Walk a Mile in My Shoes: Psychological Ownership and Psychological Distance

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1013014/volumes/v40/NA-40

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Ownership is a key concept to set consumer behavior apart from related disciplines. Nevertheless, the psychological nature of this construct has been grossly understudied. Our studies use CLT to show that ownership is related to psychological closeness, and conversely, low construal levels facilitate seeing objects as one’s possessions.

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 (to what extent do your children feel the house they live in is theirs, although legally they probably have no claim?) 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 psychological ownership to the well-established concepts of psychological distance and Construal Level Theory (CLT) (Trobe & 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). In terms of 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. The studies reported below test this hypothesis.

OWNERSHIP AND CONSTRUAL LEVEL
These 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 are indeed lower in psychological distance than non-owned ones.

Study 1a used scenario’s (Waksłak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 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 1b. omitted the third person perspective present in 1.a.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).

Study 2 elaborated on the previous results by showing how typical endowment studies can 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).

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 3.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 3.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% = 1.37).

DISCUSSION
In several studies, we show that ownership is associated with lower levels of construal, and that in turn, lower construal level facilitates feelings of ownership. We consider our contribution to be twofold. First, we demonstrate that psychological distance is an important driver of psychological ownership. We start building a more explicit and comprehensive theoretical account of psychological ownership in which earlier studied idiosyncratic drivers of ownership effects can be embedded. Second, we use that framework to make new predictions about effects that further help our understanding of the nature of psychological ownership. Obvious implications might be found in store atmosphere design, in research that investigates the modalities of (psychologically) long-distance shopping (i.e. internet, mail order, future delivery, etc.) or perceptual effects in advertising. As the proposed framework allows for clear hypotheses about the processes that relate owners to their possessions, other future research could deal with the investigation of characteristics that loop back and forth between owners and their possessions. It would for instance be easy to imagine that self-worth affects the importance we attach to our possessions, and our findings could shed new light on the well-established idea that we derive status from certain types of possessions. In short, we are convinced that the theoretical step our work makes can spur future research in a host of domains.
REFERENCES


