicted Temporal Distance \times Desired Attributes interaction, $F(1, 120) = 9.44, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$. As plotted in Fig. 1, the relation between perceiving H.R. Clinton as qualified and desiring for oneself her attributes was considerably stronger among participants assigned to the distant-future condition (Pearson’s $r = .73, p < .0001$) than the near-future condition (Pearson’s $r = .30, p < .02$). There were no significant differences ($ts < .32$) between participants in the near-future and distant-future conditions in number of attributes listed ($Ms = 4.27$ and 4.36 , respectively) or in rated desire to possess those attributes oneself ($Ms = 4.66$ and 4.71 , respectively), which is not surprising given that these variables were assessed before the temporal distance manipulation. In summary, these results suggest that increasing temporal distance increases the perceived qualifications of politicians who embody the characteristics that one desires oneself.

Study 2: Selecting student leaders pursuing one’s own (recently primed) goals

Study 2 examined participants’ votes for student leaders. Study 2 also manipulated (rather than measured, as in Study 1) the acces-

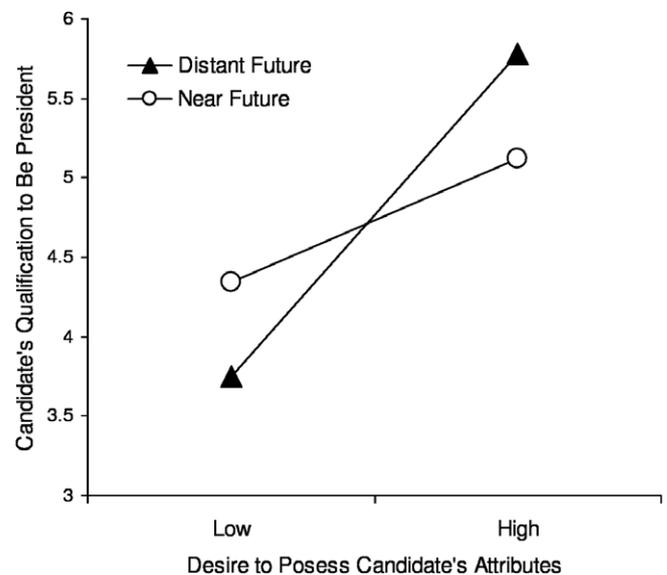


Fig. 1. Predicted values of perceiving Hillary R. Clinton to be qualified to be US President, for participants imagining H.R. Clinton to take office in the near or distant-future and scoring 1 SD above and below the group mean of desiring for themselves H.R. Clinton’s personal attributes.

sibility of participants' personal aspirations. Drawing on classic demonstrations of the motivational potency of uncompleted goals (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001; Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944; Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005), we focused participants' attention on either their uncompleted career goals or their uncompleted physical-exercise goals, and we manipulated whether candidates were portrayed as behaving compatibly or incompatibly with those goals. We predicted that participants considering candidates taking office in the distant-future would be most likely to vote for candidates behaving concordantly with their own accessible goals.

Method

Ninety-six undergraduates, participating in exchange for course credit, completed a series of computer-administered tasks.

Goal priming

In the first task, participants were assigned randomly to write about (by typing via a standard computer keyboard) an unfinished career or physical-exercise goal. Participants in the career-goal condition received the instructions excerpted below (*with exercise-goal instructions appearing parentheses*):

"We all have goals that we really want to attain but have not met yet. For example, most people want to have a great career (*to improve their health*), but we usually have not yet been able to reach our maximum potential. In this portion of the experiment, we will ask you to write briefly about currently unfinished goals you have concerning your CAREER (*PHYSICAL EXERCISE*)... Below please describe an unfinished goal you would really love to attain related to your career (*physical exercise*). Please provide enough detail to allow us to understand: (a) What is your unfinished goal; and (b) How meeting this goal would make you feel."

Participants also were asked to please list "one thing that could STOP you from reaching this goal; (2) one thing that could HELP you reach this goal; (3) one good feeling you would feel if you could reach it; and (4) ANOTHER good feeling you would feel if you could reach it." After completing the goal-priming task, participants completed a series of unrelated filler questions concerning their preferences between abstract figures.

Voting for student leaders

Participants were told that, in collaboration with the Psychology Department, with other universities in the northeast United States, and with a national honor society in psychology, experimenters were using the subject pool to conduct an election. Participants assigned to the near-future condition were told that they would be electing a representative for a term beginning within 1 month, whereas participants assigned to the distant-future condition were told that they were electing a representative for a term beginning approximately 13 months later.

Participants then viewed photos and brief descriptions ostensibly provided by each candidate. One photo depicted a college-aged woman running on a treadmill accompanied by an explanation that the candidate chose this photo because trying to stay healthy and fit is a goal that is important to her. The other photo depicted a college-aged woman in a lab coat looking at an X-ray, accompanied by the explanation that the photo was taken at the candidate's internship in a medical laboratory, chosen because the candidate is excited about the career potential this internship has created for her. In neither photo was the candidate's face visible. Participants made their selections for the position of the Northeast Regional Secretary by using a computer mouse to click a box beneath the photo candidate of their choice (with the two photos' left/right

screen positions counterbalanced randomly across participants). Lastly, participants used 5-point scales (1 = "not at all"; 5 = "extremely") to rate the physical attractiveness and perceived competence of each candidate.

Results

Fig. 2 plots the number of votes candidates received as a function of temporal distance and the candidates' compatibility with participants' accessible goals. A chi-square test of independence showed that the effect of goal compatibility on voting preference was moderated significantly by temporal distance, $\chi^2(1, N = 96) = 3.81, p = .05$. This Temporal Distance \times Goal Compatibility effect was not moderated further by the content of the goals (exercise vs. career) participants were assigned, $\chi^2(1, N = 96) = .38$. Participants in the distant-future condition chose the candidate behaving compatibly with their own goal more often ($n = 37$) than the candidate behaving incompatibly with their own goal ($n = 14$), $\chi^2(1, N = 51) = 10.37, p < .001$. In contrast, participants in the near-future condition chose the candidate behaving compatibly with their own goal about as often ($n = 24$) as the candidate behaving incompatibly with their own goal ($n = 21$), $\chi^2(1, N = 45) = .20, p = .65$. Finally, in a logistic regression predicting goal-compatible votes, the effect of temporal distance remained significant, $B = 1.11, SE = 0.50, \chi^2 = 5.01, p < .05$, when controlling simultaneously for the rated difference between goal-compatible and goal-incompatible candidates in competence, which itself predicted candidate choice, $B = 0.86, SE = 0.29, \chi^2 = 8.98, p < .01$, and attractiveness, which itself did not predict candidate choice, $B = -0.11, SE = 0.22, \chi^2 = 0.27, p > .60$.

Discussion

Personal exercise habits appear quite distinct from the essence of what it means to represent an academic honor society. Nevertheless, in Study 2, participants expecting representatives of a student honor society to take office in the distant-future, but not the near-future, strongly favored the candidate portrayed as working to accomplish participants' own unfinished goals of physical exercise or career advancement. Accordingly, these results converge

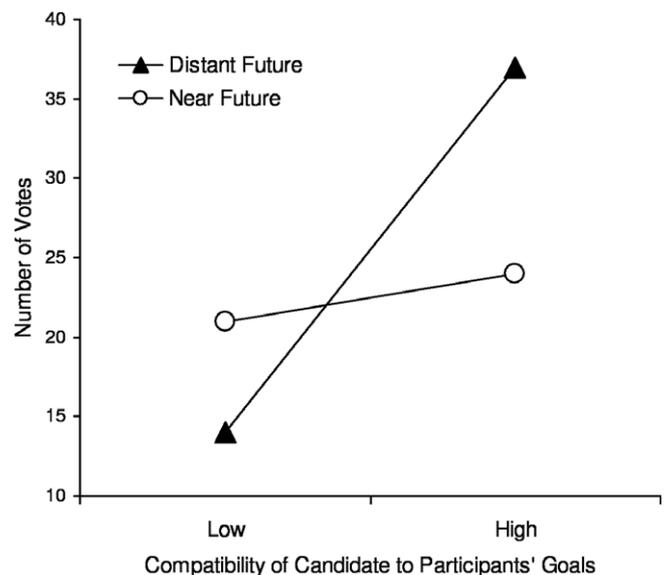


Fig. 2. Number of votes for student candidates described as behaving compatibly or incompatibly with the experimentally primed goals of participants expecting the candidates to take office in the near or distant-future.

with those of Study 1 to suggest that increasing temporal distance can lead decision-makers to move beyond the primary identification of a particular activity to organize their decisions around their own self-defining goals.

Study 3: Seeing oneself in one's product choices

Studies 1 and 2 examined how options' characteristics impacted participants' preferences and choices among them. Those studies' findings of the changing appeal, across temporal distance, of concordance of a political candidate's characteristics with one's desired self-views suggest potentially valuable applications to persuasion. Among social psychology's earliest domains of study (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), the science of persuasion has fostered prominent fields of study tied intricately to information processing (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and self-perception (e.g., Bem, 1972; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993; Stone & Cooper, 2001), processes central to the presently proposed hypothesis that construing decisions in high-level terms facilitates relating those decisions to one's self-concept. Directly examining the efficacy of persuasive appeals thus appears a natural application of the present theorizing. As a practical matter, moreover, many efforts at persuasion must be made at varying temporal distances from the behaviors and decisions they target, as when political candidates begin advertising a year before an election or when junior high school awareness programs begin the long process of convincing children not to drink and drive. Individuals also vary in their chronic tendencies to construe action in high-level and low-level terms (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), and this variability may moderate the efficacy of persuasive appeals, just the influence of health-behavior messages varies as a function of individual-difference variables including need for cognition (Williams-Piehot, Schneider, Pizarro, Mowad, & Salovey, 2003) and approach/avoidance motivation (Mann, Sherman, & Updegraff, 2004).

Study 3 contrasted the persuasive appeal of product advertisements framed in terms of participants' desired self-views and product quality. In an additional departure from Studies 1 and 2, Study 3 pursued an individual-differences approach, assessing participants' chronic levels of action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). We predicted that individuals who chronically construe action in high-level terms (e.g., those who construe "voting" as "influencing an election" rather than as "marking a ballot") would respond more favorably to advertisements framed in terms of their desired self-concepts (e.g., "Lexus. Because it's all about you") than in terms of product quality (e.g., "Lexus. Only the very best").

Method

Forty-two undergraduates, participating in exchange for course credit, completed computer-administered tasks assessing evaluations of product advertisements and individual differences in level of action identification.

Individual differences in action identification

Level of action construal was assessed with the Behavior Identification Form (BIF), a 25-item dichotomous-response questionnaire developed by Vallacher and Wegner (1989). For each item, participants read an action (e.g., "voting") and indicate which of two identifications most appropriately describes it. The choices correspond to high-level identifications (e.g., "influencing an election"), coded 1, and low-level identifications (e.g., "marking a ballot"), coded 0.

Participants were informed that they would view 12 different advertisements, under instructions that "these are ads we are eval-

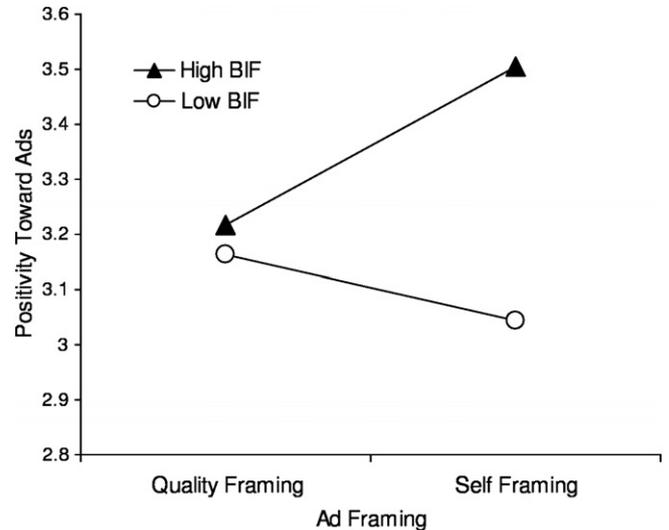


Fig. 3. Predicted values of attitudinal positivity toward advertisements framed in terms of participants' desired self-standards or product quality, for participants scoring 1 SD above (high BIF) and below (low BIF) the group mean in chronic level of action identification, as assessed via Vallacher and Wegner's (1989) behavior identification form.

uating in cooperation with researchers at a business school and with actual ad agencies. Please keep in mind that each product will be shown several times, so please pay careful attention to the different messages that are shown with the pictures of the products." In randomly varying orders, participants then viewed the self-concept-framed and product-quality-framed ads for each of six products (see Appendix A). For each ad, participants used computer keyboards to complete three statements: "My overall impression of this advertisement is: (1 = unfavorable; 6 = favorable)"; "My overall impression of this advertisement is: (1 = dislike; 6 = like)"; and "If given the opportunity to buy this product, I: (1 = definitely would not buy it; 6 = definitely would buy it)."

Results

Each participant's responses to the 25 BIF items were averaged to form an index of level of action identification ($M = 0.58$; $SD = 0.22$; $\alpha = .86$).

Advertisement evaluation

Each participant's reported liking of, favorableness toward, and inclination to buy the advertised products were averaged to form indices of positivity toward the self-concept-framed ads ($M = 3.27$; $SD = 0.71$; $\alpha = .94$) and the product-quality-framed ads ($M = 3.19$; $SD = 0.69$; $\alpha = .94$). In a General Linear Model, these positivity ratings were modeled as a function of Action Identification, Ad Framing (with repeated measures), and the interaction between those two variables, yielding the predicted Action Identification \times Ad Framing interaction, $F(1,40) = 5.38$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. Clarifying the nature of this interaction, as plotted in Fig. 3, level of action identification correlated significantly with positivity toward the self-concept-framed ads (Pearson's $r = .32$, $p < .05$) but not the product-quality-framed ads (Pearson's $r = .04$, $p > .80$).

Discussion

The desirability of features central to the primary identification of an activity strongly influences decisions construed at high levels of abstraction, as when the anticipated funniness of a comedy mo-

vie is weighted more heavily by people expecting to view the movie in the distal rather than proximal future (Trope & Liberman, 2000). Study 3 thus provided a strong test of the present theorizing, in that product advertisements appealing to participants' desired self-standards were contrasted with product advertisements directly extolling the quality of features central to each product's primary usage. As reported above, participants' chronic levels of action construal correlated with their positivity toward the self-standard-framed advertisements to a significantly greater extent than the product-quality-framed advertisements. Independent of an activity's primary identification, then, its relation to one's self-standards appears particularly influential for decisions construed at high levels of abstraction.

General discussion

What do people think they're doing when they decide between different political representatives, automobiles, and brands of coffee? Building on previous research examining the implications for self-regulation and decision-making of construing action at varying levels of abstraction (Carver & Scheier, 1999; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), we have proposed that construing action in terms of its abstract purposes facilitates orienting one's decisions toward the standards, characteristics, and goals that define one's desired self-concept. Consistent with this proposal, the present research found that desiring for oneself a political candidate's personal qualities predicted evaluating favorably (in Study 1) and voting for (in Study 2) that candidate to a greater extent among participants focused on the distal future (and presumably construing action at a relatively high level of abstraction) than the proximal future (and presumably construing action at a relatively low level of abstraction). Moreover, individuals chronically construing action in high-level terms favorably responded to advertisements appealing to their desired self-concept (in Study 3).

These findings highlight several issues warranting further consideration. For example, rather than orienting one's decisions towards one's self-standards, might construing action abstractly simply increase the overall number of features deemed pertinent to a decision, such that one initially "wants it all" but then narrows the number of features considered when lower-level action construals are adopted?¹ This alternative view potentially could apply to findings from Study 1, in that the relatively stronger weighting of personal admiration of a political candidate among participants in the distant-future condition might be assumed to be but one example of a more general process by which many other sorts of features would be weighted more strongly when construing action in high-level than low-level terms. In Study 2, however, participants in the distant-future condition weighted particularly strongly only those aspects of candidates' descriptions that matched participants' primed self-standards. In Study 3, participants' levels of action construal predicted favorable evaluations of advertisements appealing to participants' desired self-concepts but not the quality of the particular products. In summary, the alternative idea that high-level action construals increase the number of features that decision-makers consider should predict a main effect of level of action construal on weighting of any features, which cannot explain the interaction effects observed in Studies 2 and 3, whereby participants construing action in higher-level terms weighted only self-pertinent decision features particularly strongly.

Another challenge to validating the presently conceptualized process is establishing its generalizability and, conversely, the boundary conditions delimiting its operation. Findings from Studies 1 and 2 might appear to suggest that adopting high-level action

construals will facilitate attending to the fit between any political candidates' personal qualities and one's own self-standards.¹ However, the present theorizing suggests that such effects should transpire only when people need to make decisions about political candidates, given our proposal that construing action abstractly causes people to interpret the act of deciding itself as pertinent to their self-standards. Further research will be needed to evaluate this possibility by manipulating whether political representatives represent participants' choices or not.

Future research also is needed to examine the impact of level of action construal on the perceived self-pertinence of decisions in other domains. For example, to the extent that cross-cultural variability in decision-making reflects differences in individuals' self-concepts across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the present analysis suggests that stronger culture effects on decision-making should emerge when people construe action abstractly and hence are more likely to view a particular decision (e.g., "Should I take the most popular pen?"; Kim & Markus, 1999) as pertinent to how they view themselves. If the present theorizing is correct, level of action construal also should moderate one's anticipated satisfaction in living up to one's important self-guides, a possibility which recently received provisional support from a study of anticipated satisfaction when providing support to close others (Langsam, 2007). Finally, a relatively direct application of the present work can investigate whether level of action construal moderates the persuasive appeal of health messages framed in terms of one's desired self-concept (cf. Rothman & Salovey, 1997).

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Appendix A. Advertisement messages framed in terms of product quality or consumers' desirable self-concepts, Study 3

Product-quality framing

- (1) The most innovative computers in the industry. We set the standard in performance.
- (2) There has never been a better cup of coffee. Fresh, smooth, aromatic, simply unrivaled.
- (3) High performance. What could be better? Buy a hybrid and add horsepower.
- (4) LLK Jewelry. Isn't it time to own the best?
- (5) LEXUS. Only the very best.
- (6) Buy high-performance clothing, because the best t-shirts are made of the best materials.

Self-standards framing

- (1) The most innovative computers in the industry. How successful do you want to be?
- (2) What is important to you? Save a life. Save a community. Save the environment. Buy fair trade coffee.
- (3) How do you define yourself? Buy a hybrid. Be part of the solution.
- (4) LLK Jewelry. Style, Elegance, Class. Aren't you worth it?
- (5) LEXUS. Because it's all about you.
- (6) Buy sweatshop-free clothing, because your t-shirt says a lot about you.

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these possibilities.

Note: These messages were presented with color images (identical across the two framings of each product) of (1) a young woman in business attire with a laptop computer, (2) coffee beans, (3) an automobile profiled against a backdrop of windmills, (4) wrist watches in a jewelry store window, (5) a luxury automobile, and (6) a green t-shirt.

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