

# They're just not that into you: Consumer-brand relationship insights

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Researchers from Western University, Indiana University, and Washington State University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that uses the idea of psychological distance as a way to

leverage qualities of existing consumer-brand relationships.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "They're Just Not That Into You: How to Leverage Existing Consumer-Brand Relationships through Social Psychological Distance" and is authored by Scott Connors, Mansur Khamitov, Matthew Thomson, and Andrew Perkins.

Marketing managers want consumers to form strong connections with their brands. This is reflected in the prevailing brand-management approaches that seek to continually move consumers from weak relationships to stronger ones where the consumer is more attached, connected to, or in love with a brand. But a scan of the marketplace and the branding literature makes it clear that such relationships are rare and that many consumers are relationship-averse or content with the status quo. That is, many consumers likely are unreceptive to marketers' relationship-strengthening tactics. The implication is that marketers are often fixated on building the types of relationships that countless consumers simply do not want, in essence choosing a potentially wasteful relationship-upgrading strategy unaligned with consumer preferences.

This study highlights the value for marketers to embrace the [relationship](#) status quo. As Connors explains, "We are the first to show advantages, like increased [consumer spending](#), by employing communication tactics tailored to consumers' existing relationships with the brand. We focus on the idea of psychological distance as a way of conceptualizing how close to or far from a brand that consumers themselves feel. We build on the idea that nearly all current approaches to assessing the strength of consumer-brand relationships are tied to this psychological distance." Because it is such a pervasive idea, and because it can be measured robustly with a single, theoretically-informed item, psychological distance has exceptional practical power. For example, the research shows that if managers understand the psychological distance between

consumers and brands, they can match that distance with different kinds of language in their marketing communications to form a mindset congruency. When the psychological distance to a brand and choice of language are congruent, information about that brand is more easily processed, which improves outcomes like brand spending and charitable donations. Khamitov adds, "Specifically, if consumers feel psychologically distant to a brand, we find they respond better to abstract, [high-level language](#), whereas we find that concrete language is preferred among consumers who feel very close to a brand."

As an example, one of the studies finds that for more distant brands, donations were 67% higher when an advertisement featured high-level, abstract (compared to low-level, concrete) language, whereas for closer brands, donations were 88% higher when the ad featured low-level, concrete (as compared to high-level, abstract) language. Another study documents that for more distant brands, consumers paid 35% more for a product when they saw an ad featuring abstract (versus concrete) language, but for close brands, consumers paid 28% more when the ad featured concrete (versus abstract) language.

The research also identifies conditions that make these mindset-congruency effects more or less likely to emerge. For example, the mindset congruency effect operates only in conditions where consumers are at least modestly involved with a particular product category. "We surmise that consumers who are very uninvolved with a category simply do not care enough to pay attention to marketing communications about associated products. Similarly, if a brand already has a deeply entrenched position in the marketplace, such as where the brand is thought of as extremely competent or extremely warm, we find that consumers' perception of the brand resists updating. In those instances, no strategic alteration of marketing communications is likely to break through consumers' robust prior beliefs about the brand," says Thomson. Perhaps most interesting, for brands characterized predominantly by

search attributes—those where qualities of the brand can be determined prior to purchase (versus experience attributes that require a consumer to use a brand to properly evaluate it)—the mindset congruency effect is reversed. In those instances, marketers should focus on abstract (concrete) [language](#) for close (distant) search brands.

Overall, the study's combination of field and lab studies presents a simple, yet powerful, theoretical and empirical account that allows marketers to leverage qualities of existing consumer-[brand](#) relationships rather than attempting the expensive and often ineffective strategy of 'upgrading' [consumers](#) into new and ever more committed relationships.

**More information:** Scott Connors et al, EXPRESS: They're Just Not that into You: How to Leverage Existing Consumer-Brand Relationships through Social Psychological Distance, *Journal of Marketing* (2020).

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