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New brand extensions can push a brand outside its typical boundaries. In this article, the authors argue that people's acceptance of such extensions depends on their feelings of control. Across several studies, the authors demonstrate that when feelings of personal control are low, consumers and managers seek greater structure in brands and thus reject brand extensions that do not seem to fit well with the parent brand. The authors also identify important boundary conditions that illustrate when consumers are most likely to punish a brand for poor-fitting brand extensions and how the effect can be mitigated.

Keywords: branding, brand extensions, structure, control, boundaries

Putting Brands in Their Place: How a Lack of Control Keeps Brands Contained

In January 2012, Starbucks (the largest coffeehouse company in the world) announced that it would extend its offerings to include beer and wine in select stores in the United States (Hutson 2012). Reactions from consumers and the media were immediate, abundant, and mixed. Although the announcement generated thousands of positive comments on the social media site Twitter from supporters of the plan, it also evoked the ire of those arguing that Starbucks should stick to its core offerings (Baertlein 2012). Will this extension be a success for Starbucks?

In a world in which brands are constantly in search of new sources of growth, extending brands into new areas is not uncommon. What determines whether people will accept such extensions? Fortunately, research suggests several important factors that drive people's perceptions of fit and their overall reactions to an extension, from contextual and consumer-related factors (e.g., mood, self-construal) to product-centered and marketing-focused factors (e.g., product features, available information, comparison brands, breadth of the parent brand) (see, e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Ahluwalia 2008; Barone and Miniard 2002; Klink and Smith 2001; Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012; Meyvis and Janiszewski 2004; Völckner and Sattler 2006).

Building on such research, we propose that the feeling of control—a critical element in people's lives (e.g., Kelly 1955; Lefcourt 1973; White 1959)—may be an important driver of brand extension reactions that research has overlooked until now. In developing this perspective, we first review research suggesting that people have an overarching desire to believe that they live in a world of order and structure rather than one of randomness and chaos. People are often able to maintain this sense of order and structure by believing that they are in control of the outcomes in their lives (Kay et al. 2008). This belief in personal control is often shaken, however, in the face of life-altering events, such as paralyzing economic downturns, random violence, natural disasters, and other tragedies that people experience directly or indirectly (e.g., on the evening news). Minor situations (often instigated by marketers themselves), such as product failures, out-of-stocks, and sweepstakes, may also shake feelings of control. In these situations, people look for other signs that the world is structured. We argue that people will seek structure in their brand choices and impose narrower mental boundaries regarding where brands belong, thereby limiting their perceptions of what extensions fit with the brands.

We first demonstrate the basic relationship between feelings of control and people's increased need for structure, or fit, in brand extensions (Studies 1 and 2). We then explore how this relationship is moderated by the presence of opportunities for asserting structure (Study 3). Finally, we present a competitive context in which we would expect to find a different relationship between feelings of control and perceptions of fit than previously discussed (Study 4). Together, these studies demonstrate how one of the most

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basic needs of everyday life affects people's reactions to brands. They also provide rationale for why fit is important on a broader level than has been previously explored by suggesting that consumers may reject poor-fitting extensions to avoid exacerbating feelings of randomness in their world and that reactions to fit may therefore provide a meaningful gauge of the structure that consumers perceive in their world.

SEEKING STRUCTURE: WHEN, WHY, AND HOW?

Personal control is often considered a basic human need (e.g., Kelly 1955; Lefcourt 1973; White 1959), defined as the extent to which a person can intentionally produce desired outcomes and prevent undesired ones (Skinner, Chapman, and Baltes 1988). One of the many benefits that personal control offers is freedom from the fear that the world is random and chaotic (Kay et al. 2008). In other words, if a person can control outcomes, things must not be randomly or chaotically determined; there must be a certain degree of order and structure to the way things work. The desire to be in control may often serve a larger, perhaps more primary, motive of maintaining a sense of structure.

In this article, we focus on the notion that when people cannot rely on feelings of control to thwart the fear of randomness, they find a sense of order and structure in their environment in other ways. For example, people seek order and structure by supporting powerful external systems, including the government and God (Kay et al. 2008; Kay, Moscovitch, and Laurin 2010), when feelings of personal control are low. Whitson and Galinsky (2008) demonstrate that people also seek structure in random noise (e.g., an array of black dots) when personal control is threatened. Cutright (2012) demonstrates that people even seek structure in the aesthetic elements of their surroundings when control is low. For example, the low-control people in her research chose logos, pictures, and product designs that contained strong aesthetic boundaries over those that did not. They also bought more from a store that maintained clear boundaries on its shelves than from a store that did not.

In the present research, we argue that consumers seek more than physical, aesthetic boundaries in their environment when control is low. They also require that products and services adhere to the invisible mental boundaries that have been erected to dictate where things belong. In other words, people want to feel as if things are contained within their designated space, bounded by an appropriate set of traits, attributes, and other associations. We suggest that in maintaining these tight mental boundaries when evaluating consumption options, people are seeking to feel as if the old adage "a place for everything and everything in its place" holds true in their lives.

Given that brand name products are the cornerstone of many consumption decisions and are regularly judged by the degree to which they maintain proper boundaries (e.g., whether new product and marketing decisions fit well with the brand's image), we specifically focus on the boundaries that people erect around brands. However, because brands are simply categories that efficiently communicate and provide structure to a variety of traits and attributes when the boundaries are properly maintained (Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Erdem and Swait 1998;

Keller and Lehmann 2006), we expect that our findings will extend to a variety of other types of consumption-related categories (e.g., services, marketing strategies, different groups of people)—a point to which we return in the "General Discussion" section.

In addition to enabling us to understand the mental boundaries that people try to maintain in consumption, this research also enables us to build an important connection between physical boundaries and mental boundaries. Building on Cutright (2012), the present research demonstrates that although mental and physical boundaries may differ in how they look, how they are formed, and where they exist, they serve similar functions for keeping things in place. Thus, they both increase in value when feelings of control are low. Our specific argument is as follows: When feelings of control are low, people have an enhanced desire for structure. They therefore mentally erect narrower cognitive boundaries that dictate the space in which a brand belongs (e.g., the attributes, benefits, other associations that fit with the brand). When extensions stretch a brand beyond such boundaries, consumers with low control will perceive the extensions as having "poor fit" (i.e., they detract from the brand's sense of structure).

As prior research has demonstrated, when people believe a brand extension has poor fit, whether fit is based on shared product features or brand associations (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991), they are less likely to consider purchasing the extension (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991; Völckner and Sattler 2006). Accordingly, we hypothesize that when feelings of control are low, people's lower perceptions of fit for questionable extensions will lead directly to lower overall evaluations for the extensions. Notably, we do not expect that feelings of control will influence attitudes toward good-fitting extensions—that is, extensions that do not stretch a brand outside its accepted boundaries. In such cases, people with low control will accept the fit of the extensions because structure is still maintained. We test this basic hypothesis in Studies 1 and 2.

Are Brand Fit and Evaluations Malleable?

To accept the stated hypothesis—that low feelings of control lead to poorer evaluations of poor-fitting brand extensions—we must believe that brand fit and evaluations are malleable enough to change across different contexts. Fortunately, research provides important insights in this area. Brands are categories (Boush and Loken 1991), and people's perceptions of what fits within a given category are highly flexible.

For example, research has shown that people's perceptions of product and brand categories change as a function of the person with whom the brand is shown (Wanke, Bless, and Schwarz 1999), the order of information receipt (Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001), and the presence of certain visual cues (Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012). Mood is also capable of changing brand category perceptions, with positive mood increasing perceptions of fit for extensions that are moderately similar to the core brand (Barone, Miniard, and Romeo 2000). Even individual and cultural factors such as self-construal and analytic versus holistic thinking can change category perceptions (Ahluwalia 2008; Monga and John 2006), a topic to which we return subsequently.

Perhaps most important to the research at hand, studies indicate that people's perceptions of what belongs in a given category also depend on their goals. For example, Barsalou's (1982) classic categorization research shows that people may consider items more or less similar to one another depending on the context in which the items are being considered. Items that typically seem very different from one another (e.g., record album and necklace) can seem quite similar when framed in the appropriate context (e.g., "possible gifts"). Ratneshwar et al. (2001) also demonstrate that when a health goal was salient, participants considered a granola bar to be closer to fruit yogurt than to a candy bar. Similarly, if a goal for convenience was salient, an apple was more similar to a donut than to an orange. Such goal-dependent categorization suggests that it is reasonable to believe when feelings of control are low and the need for structure is high, people may perceive categories (e.g., brands) differently.

Thus, perceptions of a brand category are malleable, depending on a variety of factors. As a result, the fit of an extension with the brand category is also malleable. As we noted previously, because fit affects evaluations of extensions (Aaker and Keller 1990; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991), evaluations are malleable as well.

It is important to note that although the prior research on context effects focuses on consumers' reactions to extensions, our hypotheses are not limited to consumer reactions. We expect that marketing decision makers will also be influenced by feelings of control. It can be argued that managers should be less subject to the psychological biases that affect consumers because they should think about the extensions more strategically. In other words, instead of relying on feelings of personal control to make brand extension decisions, they may be more likely to focus objectively on issues such as fit, positioning, brand portfolio effects, and other strategic implications of extensions (Nijssen and Agustin 2005). However, given how difficult it is to correct for unknown mental biases (e.g., feelings of control) (Wilson and Brekke 1994), we do not expect managers to be exempt from the influence of control on brand extension reactions. This suggests that feelings of control not only affect consumer evaluations but also whether a manager launches a product at all. We test this prediction in Study 3.

Is It Really About Structure?

We have suggested that it is a general need for structure that drives people to reject poor-fitting brand extensions when feelings of control are low. However, another argument is that people only reject poor-fitting extensions to avoid product risk. In other words, when control is low, people are less likely to indulge in risky propositions (Horswill and McKenna 1999), and poor-fitting extensions are often considered risky (Klink and Smith 2001). We posit, however, that people seek structure beyond a basic desire to reduce product risk. If this is true, we should find that when the need for structure is satisfied (in a way that does not address any specific product risks), people no longer require such tight fit and structure from brands. Consistent with prior research on goals, we expect that the tension related to finding structure will be relieved when another means for obtaining structure is provided (Förster, Liberman, and Friedman 2007). Thus, we hypothesize that low feelings of

control will lead to reduced perceptions of fit and overall reactions to a poor-fitting extension only when other opportunities for structure are not available. We test this hypothesis in Study 3.

Summary of Hypotheses

In summary, we hypothesize that when personal control is threatened and consumers consequently seek greater order and structure in their lives, they will form tighter boundaries around what a brand represents and where it belongs. Thus, we expect that such people will have lower perceptions of fit for a new extension and will be less likely to consider it. Importantly, this should only be true when brand extensions are clearly inconsistent with the brand—that is, when they violate the boundaries of the brand. When new extensions are within the brand's boundaries (and an acceptable sense of structure is maintained), people with threatened feelings of control will not react differently from people in a baseline state (Study 1 and 2). As an example, if Starbucks introduces wine and beer (an extension that seems outside its boundaries), people with threatened feelings of control will have lower perceptions of fit and evaluations than people at baseline. However, if Starbucks introduces a new espresso, this would fit inside the boundaries of the brand and evoke no differences between people with threatened versus unthreatened feelings of control.

The present research also explicitly highlights the motivation for structure that underlies the relationship between feelings of control and brand extension responses. We hypothesize that when control is low and the need for structure is consequently high, people's reactions to poor-fitting brand extensions will differ according to whether they have an opportunity to assert structure at that time. Specifically, we expect that when people have an opportunity to satisfy the motive for structure, the need for tight fit in brand extensions will be reduced. We explore this hypothesis for both managers and consumers.

Finally, in Study 4, we acknowledge the important role that the competitive landscape will have on the relationship between control and brand extension evaluations, building on Milberg, Sinn, and Goodstein's (2010) work. We explore one competitive situation in which we should observe a reverse pattern—in which people with low feelings of control are likely to see *enhanced* fit for a poor-fitting option. Specifically, we expect that when people face a consideration set wherein the best option in the set has poor fit, they will choose this poor-fitting option. However, those with low feelings of control must reconcile this choice of a poor-fitting option with their desire for structure. We expect them to do so by inflating their perceptions of fit, consistent with basic dissonance theory, which posits that people seek to maintain consistency in their thoughts, beliefs, and actions to avoid the psychological discomfort of conflicting cognitions (Elliot and Devine 1994; Festinger 1957).

STUDY 1

Study 1's objective is to demonstrate that when personal control is threatened, people are less likely to accept poor-fitting brand extensions. We show that this is because threatened feelings of control lead to more narrow perceptions of what fits with the brand. We also demonstrate that feelings of control will not affect good-fitting extensions.

Importantly, in this study and those that follow, we compare participants in a high state of control (“the baseline”) with participants whose control is threatened and shaken from this baseline (“low control”) to understand the effects of personal control. We consider high control synonymous with the baseline in our contexts, in line with research suggesting that people (in nondepressed populations) generally maintain high, overly optimistic perceptions of their control (e.g., Alloy and Abramson 1979; Langer 1975; Taylor and Brown 1988). We also test this notion in the following pretest.

Pretest

First, we conducted a pretest to confirm that our intended manipulations of control were effective. Sixty-five participants were recruited in a university lab, representing students from the same population as the main study. Participants were assigned to one of three conditions. In the high-control condition, participants thought of two things in their lives over which they had complete control. In the low-control condition, participants thought of ten things in their lives over which they had complete control. We modeled these two conditions after ease-of-retrieval manipulations (Schwarz et al. 1991) and designed them to minimize differences in the content of the manipulations while altering people’s perceived confidence in their degree of control. Our hypothesis was that people would feel less confident in their ability to control outcomes after they tried to think of ten things that were completely in their control than after trying to think of just two things. We also included a neutral condition to test the hypothesis that people’s baseline level of control is one of high control. Participants in this condition did not receive a manipulation and instead went directly to the subsequent measures.

Participants then completed the brief Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) as a measure of their current mood state (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988), a manipulation check to assess their feelings of control, and a state measure of self-esteem (Heatherton and Polivy 1991). In the control manipulation check (Kay et al. 2008), participants indicated how much they agreed with statements such as “The events in my life are mainly determined by my own actions” on a seven-point Likert scale ($\alpha = .83$).

The manipulation was successful at threatening people’s feelings of control. A main effect of the control manipulation on people’s perceptions of control emerged ($F(2, 62) = 5.61, p = .01; M_{LC} = 4.38, M_{HC} = 5.15, M_N = 5.28$), whereby people in the low-control condition reported lower feelings of control than those in the high-control condition ($F(1, 62) = 7.94, p = .01$). People in the low-control condition also reported lower control than people in the neutral condition ($F(1, 62) = 8.92, p < .01$). Those in the neutral and high-control conditions did not differ from one another ($F(1, 62) = .19, p = .67$). This latter contrast supports prior research suggesting that baseline perceptions of control are often quite high. Thus, we manipulate only low and high control in the main study.

The results indicated that the control manipulation affected neither positive mood ($F(2, 62) = .71, p = .49; M_{LC} = 3.19, M_{HC} = 2.92, M_N = 2.92$) nor negative mood ($F(2, 62) = 2.19, p = .12; M_{LC} = 1.48, M_{HC} = 1.18, M_N = 1.52$). However, in light of prior research suggesting that mood can

affect evaluations of brand extensions (Barone, Miniard, and Romeo 2000), we control for mood in the studies that follow. Notably, the 20-item measure of state self-esteem (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself”; 1 = “not at all,” and 5 = “extremely”; Heatherton and Polivy 1991) was not affected by control ($F(2, 62) = .80, p = .45; M_{LC} = 3.64, M_{HC} = 3.88, M_N = 3.82$).

Main Study Method

Participants. Fifty-nine students were recruited in a university lab. They were paid \$5 to take part in this study.

Procedure. The students were each assigned to one of two control conditions: the low or high personal control condition we described in the pretest. Participants then completed the manipulation check and the PANAS mood measures previously discussed. Next, in a randomly determined order, participants read about both a poor-fitting brand extension and a good-fitting extension. They read that Honda (a large automobile company) was considering opening a line of vacation resorts (poor fit) and go-kart racing centers (good fit) that would be located in different parts of the country. Both would have amenities and attractions for various age groups and would be very clean and entertaining. Participants rated the fit of the brand extensions using a two-item measure of perceived fit (seven-point scales anchored by “dissimilar/similar” and “inconsistent/consistent”) used in prior brand extension research (Ahluwalia 2008). They also indicated how likely they would be to consider the extension (seven-point scale: 1 = “very unlikely,” and 7 = “very likely”; Ahluwalia 2008). Importantly, we counterbalanced whether fit was measured before or after their overall evaluations. A pretest with 25 participants indicated that people believed the Honda Vacation Resort was a poorer fit ($M = 2.26$) than the Honda Go-Kart extension ($M = 5.70; t(24) = -10.10, p < .0001$).

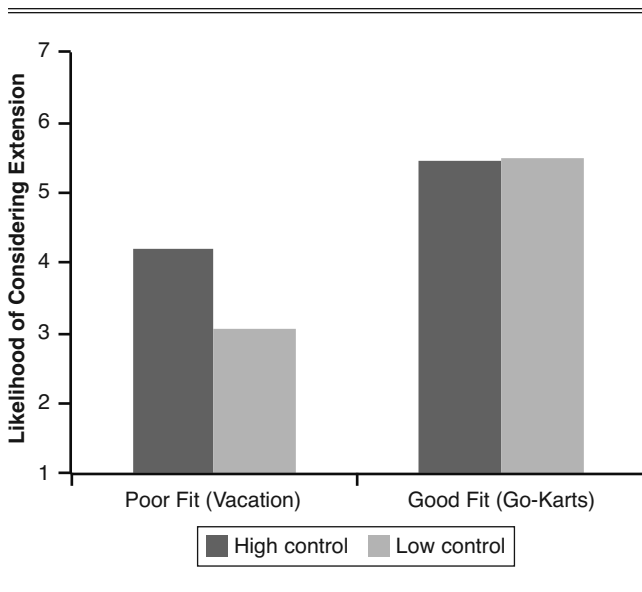
Results

Manipulation check. People in the low-control condition rated their feelings of control lower than people in the high-control condition ($F(1, 57) = 9.85, p < .01; M_{LC} = 4.16, M_{HC} = 4.93$). The manipulation did not generate differences in positive mood ($F(1, 57) = .39, p = .54; M_{LC} = 2.45, M_{HC} = 2.34$) or negative mood ($F(1, 57) = .82, p = .37; M_{LC} = 1.27, M_{HC} = 1.37$). As previously noted, we control for mood in the analyses that follow.

Overall evaluations. To determine whether the control manipulation affected consumers’ reactions to the poor-fitting and good-fitting brand extensions, we conducted a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), revealing an interaction of the control manipulation (low vs. high, between-subjects) and fit type (good vs. poor, within-subject) on overall evaluations of the brand extensions ($F(1, 56) = 6.72, p = .01$; see Figure 1). To probe this interaction, we first analyzed the effect of the control manipulation on the poor-fitting Honda Resort extension. As we expected, participants in the low-control condition were less likely to consider the poor-fitting extension than those in the high-control condition ($F(1, 58) = 7.93, p = .01; M_{LC} = 3.05, M_{HC} = 4.22$).¹ We then analyzed the effect of the control

¹This pattern did not differ on the basis of the order in which the fit measure was taken (interaction with order: $F(1, 54) = .30, p = .59$).

Figure 1
STUDY 1: IMPACT OF FEELINGS OF CONTROL ON
POOR-FITTING AND GOOD-FITTING BRAND EXTENSION
EVALUATIONS



manipulations on the good-fitting Honda Go-Kart extension. There were no significant differences in ratings based on low versus high feelings of control for this extension ($F(1, 56) = .00, p = .95; M_{LC} = 5.48, M_{HC} = 5.46$).

We next investigated whether the effect of control on the poor-fitting extension was driven by decreased perceptions of fit in the low-control condition. As we expected, when judging the fit of the poor-fitting extension, participants in the low-control condition rated it lower than participants in the high-control condition ($F(1, 56) = 4.77, p = .03; M_{LC} = 2.52, M_{HC} = 3.19$). This was not true when participants judged the fit of the good-fitting extension ($F(1, 56) = .01, p = .92$).

Using a bootstrapping approach (Preacher and Hayes 2004), we then formally tested the notion that fit mediated the relationship between feelings of control and the evaluation of the poor-fitting extension but not the good-fitting extension. The indirect path of the effect of control on the poor-fitting extension evaluation through fit was significant with a 95% confidence interval (5,000 bootstrap samples) excluding zero ($-.24, -.02$), suggesting that perceptions of fit indeed mediated the effect. This was not true for the good-fitting extension; the 95% confidence interval for the indirect path through fit included zero ($-.13, .10$).

Discussion

Study 1 demonstrates that when feelings of personal control are shaken, people have lower perceptions of fit for brand extensions that do not clearly sit within the boundaries of a brand. We find that these lower perceptions of fit then lead to lower evaluations of such extensions. In the next section, we replicate these findings to generalize beyond the specific manipulations and dependent variables used here.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we first demonstrate that the effects revealed in Study 1 are not specific to Honda but apply to a broad

range of brands. We also use a different operationalization of the personal control construct. By manipulating this key construct through multiple methods, we can be more certain that “control” drives the observed effects rather than the idiosyncrasies of a particular manipulation (Campbell and Fiske 1959). For example, in Study 1, some might wonder whether the difficulty of the low-control versus the high-control condition was more responsible for the effects than feelings of control. Therefore, in Study 2, participants completed a manipulation that did not differ in difficulty. Specifically, we adopted a personal control manipulation (Whitson and Galinsky 2008) that prompts people to reflect on times of low or high control, while holding a negative valence constant.

Pretest

Sixty-one participants were recruited online (through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing marketplace) and paid \$.50 to complete the study. They were assigned to one of three control manipulation conditions. In the high-control condition, participants recalled an experience that was threatening or scary but in which they were in control of the outcome. In the low-control condition, participants recalled an experience that was threatening or scary for them in which they were not in control of the outcome. Similar to Study 1’s pretest, we also added a neutral condition (no manipulation) to test the hypothesis that people’s baseline level of control is high in this context.

After participants completed the manipulation of control, they completed the PANAS scale as a mood measure (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988) and a manipulation check pertaining to their feelings of control (see pretest for Study 1). Participants also completed the state measure of self-esteem (Heatherton and Polivy 1991). Finally, participants in the low- and high-control conditions indicated on five-point scales how difficult the writing exercise was (1 = “very easy,” and 5 = “very difficult”) and how much effort they invested in the activity (1 = “no effort,” and 5 = “a great deal of effort”). We also timed how long it took them to complete the essays.

As we expected, a main effect of the control manipulation on perceptions of control emerged ($F(2, 58) = 5.15, p = .01; M_{LC} = 4.34, M_{HC} = 5.20, M_N = 5.24$). People in the low-control condition perceived lower feelings of control than people in the high-control condition ($F(1, 58) = 7.66, p = .01$). People in the low-control condition also perceived lower control than people in the neutral condition ($F(1, 58) = 7.84, p = .01$). People in the neutral and high-control conditions did not differ from one another ($F(1, 58) = .02, p = .89$).

Positive mood ($F(2, 58) = 2.65, p = .08$) and negative mood ($F(2, 58) = .40, p = .67$) were not significantly affected by the control manipulation. The unexpected marginal effect on positive mood was driven by the neutral condition ($M_{HC} = 2.60, M_{LC} = 2.28, M_N = 2.83$; the only significant contrast is between neutral and low control, $p = .03$). In addition, the control manipulations did not affect self-esteem ($F(2, 58) = .95, p = .39$). Finally, the low- and high-control manipulations did not differ in their level of difficulty ($F(1, 40) = .13, p = .72; M_{LC} = 2.25, M_{HC} = 2.36$), amount of effort invested ($F(1, 40) = .00, p = .97; M_{LC} = 4.10, M_{HC} = 4.09$), or amount of time spent ($F(1, 40) = .00, p = .95; M_{LC} = 4.36$ minutes, $M_{HC} = 4.48$ minutes).

Main Study Method

Participants. One hundred ninety-five adults were recruited to participate in the main study online (through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk). They were paid \$.50 to complete the study.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two control conditions discussed in the pretest (low personal control vs. high personal control essay). Participants then saw a list of six brand extensions that were designated as poor-fitting extensions² on the basis of pretesting and six brand extensions (with the same parent brands) that were designated as good-fitting extensions.³ For each extension, participants indicated on seven-point scales how well each product idea fit with the brand name that was listed (1 = "very poor fit," and 7 = "very good fit") and answered how likely they would be to consider buying each extension (1 = "would definitely not consider," and 7 = "would definitely consider"). We counterbalanced the order in which participants answered questions about the fit of the extensions and their overall evaluations. Participants either rated fit first for all extensions followed by overall evaluations or vice versa.

Results

Brand extensions pretest. We ran a pretest to confirm that the brands identified as good-fitting items were indeed viewed as better fits than those identified as poor fitting. Twenty participants rated all 12 products on how well they fit with the listed brand (1 = "very poor fit," and 7 = "very good fit"). The results confirmed that participants rated the set of good-fitting items as significantly higher in fit ($M_{\text{good fit}} = 4.89$) than the set of poor-fitting items ($M_{\text{poor fit}} = 2.00$).

Manipulation check. The low-control condition reported lower feelings of control than the high-control condition ($F(1, 193) = 14.61, p < .001; M_{\text{LC}} = 4.36, M_{\text{HC}} = 5.00$). There were no significant differences in positive mood ($F(1, 193) = 3.08, p = .08; M_{\text{LC}} = 3.06, M_{\text{HC}} = 3.30$) or negative mood ($F(1, 193) = 0.00, p = .98; M_{\text{LC}} = 2.12, M_{\text{HC}} = 2.12$).

Overall evaluations. We used a repeated-measures generalized estimating equation model to analyze the results of each product independently while categorizing them as a poor fit versus good fit and accounting for repeated measures by each participant. Analyses revealed an interaction of control manipulation (low vs. high; between-subjects) and fit type (good vs. poor; within-subject) on people's overall evaluations of the brand extensions ($\beta = -.41, Z = -2.04, p = .04$). When judging the poor-fitting items, participants in the low-control condition were less likely to consider the items than those in the high-control condition ($\beta = .62, Z = 2.69, p = .01; M_{\text{LC}} = 2.38, M_{\text{HC}} = 3.00$). There were no significant differences in ratings based on low versus high control among the good-fitting items ($\beta = .20, Z = .87, p = .38; M_{\text{LC}} = 3.99, M_{\text{HC}} = 4.19$; see Figure 2). These patterns did not differ according to the order of the key measures (control \times order of measures \times level of fit: $\beta = -.02, Z = -.04, p = .97$) and were consistent across each category of goods.

²Poor-fitting extensions: Mountain Dew gym shoes, McDonald's one-hour photo processing, Duracell shoes, Tropicana wine, Häagen-Dazs popcorn, and Energizer cellular phone.

³Good-fitting extensions: Mountain Dew energy drink, McDonald's frozen fries, Duracell electric toothbrush, Tropicana candy, Häagen-Dazs candy bars, and Energizer cellular phone charger.

Mediation by perceived fit. We then aimed to understand whether fit perceptions mediated the relationship between feelings of control and brand extension ratings for the poor-fitting extensions. Again using a repeated-measures generalized estimating equation model, we find that when judging the fit of the poor-fitting items, participants in the low-control condition rated the items as having lower fit than those in the high-control condition ($\beta = .53, Z = 2.44, p = .01; M_{\text{LC}} = 2.19, M_{\text{HC}} = 2.72$). No significant difference emerged for low- versus high-control conditions in fit evaluations among the good-fitting items ($\beta = -.00, Z = -.00, p = .99; M_{\text{LC}} = 4.15, M_{\text{HC}} = 4.15$).

Next, formally testing the notion that fit mediates the relationship between feelings of control and evaluations of the poor-fitting extensions, we first formed an index of the mean overall rating of the poor-fitting extensions ($\alpha = .91$). We then found that the indirect path of the effects of control on evaluations through fit was significant with a 95% confidence interval (5,000 bootstrap samples) excluding zero ($-.77, -.10$). This was not true for good-fitting extensions in which the 95% confidence interval included zero ($-.29, .36$).

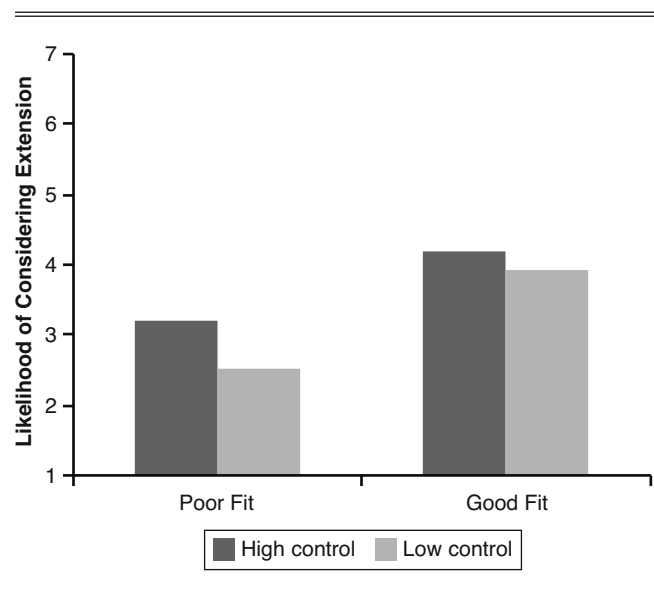
Discussion

Study 2 builds on the results of Study 1 by demonstrating that low feelings of control lead to reduced perceptions of fit and overall evaluations for poor-fitting extensions representing a wide variety of brands and product categories. Next, we begin to explore more explicitly how the need for structure drives the patterns demonstrated here.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we build on the previous findings in three key ways. First, we aim to demonstrate more clearly the "structure" motive underlying our effects. To do so, we explore people's reactions to the opportunity (or lack thereof) to

Figure 2
STUDY 2: IMPACT OF FEELINGS OF CONTROL ON
POOR-FITTING AND GOOD-FITTING BRAND EXTENSION
EVALUATIONS



assert structure in their environment when control is low. We hypothesize that low control will only lead people to be more likely to reject poor-fitting items when they have not had an opportunity to assert structure over their environment. Such moderation would provide further evidence that the need for structure is an important link in the causal chain connecting feelings of control to consumers' attitudes regarding where brands belong (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005). Second, by manipulating people's opportunities to assert structure in their environment in a way that is unrelated to the dependent variable, we intend to demonstrate that there is an inherent desire for structure that consumers seek to satisfy and that this desire is not wholly dependent on the desire to reduce risk. If providing structure that is unrelated to the focal product minimizes the need for structure in brands and leads people to be more accepting of poor-fitting extensions, it would suggest that avoiding the risk of a poor-fitting extension is not the ultimate goal.

Finally, unlike in the prior studies, in Study 3, we recruit marketing and sales managers, thus addressing an acknowledged need for more brand extension research that explores managers' thought processes (Nijssen and Agustin 2005). As we previously noted, some may argue that managers should be less subject to the psychological biases that affect consumers because they should think about the extensions more strategically (Nijssen and Agustin 2005). However, managers are unlikely to be any more aware of the influence of their feelings of control on their decision making than are consumers and are thus unlikely to correct for it (Wilson and Brekke 1994). Thus, sampling managers may provide a more conservative test of our hypotheses, but we expect to observe that managers are indeed influenced by feelings of control.

In this section, we manipulate feelings of control and then manipulate whether participants have an opportunity to assert structure. Finally, we measure attitudes toward two new ideas from Honda: the poor-fitting extension (Honda Resort) and the good-fitting extension (Honda Go-Karts) presented in Study 1. We expect to find that when personal control is threatened (vs. when it is not), people will be more likely to devalue the poor-fitting extension but only when they do not have the opportunity to assert structure in another way. We do not expect to see this pattern when participants evaluate the good-fitting extension.

Method

Participants. Ninety-three sales and marketing managers were recruited online by a market research company. They were paid \$.60 and entered into a lottery for prizes.

Procedure. The study had a 2 (control: low vs. high) \times 2 (opportunity to structure: no vs. yes) between-subjects design. First, participants were randomly assigned to either a low- or a high-control condition, as in Study 1, except that participants recalled times of control related to their jobs. Next, participants were randomly assigned to an "opportunity to structure" condition. In the "structure" condition, participants saw a series of 20 popular logos and were directed to categorize them (in whatever way they liked) in a series of boxes on the right-hand side of their computer screen. In the "no structure" condition, participants saw the same series of popular brands but were directed to read and count the logos and then move them to the right-hand side

of the computer screen into one large box. In line with research suggesting that categorization is an effective means of asserting structure (Moskowitz 1993; Neuberg and Newson 1993; Schaller et al. 1995), we expected that participants in the low-control condition who organized the brands would be asserting structure in their environment and would thus have less of a need for structure in brand extensions than participants who merely counted the brands.

As in Study 1, participants rated how likely they would be to consider launching the poor-fitting extension (Honda Resort) and the good-fitting extension (Honda Go-Karts). They also reported their perceptions of fit for the extensions. We counterbalanced the order in which the good-fitting and poor-fitting options were presented. We also took measures of mood (using PANAS). Moreover, participants answered a manipulation check question that assessed the degree to which the structure exercise gave them a sense of structure and/or a sense that things were in their place (seven-point scale: 1 = "strongly disagree," and 7 = "strongly agree").

Results

Manipulation check. There were no differences in positive ($F(1, 91) = .22, p = .64$; $M_{LC} = 3.59, M_{HC} = 3.49$) or negative mood ($F(1, 91) = 2.08, p = .15$; $M_{LC} = 2.19, M_{HC} = 2.54$) based on control. Furthermore, the brief manipulation check designed to assess the effectiveness of the structure manipulation indicated that participants in the structure condition were more likely to say that they were given a feeling of structure than those in the no structure condition ($F(1, 91) = 5.47, p = .02$; $M_{no\ structure} = 4.30, M_{structure} = 5.02$).

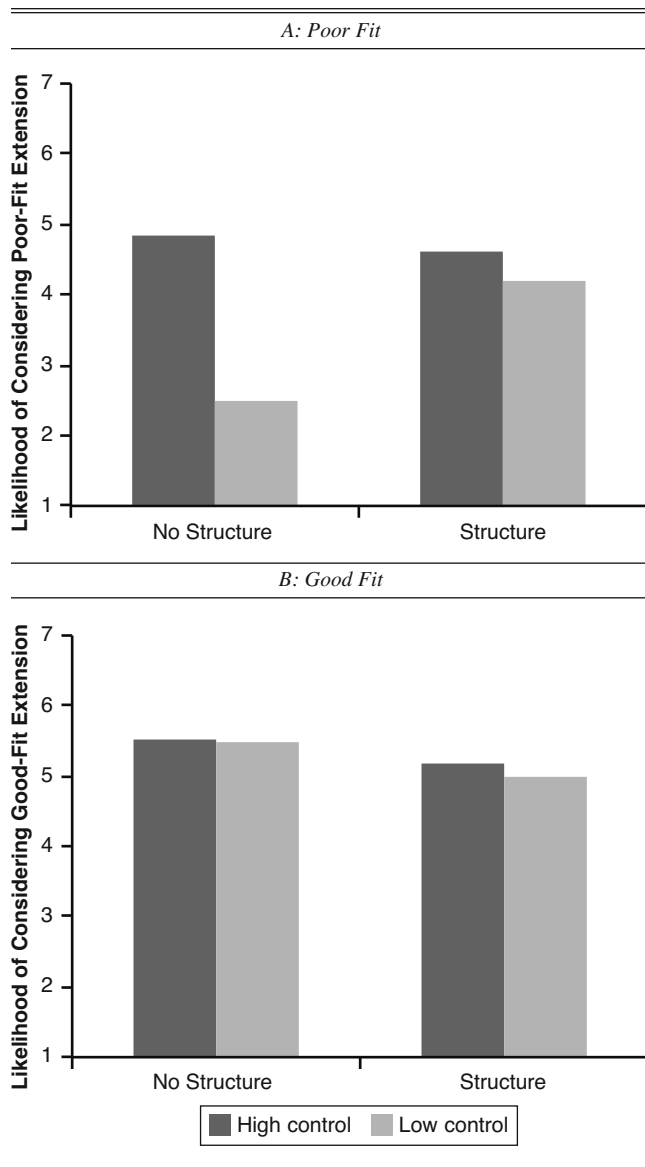
Overall evaluations. We hypothesized that we would replicate the patterns we observed previously when participants did not have an opportunity to assert structure; that is, the low-control condition would show lower evaluations for the poor-fitting extension than the high-control condition. However, when participants had an opportunity to assert structure, we did not expect the low- and high-control conditions to differ in their evaluations. To test this hypothesis, we ran a repeated-measures ANOVA. The three-way interaction of control condition (low vs. high control; between-subjects) \times opportunity to structure (yes vs. no; between-subjects) \times extension type (poor fit vs. good fit; within-subject) was significant ($F(1, 88) = 5.18, p = .03$; see Figure 3).

Focusing first on the managers' likelihood of considering the poor-fitting extension, we find the expected interaction of control and opportunity to structure ($F(1, 88) = 4.03, p = .05$). When they did not have the opportunity to structure, participants in the low-control condition were less likely to consider the extension than those in the high-control condition ($F(1, 88) = 13.43, p < .001$; $M_{LC} = 2.50, M_{HC} = 4.83$). When participants had the opportunity to structure, however, this difference between the low- and high-control conditions was mitigated ($F(1, 88) = .70, p = .41$; $M_{LC} = 4.20, M_{HC} = 4.61$). Moreover, when focusing on the low-control condition, we find that people without the opportunity to structure were less likely to consider the extension than people who had the opportunity to structure ($F(1, 88) = 4.92, p = .03$). This difference did not exist in the high-control condition ($F(1, 88) = .28, p = .60$).

In investigating the role of fit, we find that the effect of control on fit for the poor-fitting extension was significant in

Figure 3

STUDY 3: IMPACT OF FEELINGS OF CONTROL ON POOR-FITTING AND GOOD-FITTING BRAND EXTENSION EVALUATIONS AS A FUNCTION OF PEOPLE'S OPPORTUNITY TO ASSERT STRUCTURE



the no structure condition ($F(1, 88) = 4.91, p = .03; M_{LC} = 1.96, M_{HC} = 3.52$) as well as in the structure condition ($F(1, 88) = 10.52, p = .002; M_{LC} = 3.20, M_{HC} = 4.50$). However, a moderated mediation analysis suggests that the indirect effect of fit only fully mediated the effect of control on evaluations in the no structure condition ($\beta = -1.04, Z = -2.98, p = .003$; the 95% confidence interval excludes zero: $-1.73, -.42$). The indirect effect was not significant in the structure condition ($\beta = -.90, Z = -1.44, p = .15$; the 95% confidence interval includes zero: $-2.33, .35$). This suggests that fit was most important to evaluations when people did not have the opportunity to structure.

Notably, the two-way interaction of control and opportunity to structure on likelihood of considering the good-fitting extension was not significant ($F(1, 88) = .06, p = .80; M_{LC/$

$\text{no structure} = 5.50, M_{HC/\text{no structure}} = 5.52, M_{LC/\text{structure}} = 5.00, M_{HC/\text{structure}} = 5.19$), nor was the two-way interaction on fit ($F(1, 88) = .20, p = .65; M_{LC/\text{no structure}} = 5.13, M_{HC/\text{no structure}} = 5.65, M_{LC/\text{structure}} = 4.80, M_{HC/\text{structure}} = 5.08$).

Discussion

Study 3 demonstrates that control affects managers' likelihood of considering poor-fitting extensions. The study also shows that the effect is mitigated when participants have opportunities to impose structure before they evaluate brand extensions. This study therefore illustrates the importance of structure when control is low.

After observing the impact of situational opportunities for structure in the relationship between control and brand extension evaluations, we wondered whether the chronic need for structure is important in determining the benefit generated from such situational opportunities for structure. Specifically, we wondered whether those who are low in chronic need for structure or those who are high in such need are the most likely to leverage situational opportunities for structure when evaluating brand extensions. Some might expect that people who chronically seek structure will be the most likely to be receptive when opportunities for structure are provided and thus be the most likely to show a change in attitude toward a poor-fitting extension. However, it may be those who are not as accustomed to seeking structure that change the most when structure is provided. People who are typically the least interested in having a sense of structure in their lives should be the furthest away from achieving this goal when the need to do so arises (i.e., low-control contexts) and have fewer means available for finding structure. They should therefore be the most likely to take advantage of structure that is explicitly provided. This would be consistent with examples in prior research in which people who express the lowest levels of a trait are the most likely to be affected by manipulations designed to enhance that particular characteristic (Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999; Johar, Moreau, and Schwarz 2003; Maimaran and Wheeler 2008). To explore this idea, we asked a set of adults from an online research panel to complete the Personal Need for Structure Scale (Neuberg and Newsom 1993; Thompson et al. 2001). Each person was also randomly assigned to a control condition (Study 1) and an opportunity to structure condition (Study 3). They then rated how likely they would be to consider buying a poor-fitting extension (Honda Resort) and a good-fitting extension (Honda Go-Karts). Replicating the results of Study 3, we found that having an opportunity to structure led the low control condition to be more accepting of the poor-fitting extension. However, this result was most likely among people with a chronically low need for structure, suggesting that people who are not accustomed to searching for structure may be the most affected when structure is provided to them at a critical point (i.e., a low-control situation).

STUDY 4

Thus far, our results indicate that when feelings of control are shaken, people reject brand extensions in which the fit is questionable. This result is mediated by perceptions of fit and moderated by opportunities for structure in the environment. Combining such findings, we argue that people are motivated to find structure and judge the fit of poor-fitting

brand extensions more harshly as a way of articulating and affirming the importance of structure. However, some may argue that a limitation of our prior studies is that participants did not evaluate the extensions in the context of competition. In light of research suggesting that perceptions of fit become less important in competitive settings in which other factors take priority (Milberg, Sinn, and Goodstein 2010), it seems important to understand when competition might significantly change how low-control participants respond to poor-fitting extensions. Will people judge a poor-fitting extension harshly even when it is the best option in their consideration set? How do people support their need for structure when the best option in the set has a poor fit?

We do not expect that low feelings of control will cause participants to choose an item with good fit while ignoring all other factors (e.g., quality, price). However, we expect that consumers with low control who choose a poor-fitting option will want to rationalize their choice, reconciling it with their desire for structure. Specifically, we argue that these people will choose the best overall option but will adjust their perceptions of fit to be consistent with their goal for structure. In other words, low-control participants will justify their choices by convincing themselves that the choice reflects higher fit than they would have otherwise claimed. As we stated previously, this hypothesis is consistent with basic dissonance theory; low-control participants will seek consistency across their thoughts, beliefs, and actions to avoid an uncomfortable psychological state (Elliot and Devine 1994; Festinger 1957). Note that we do not expect this biased enhancement of fit when feelings of control are high. When control is high, the goal for structure is weak. Thus, when people choose a poor-fitting, ill-structured option, they do not need to reconcile this decision with a goal for structure.

If the proposed pattern of behavior emerges in Study 4, it would not only maintain support for the notion of structure as a key motivating factor when control is low but would also introduce competitive context as an important boundary condition for determining when low control leads to lower versus higher perceptions of fit. To test our hypotheses, we presented participants with a discussion of two brand extensions, one of which was manipulated to be clearly superior over the other. We expected that the majority of people would choose the option that we manipulated to be the “winner.” Our research question in this study is therefore not about their choice but instead about how people will judge the “fit” of their choice as a function of our manipulations of control. When the poor-fitting option is the best choice, we predict that people with low control will increase their perceptions of fit relative to the high-control condition (to be consistent with their desire for structure). When the poor-fitting option is not the best choice, we predict that people will exhibit the patterns demonstrated in the previous studies: low control should lead to decreased fit ratings relative to high control, highlighting a clear preference for maintaining structure for the brand.

Method

Participants. One hundred forty-eight participants were recruited by an online research company. They were paid \$.60 and included in a lottery for prizes.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to the personal control conditions discussed in Study 2 (low- vs. high-control essay) and then asked to imagine that they were in the process of choosing between two companies’ vacation resorts. They were presented with one of three scenarios. In all three scenarios, we said that Honda and Hyatt (a large hotel chain) were both introducing a vacation resort. We then varied which would be viewed as the winning choice. In all three scenarios, participants first read the following:

Honda is planning the introduction of a new line of vacation resorts. These resorts will be located in different parts of the country and will have amenities and attractions for various age groups. The company has tested its resorts with a group of consumers who found them to be very clean, entertaining and relaxing. Hyatt recently announced that they will compete directly with Honda by offering a brand new line of vacation resorts.

In the condition in which the poor-fitting Honda resort wins (“Honda wins” condition), participants continued to read that Hyatt would

offer fewer locations, amenities and attractions. The prices will also be 20% higher on average. A preliminary group of consumers tested a Hyatt resort and provided average ratings for cleanliness, entertainment and relaxation.

In the condition in which the good-fitting Hyatt resort wins (“Hyatt wins” condition), participants read that Hyatt would

offer more locations, amenities and attractions. The prices will also be 20% lower on average. A preliminary group of consumers tested a Hyatt resort and provided strong ratings for cleanliness, entertainment and relaxation.

Finally, in the baseline condition (“Equal” condition) in which Honda and Hyatt were presented with equally positive information (but in which Hyatt would be perceived as the better-fitting, more natural choice), participants read that Hyatt would

be equivalent to the Honda resorts in terms of locations, amenities and attractions. The prices will also be equivalent. A preliminary group of consumers tested a Hyatt resort and provided strong ratings of cleanliness, entertainment and relaxation.

After participants read their manipulation, we measured the effectiveness of the manipulation by having them answer the question “Which resort would you be most likely to consider for your next vacation?” We expected that the best choice would be fairly obvious on the basis of our manipulations and would enable us to focus on the biased nature of fit perceptions.

For the dependent variable, participants rated the resort’s fit with Honda and Hyatt on seven-point scales as in Study 1. We counterbalanced whether they were asked first about the fit of the Honda or the Hyatt extension. Participants then completed the mood measures.

Results

Manipulation check. As we expected, participants were more likely to choose Honda as the best choice in the “Honda wins” condition (67%) than in the “Hyatt wins” condition (29%; $\beta = -1.61$, $\chi^2 = 13.76$, $p = .0002$) or the

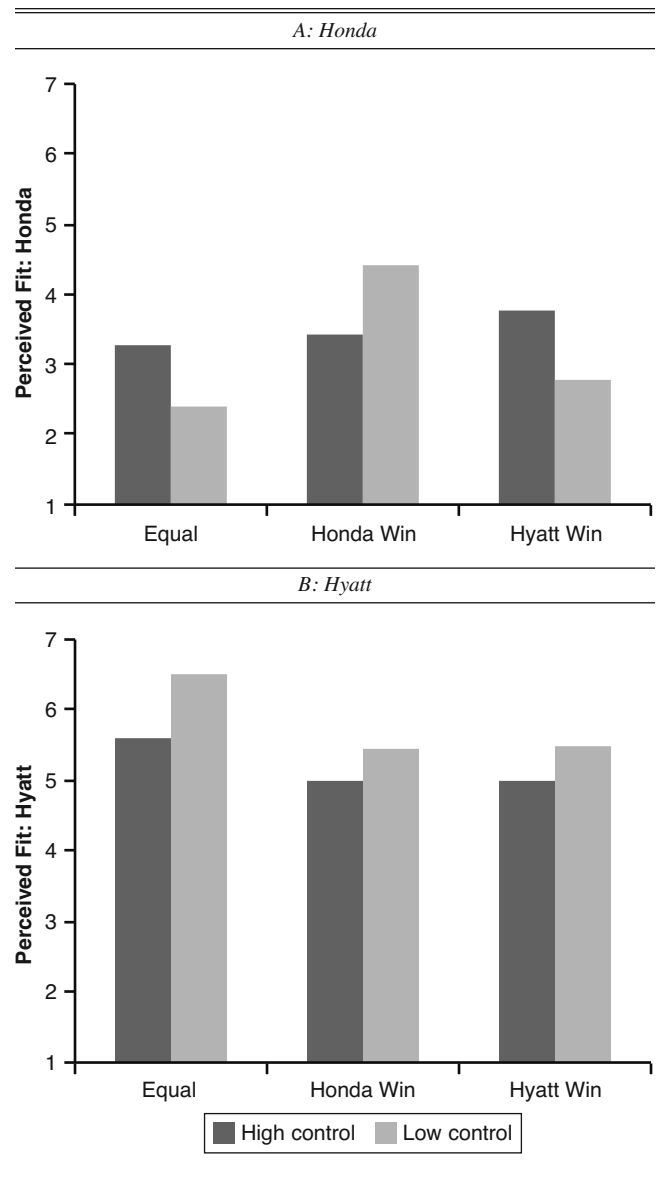
“Equal” condition (29%; $\beta = -1.61$, $\chi^2 = 13.76$, $p = .0002$). Moreover, participants were equally likely to choose Honda between the “Hyatt wins” condition (29%) and the “Equal” conditions (29%). This suggests that our manipulation was successful in enticing people to choose the poor-fitting Honda resort option in the “Honda wins” condition and to avoid it in the remaining two conditions. (Given that not everyone behaved in line with the expectations of their particular manipulation, we subsequently discuss the difference in our key results for those who behaved as we expected with respect to the manipulation vs. those who did not.) Similar to the previous studies, there were no differences in overall positive mood ($F(1, 146) = 2.11$, $p = .15$; $M_{LC} = 2.87$, $M_{HC} = 3.08$) or negative mood ($F(1, 146) = .10$, $p = .75$; $M_{LC} = 1.79$, $M_{HC} = 1.83$) based on control.

Main results. To test the hypothesis that participants in the low-control condition would rate the fit of the poor-fitting Honda resort higher than those in the high-control condition when Honda was framed as the best choice (i.e., the “Honda wins” condition) but lower when it was not the best choice (i.e., the “Hyatt wins” and “Equal” conditions), we ran a repeated measures ANOVA for the three-way interaction of control condition (low vs. high; between-subjects) \times resort condition (Honda wins, Hyatt wins, Equal; between-subjects) \times fit reactions to each brand (Honda vs. Hyatt; within-subject). The three-way interaction was significant ($F(2, 141) = 4.53$, $p = .01$).

Honda (poor-fitting extension) fit evaluations. We then analyzed the interaction of control condition and resort condition on reactions to Honda’s fit ($F(2, 141) = 6.62$, $p = .002$; see Figure 4). This interaction did not change on the basis of the order of questions (three-way interaction with order of questions: $F(2, 135) = .19$, $p = .83$). Probing the two-way interaction, we find that in the “Equal” condition ($F(1, 141) = 3.84$, $p = .05$; $M_{LC} = 2.39$, $M_{HC} = 3.28$) and the “Hyatt wins” condition ($F(1, 141) = 5.15$, $p = .02$, $M_{LC} = 2.77$, $M_{HC} = 3.77$), low-control participants rated the fit of Honda as lower than participants in the high-control condition. This replicates prior results in which low control led people to devalue the fit of poor-fitting extensions. What is notable, however, is that in the “Honda wins” condition, the low-control condition participants reported higher fit for Honda than did those in the high-control condition ($F(1, 141) = 5.36$, $p = .02$; $M_{LC} = 4.40$, $M_{HC} = 3.44$). The low-control condition participants also rated Honda’s fit higher in the “Honda wins” condition than in the “Equal” ($F(1, 141) = 16.90$, $p < .0001$) or the “Hyatt wins” conditions ($F(1, 141) = 13.56$, $p = .0003$). This was not true in the high-control conditions ($F_s < 1$) when people evaluated Honda’s fit. Participants rated Honda’s fit equally across all three conditions when control was high ($M_{Equal} = 3.28$, $M_{Honda\ wins} = 3.44$, $M_{Hyatt\ wins} = 3.77$).

We argue that low-control participants rate the fit of poor-fitting options more highly than high-control participants when it is the best choice, because they want to make the optimal choice but also want to be true to their desire for structure. If consistency with one’s choice is indeed a driving mechanism for the inflated fit perceptions, we should find that our effects are strongest when low-control participants actually choose the poor-fitting option (when it is framed as the best choice) and therefore need to justify the fit. Thus, we next analyze how people who actually chose

Figure 4
STUDY 4: IMPACT OF FEELINGS OF CONTROL ON PERCEPTIONS OF FIT FOR “WINNING” BRAND EXTENSIONS OF GOOD AND POOR FIT



the poor-fitting Honda resort when it was the best decision responded differently in their fit responses than those who did not (i.e., those who behaved contrary to the manipulation’s expected response).

We find that the low-control participants who chose Honda rated its fit significantly higher when they were in the “Honda wins” condition ($M = 4.50$) than when in the “Equal” ($M = 2.00$; $p = .002$) or “Hyatt wins” conditions ($M = 2.00$; $p = .001$). In contrast, the low-control participants who did not choose Honda did not rate Honda’s fit significantly differently in the “Honda wins” condition ($M_{Honda\ wins} = 4.00$) than in the “Equal” ($M_{Equal} = 2.50$; $p = .15$) or the “Hyatt wins” conditions ($M_{Hyatt\ wins} = 3.25$; $p = .55$). In another set of important contrasts, we find that those in the “Honda wins” condition who chose Honda rated its fit higher when feelings of control were low rather than high

($M_{LC} = 4.50$, $M_{HC} = 3.55$; $p = .04$). However, those in the “Honda wins” condition who did not choose Honda did not rate its fit significantly differently when feelings of control were low versus high ($M_{LC} = 4.00$ vs. $M_{HC} = 3.26$; $p = .53$). Although the cell sizes are small and uneven across this analysis and thus warrant caution in interpretation, the findings suggest that only when Honda was actually chosen did low-control participants need to heighten their fit perceptions to maintain the consistency between their choice and the desire for structure.

Hyatt (good-fitting extension) fit evaluations. As we expected, fit evaluations for the good-fitting extension, Hyatt, were always higher than for Honda ($t(147) = -11.78$, $p < .0001$; $M_{Honda} = 3.34$, $M_{Hyatt} = 5.45$). However, reactions to Hyatt’s fit did not change as a function of the control or resort manipulations. The two-way interaction of control and resort conditions on Hyatt fit evaluations was not significant ($F(1, 141) = .50$, $p = .61$; see Figure 4).

Discussion

Supporting Milberg, Sinn, and Goodstein’s (2010) conclusions, this research highlights the importance of the competitive context in consumers’ responses to brand extensions. It differs from Milberg, Sinn, and Goodstein’s research, however, in that we were not interested in participants’ choices but instead focused on their perceptions of fit. We manipulated the choices such that people would be likely to choose the options that we designated as the best.

Study 4’s results replicate our prior findings by suggesting that people with low feelings of control are less likely to perceive fit in a poor-fitting extension (Honda Resort) when the competitive context does not compel them to choose that poor-fitting option. However, we find that when it is in their best interest to perceive fit (i.e., when the best option has low fit), people with low feelings of control are the most motivated to adjust their perceptions of fit. In such situations, they may rethink the boundaries of the brand and allow themselves to see structure in a far-fetched extension to make the optimal choice while staying consistent with their desire for structure.

Beyond demonstrating how differences in competitive context affect brand extension reactions under different conditions of control, this study may speak more broadly to the idea that unstructured contexts from which it is difficult for consumers to escape (i.e., consumers being forced to choose a brand extension that lacks structure) will encourage people with low feelings of control to take the opposite extreme and find structure to be consistent with their desired state. Speculatively, Study 4 may therefore provide additional insight into why low feelings of control aided people’s abilities to find patterns in random noise in Whitson and Galinsky’s (2008) research. People with low feelings of control in their studies were more likely than those with high feelings of control to assert structure over random patterns (e.g., random array of dots, random stock market outcomes). Low-control participants may have felt the most need to force structure on random patterns (i.e., rationalize fit) because the context did not easily enable them to reject the notion of structure being present. In other words, given that they were forced to engage in an unstructured activity (just as participants in Study 4 were “forced” to choose an unstructured brand extension), they may have found that the

best way to deal with the lack of structure embedded in the assigned task while remaining consistent with their desire for structure was to force structure on the tasks.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Given that the majority of new products introduced each year are brand extensions (Keller 2008), the quest to understand the factors that determine success and failure has been an important endeavor for researchers and practitioners alike. We suggest that the need for structure in consumption is one key factor this effort has overlooked. We have argued that the need for structure arises when people’s feelings of control are low and they desire signals that their world is not random and chaotic. When consumers seek this sense of structure, they prefer that brands stay within their established boundaries and reject those that do not. Across several studies, we demonstrate that when people’s feelings of control are shaken, they are less likely to consider poor-fitting brand extensions (Studies 1–4). We also demonstrate that this relationship is mitigated when people—whether consumers or managers—have the opportunity to engage in small acts of structure (Study 3). Finally, we show that the relationship between control and reactions to poor-fitting extensions can be reversed in the face of competition, particularly when an extension with poor fit is the best choice (Study 4).

This research builds on extant brand extension research by suggesting that although fit is indeed a critical driver of brand extension evaluations, it is not solely a reflection of people’s reactions to a product’s characteristics. It is also a reflection of their need for structure more generally. It suggests that psychological state is an important consideration in brand extension decisions. This research also contributes to the increasing body of literature investigating how consumers cope with low feelings of personal control (e.g., Kay et al. 2009), suggesting that consumers can use even mundane product evaluations as tools for dealing with pervasive psychological threats to control. In addition, Study 3’s results were moderated by opportunities to engage in structure, suggesting that the elements through which consumers seek structure are compensatory when control is low. Further research could explore the effectiveness of the different approaches. Are all means of asserting structure equally effective?

This article also builds on recent research that has shown that low control leads people to prefer physical boundaries in the environment (e.g., aesthetic borders, frames) as a means of finding structure (Cutright 2012). We suggest that such structure need not come in a physical form but can instead be embodied in the mental boundaries that people erect.

Our research leaves many questions unanswered. It would be worthwhile to explore how feelings of control are related to individual differences that we know to be relevant for brand extension evaluations. For example, cultural factors such as interdependent versus independent self-construals have important effects on brand extension evaluations and may also reflect differences in control. Ahluwalia (2008) demonstrates that people with interdependent self-construals are better able to see fit in brand extensions than those with independent construals. Relatedly, Monga and John (2006) find that people from Eastern cultures (typically “interdependents”) perceive higher fit than those from Western

cultures (typically “independents”) due to greater holistic thinking. Notably, interdependents are less motivated by a need to maintain active personal control than are independents (Lu et al. 2001). Rather than seeking to control other people and things, interdependents focus on maintaining harmony in their relationships and adapting to the environment (Lu et al. 2001; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Consequently, they may be less likely to experience the meaningful threats to control that would normally instigate a desire for greater structure. This could be an additional reason they are more accepting of poor-fitting extensions.

Another important individual difference to consider might include consumers’ levels of commitment to a brand. Should companies expect to offend their loyal, highly committed customers with a poor-fitting extension or their less loyal switchers? Using our opening example, we have early data to begin answering this question. After manipulating control for 182 participants, we asked them to consider Starbucks’s plan to introduce “wine, beer and premium food offerings” to several of its locations (Hutson 2012). To assess their role of commitment to Starbucks, participants also completed the Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas and Bettman 2003). The results indicate that people with a low connection to Starbucks were less willing to consider the Starbucks extension when their feelings of control were low (vs. high). This finding did not hold true for people with a high connection to Starbucks, suggesting that companies may receive the most negative reactions from their non-loyal, less committed consumers (who may or may not be a critical target) when feelings of control are low. It would be worthwhile to explore why this pattern appears and how it may differ for other types of brands. Perhaps brands that are loved precisely for their commitment to a narrow focus would be punished more harshly by their core customers.

Beyond exploring which consumers will devalue extensions when control is low, further research could also explore what tools marketers have at their disposal for thwarting the effect. Might executional details in advertising, such as music or images, aid the sense of structure? It may also make sense to focus on learning how to increase people’s sense of control to keep the need for structure low. For example, might money-back guarantees or easy returns increase consumers’ feelings of control and reduce negative reactions to poor-fitting extensions?

It would also be useful to extend the understanding of control and structure beyond brand extensions. The notion that consumers are likely to reject things that push beyond accepted boundaries when feelings of control are low should be relevant not only for brand extensions but also for many other categories on which marketers and consumers rely. For example, people’s expectations about what a category of products should do (e.g., should a cell phone be able to start a car?) or how salespeople should interact with customers (e.g., how much personal information should be easily accessible to them?) may be affected by feelings of control. In addition, those with low control may reject advertising or other forms of marketing communication that push accepted cultural boundaries. Thus, this research provides a framework for understanding when consumers will cling to the boundaries that they have set in their minds for a variety of issues. Taking heed of consumers’ feelings of control should provide important insight into the structure that they desire

and help predict their reactions to several marketing decisions, including, but not limited to, brand extensions.

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