The Things You Own Come With Free Blinkers: the Construal Level of Possessions

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Ownership is a key concept in consumer literature. Nevertheless, the psychological nature of ownership as a state remains understudied. We relate ownership to psychological distance and apply CLT to show that possessions are processed low levels of construal, and conversely, processing objects at low construal levels leads to ownership effects.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
Ownership of products and its transactions has recently been highlighted as one of the core topics unique to consumer research (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010). While extensive research has reported on effects of ownership – e.g. the endowment effect (Thaler, 1980), the mere ownership effect (Beggan, 1992), – much of this literature takes a transactional perspective where ownership is acquired or lost in a “legal”, objective way. This approach has banned the difficult to measure psychological state of ownership to a ‘black box’ between its antecedents and consequences. Only recently, consumer literature has begun to look at psychological ownership as a distinct phenomenon (Morewedge, Shu, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2009; Peck & Shu, 2009).

The perspective of psychological ownership allows to think about ownership as a continuum (contrary to legal ownership) and also permits a distinction between an affective and an ownership component in the study of ownership transactions (Shu & Peck, 2011).

However, this understanding is far from complete, and it is here that we aim for a contribution, by relating cognitive psychological ownership to the well-established concepts of psychological distance and Construal Level Theory (CLT) (Troe & Liberman, 2010). Many authors discussed the importance of “an association” between a person and objects in the genesis and perception of ownership (Beggan & Brown, 1994; Friedman, 2008). Here we test the hypothesis that the “(strength of) association” underlying psychological ownership can be seen as psychological closeness, with effects as predicted by CLT.

Ownership and construal level
Two studies aimed at testing whether owners think about objects in a more concrete way, a prediction based on CLT that should hold if owned objects indeed are psychologically closer than non-owned ones.

Study 1a used scenario’s (Waksnak, Trope, Liberman, & Aloney, 2006) to find that, when asking participants to classify objects in groups, professional movers made fewer categories (M = 1.97, SE = .059) than the owners of the objects to move (M = 2.15, SE = .063; t(85) = 2.07, p < .05). The same difference was observed between insurance brokers (M = 1.98, SE = .059) and the owners of objects (M = 2.17, SE = .065; t(85) = 2.12, p < .05).

Study 1.b omitted the third person perspective present in Study 1.a., showing an interaction effect (F(1,71)=10.14; p<0.005) indicating that participants were quicker to detect a detail-change between two near-identical pictures of a cup they were asked to imagine was theirs, relative to non-owners (t(71) = 2.18, p < .05). The opposite was true for global, contextual changes (t(71) = 2.35, p < .05). Ownership leads to a more narrowly focused attention on the possession, which is in line with what can be predicted from CLT literature.

Construal level and ownership
Mirroring the previous studies, we also tested whether a concrete mindset would instigate effects that are usually the result of ownership manipulations.

In study 2.a., a cup was shown and participants were asked to list reasons either why or how a cup can be used. We then gauged participants’ perceived ownership and valuation of this cup, finding an indirect effect where perceived ownership functioned as a mediator between the manipulation and valuation (M = .30, SE = .16, LL95% = .050, UL95% = .63).

Study 2.b. again used a manipulation of psychological distance, i.e. physical distance (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006), where by means of perspective in a picture, an object (in this case a Parker pen in an ad) is represented as close or far. Again, we found that manipulating psychological distance is related to ownership, as we found an indirect effect of this manipulation on valuation of this pen, mediated by perceived ownership (M = .62, SE = .32, LL95% = .095, UL95% = .137). In this study, we also find results indicating that owned objects are more included in the self, as measured by a modified version of the IOS-scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

Construal level and the endowment effect
Study 3 related the previous findings to literature (Carmon & Ariely, 2000) indicating that the endowment effect might be explained by the fact that owners focus closely on the (positive) attributes of the good. Buyers focus more on the money they stand to lose, and have to overcome the distance related to the hypotheticality of owning the good to evaluate it, which would put them in a state of higher mental construal. We investigate whether typical endowment studies might be explained in terms of changes in construal level (CL): participants were asked to evaluate an owned (non-owned) flat and list all places of significance in it (could be rooms or parts of rooms). This measure was used to assess the level of detail participants used in their thinking as a proxy for their construal level. Results showed an indirect effect of the ownership manipulation on valuation of the apartment, mediated by the number of places mentioned (M = 9641.63, SE = 5119.59, LL99% = 1676.18, UL99% = 22224.50). Actually, the same is true when we replace valuation with a scale of perceived ownership (Peck & Shu, 2009) (M = .16, SE = .10, LL95% = .0013, UL95% = .39).

DISCUSSION
In several studies, we show that ownership is associated with lower levels of construal, and that ownership is related to psychological distance. This is an important theoretical step that allows us to reconcile much of the literature related to ownership. Low construal level as a result of psychological ownership can explain the endowment effect (study 3), and can explain negative effects of ownership and materialism, like lack of empathy with others (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), temporal shortsightedness (Richins, 2011) and others. It also provides a more explicit interpretation of current definitions of ownership in terms of an association (Pierce, Kostova, & Rindfleisch, 2002), of the extended self (Belk, 1988), and of self-enhancement accounts of ownership effects (Cunningham, Turk, Macdonald, & Neil Macrae, 2008; Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Becker, 2007).

REFERENCES


