Social Distance, Connectedness, and Product Familiarity on Endorsement Evaluations: An Experimental Approach

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Contrary to previous research on social distance suggesting that widened social distance is linked to power, this paper argues that indeed narrowing social distance creates increased favorable evaluations in the context of endorsements. By experimentally framing the source such as celebrity endorsers into a close relationship social category (e.g., 'friend', 'family'), product attitudes and purchase intentions increase. This effect was mediated by connectedness and was moderated by the familiarity of consumers towards the product. The research context is in the Philippines where celebrity culture is predominantly relational due to its highly collectivistic culture. Implications on close relationship and relational paradigm in celebrity endorsements are discussed.

Keywords: celebrity endorsements, connectedness, Philippines, product familiarity, social distance

1 Introduction

Celebrity endorsements remain a major investment among advertisers in the United States (Nielsen Media Research, 2015) as they are also widespread in Asia: 70% of South Korean and Japan's commercials feature celebrities, and the strategy has gained momentum in China, India, and The Philippines (Euromonitor International, 2014; Sharma, 2012). These Asian markets have shifted to a consumer culture where celebrities are staple components of consumption discourses (Fitzsimmons & Lent, 2013). As celebrities have come to play a major part in modern, consumption culture, ways on how marketers can utilize celebrity power to create and appeal to emotional bond with consumer and to avoid animosity (Leong et al., 2008) should be given attention in celebrity endorsement research streams (e.g., Chao, Wührer, & Werani, 2005; Escalas & Bettman, 2009; Euromonitor International, 2014; Hung, Chan, & Tse, 2011; Thomson, 2006). Grounded in these issues, the industry report of Euromonitor identified major practical challenges faced by marketers in celebrity endorsement strategy, like how celebrities can emotionally appeal and bond with consumers. This study attempted to address such practical issues through theoretical explorations and development on the notion of narrowed social distance as conveyed by celebrities.

Celebrity endorsement definitions and approaches are traditionally in the models of source credibility (Goldsmith, Lefferty, & Newell, 2000; Hovland & Weiss, 1951), source attractiveness (Ohanian, 1991; Stephens & Rice, 1998), and match-up hypothesis (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004). As the area of celebrity endorsements grows interestingly in the recent decades of consumer research, scholars have been devoted to understanding the underlying consumer processes that eventually elicit effectiveness of marketing campaigns (Keel & Nataraajan, 2012). Dominant existing models of celebrity influence have become mature, and much has been written on these models that serve as framework for celebrity selection (Erdogan, 1999). Celebrities may provide central information when an aspect of the celebrity matches the product (e.g., match-up, credibility, and attractiveness linked to the product category). However, such traditional models may pose limitations. For example, the source credibility and meaning transfer—or perceptions about a celebrity transferred to brands (McCracken, 1989)—cannot account for changes in the consumer and the celebrity and could be regarded as one-time and transactional advertising model (i.e., one-time transaction, short-term customer relationship versus a "relational model") (Kimelfeld & Watt, 2001). Meanwhile, the image congruence or product match-up model should regard the integral changes of

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both the celebrity and the product; the model can be more lasting but limited to fixed images. These theoretical and practical issues on celebrity endorsements motivate the relational paradigm to arise.

The current paper's approach differs from the traditional explanations of celebrity endorsement effects on persuasion by focusing on the relational meanings and social intimacy consumers perceive towards celebrities by narrowing social distance. By turning to Construal Level Theory (CLT), this present research proposes the ability of a relationship-based persuasion by celebrities through narrowing social distance via social categories of relationship appeals. These social categories have activated relationship schema and interpersonal involvement towards the celebrity through mass media consumption and its representations of humans in media figures (Giles, 2002). This way, the cultural being of celebrities taking effect in endorsements (McCracken, 1989) has been embodied through a close relationship paradigm where connections with consumers are better explicated as human brands (Thomson, 2006).

CLT's key premise is that distant objects, events, or individuals are classified or represented as abstract, intangible, unobservable, and broad concepts. In contrast, close objects, events, or people are represented with concrete, specific, observable, or discrete more accessible features (Trope & Liberman, 2010). CLT research has classified dimensions of these psychological distances as temporal, social, and hypothetical. For example, an object might be nearby or remote in space. In addition, an event might unfold very soon or farther in the future. Likewise, an event might be likely, and thus effectively close, or hypothetical and unlikely, and thus effectively distant. Finally, an event might be experienced from the perspective of individuals themselves, and thus close, or from the perspective of an observer, and thus distant. This paper situates social distance in terms of social categories and relationships that are utilized in celebrity endorsements by primarily proposing that social distance can be narrowed by framing and construing celebrities as socially-close others.

1.1   Social distance

Drawing upon construal level theory, social distance is a form of psychological distance (e.g., self vs. other; in-group vs. out-group[1]) (So & Nabi, 2013; Trope & Liberman, 2003). Similarly, Bogardus (1933) equated the notion of social distance as the level of people's willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with different social categories such as neighbors, close friends, and even members of diverse social groups, such as racial and ethnic groups.

Park (1924) introduced social distance as the "grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations generally" (p. 339). More recently, social distance was incorporated into the theory of perceptions and judgments about distal entities though the Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) characterizing social distance as one of the four dimensions of psychological distance (along with temporal distance, spatial distance, and hypotheticality). From CLT's perspective, social distance is a perception of distinction between the self and another social entity on the dimensions of perceived similarity, familiarity, and group memberships (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). For example, those other social entity who are unfamiliar, out-group members, and dissimilar in general traits or in status have been conceptualized as socially distant. As social distance increases, the discrepancy on perception and judgments between the self and the other increases as well.

In accordance to the principles proposed by CLT, as social distance increases, information is represented in more abstract, schematic, and decontextualized terms (i.e., high-level construals). Meanwhile, as social distance decreases (i.e., narrows), information is deemed more concrete, detailed, and contextualized terms (i.e., low-level construals).

Previous research has shown that individuals tend to perceive in-groups and out-groups differently. Compared with in-groups, out-groups have been perceived as more homogenous (Jones, Wood, & Quattrone, 1981), as having more predictable sets of properties (Linville, Fischer, & Yoon, 1996), and have been described in more abstract terms (Fiedler, Semin, Finkenauer, & Berkel, 1995). And compared to high-level construals, low-level construals have been more influential when social distance is small than large. Previous research has demonstrated this proposition (Ebert, 2005; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Pennington & Roese, 2003; Ziamou & Veryzer, 2005). For example, Ebert

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[1] An in-group is a social group to which a person psychologically identifies as being a member. By contrast, an out-group is a social group with which an individual does not identify (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

(2005) investigated the influence of social distance on the way people make judgments. Consistent with CLT, Ebert's research suggested that low-level construals, such as short-term costs of a course of action, tend to be more influential in forming judgments for a socially proximal entity (e.g., friend) than for a socially distant entity (e.g., a stranger).

Stephan, Liberman, and Trope (2011) examined the psychological causes of social distance. They found out that expectations for temporally remote (versus proximal) social interaction produce greater social distance from a target person, measured as reduced familiarity and as reduced similarity to the self. Moreover, a more abstract, higher-level construal of a social target results in less familiarity and in less allocation of resources. Meanwhile, Stephan, Liberman, and Trope (2010) argued that politeness creates social distance and distance, in turn, causes people to act more politely.

Finally, in their social distance theory of power, Magee and Smith (2013) argued that asymmetric dependence between individuals (i.e., power) produces asymmetric social distance: high-power individuals feeling more distant than low-power individuals. They assert that high-power individuals' greater experienced social distance leads them to engage in more abstract mental representation.

However, as the idea of relational approach in celebrity endorsements develops (e.g., Hung, Chan, & Tse, 2011), social distance (close vs. distant) appeals as frames of persuasive communication remain a wide opportunity for empirical explorations.

In summary, the literature on social distance have presented two opposing views on its effects to persuasion: one is that wider social distance between the focal persuader and the audience evokes better persuasion, while the other view (i.e., construal level theory) suggests that closer and narrower social distance may endorse more favorable effects on the message appeal.

1.2 Research question and positioning: narrowed social distance as persuasive appeals

In view of the prevailing dialectics on the role and nature of social distance in persuasion especially situated in marketing, this paper asks the following research questions: *How does narrowed social distance influence product evaluations? Can connectedness be an underlying mechanism on the said effect of social distance? And, in the context of product familiarity, how can endorser connectedness, as effected by narrowed social distance, vary the effect on product evaluations?*

Thus, in contrary to previous research on social distance and power (cf. Magee & Smith, 2013), this paper's contention is that narrowed social distance can be used to frame persuasive communication through the ability of a relationship-based persuasion by media personae (i.e., celebrities) via social relationship categories appeals. These social categories activate relationship schema and interpersonal involvement by way of connectedness towards the media persona through its representations of humans in media figures.

As social distance decreases, judgments and perceptions about the self and the other become convergent. The activation of relationship schema leads to reduction of perceived social distance. In other words, if people see the celebrity as a close friend or a family member, they perceive the celebrity as familiar, similar to them in important ways (e.g., attitude toward life, personality, etc.) and part of the same social group. All of which are dimensions of social distance. Thus, such perception of a close friendship with the celebrity reduces social distance felt towards the character of the celebrity (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Liviatan, Trope, and Liberman (2008) have argued that interpersonal similarity is indeed a form of social distance, with similar others being perceived as socially closer to oneself than dissimilar ones. Such social distance has important implications for information processing about other people (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007).

This current study utilizes an experimental approach in exploring on the nature of social distance that evokes better persuasion in the context of evaluating product familiarity, with connectedness as an explanatory variable for the varying effects. Limitations of the study can be attributed to the method itself being experimental. Using the main premise of experiments, the study only illustrates the possibilities on eventual product evaluations while varying the social distance projected by the endorsers, while controlling for other factors that might be explanatory. For example, as suggested

by traditional models of celebrity endorsements, credibility of the endorser is often considered by consumers in their product-endorser match-up credibility. Also, certain celebrities' effects may be contingent upon the generalized image consumers have with him or her such as in the case of multiple endorsements.

2   Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1   Social distance and product evaluations in advertising

Social distance develops from schema of social intimates such as a friend or family member, as the corresponding knowledge system for known persons (Anderson, 1988). When the schema of a familiar person such as a social intimate (e.g., friend, family member) is made salient through the celebrity, the celebrity assumes the said persona characteristics through a person memory that affects judgments (Srull & Wyer, 1989). This activates a schema of social relationships (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) among consumers, transporting the intimate feeling towards the celebrity to a consumer's judgments of the endorsed product.

Construal level theory has supported this claim, suggesting that the interpersonal similarity makes someone socially near or less distant, or low level of construal (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Liviatan et al., 2008). Low-level construals guide the responses of individuals to people who are like them. Familiarity facilitates liking of a similar target and its behaviors in this case, the endorsement act through social distance appeals.

Construction of relations between persona and self happens in social distance appeals. Consumers have compared themselves with media personae on various dimensions (Mares & Cantor, 1992), and on the surface levels, they may have looked for similarities between them and the personae. However, the persona—self-relations may come deeper than comparisons (Klimmt et al., 2006). They can also refer to imagining a social group to which both the persona and the viewer belong and thus a sense of affiliation, or they might imply intended learning in that viewers think about how their own lives could benefit from the experiences the persona communicates, for example, in endorsements (Fritchie & Johnson, 2003). It is more likely that viewers establish such relations between the persona and the consumers/viewers in condition of socially close than socially distant levels. The celebrity in socially distant message is perceived as less relevant, and establishing such relations with them does not produce much valuable information among consumers, compared to a socially close appeals. Meanwhile, compared to construing celebrities as a "friend" versus a "family member" also poses different effects. Although no empirical research has investigated the degree to which the two social categories of intimacy vary, a study by Gleich (1996) suggested that media characters' delineation with good neighbors and close friends vary in dimensions such as confidence, proximity, and strength of character. In terms of passion and sociability, media characters have been perceived to be similar to close friends. Furthermore, Hermes (1995) likened media figures to an "extended family" and that information and narratives about celebrities are important in developing shared standards of morality and in personality development among young consumers (Giles & Maltby, 2004). This spectrum of parasocial (i.e., "illusionary intimacy" or one-way perceived interpersonal relationship with media personae) interaction and relationship was verified by Klimmt and colleagues (2006) when they illustrated that the intensity of social distance can vary considerably and can be understood as a continuum. They visualized two general prototypical poles of social distance intensities: close and distant levels.

This paper argues that social distance can come into different levels in a broad spectrum. It proposes a three-level comparison where a socially distant appeal frames the celebrity as himself/herself as an actor/actress or performer, as with the most traditional models of celebrity endorsements such as source credibility. Meanwhile, a moderate social distance activates a friendship relationship schema that might have been developed towards the celebrity (Giles, 2002). Finally, a socially close appeal situationally has framed the celebrity as a family member (Hermes, 1995). These social categories of relationship schema have affected evaluations and judgments among consumers, such as in endorsements (Klimmt et al., 2006).

In essence, the notion of narrowing social distance also means strengthening the 'in-group' attitudes and behaviors towards the celebrity. The social identity of the celebrity as an effect of

narrowing social distance has been transformed into a more 'significant other' rather than a 'generalized other' (i.e., George Mead's symbolic interactionism 1967). Thus, the more social distance has been narrowed, the more 'in-group' the celebrity has been perceived on the consumers' part, and persuasion becomes more effective in advertising.

H1: In celebrity-endorsed advertisements, there is a linear relationship between celebrity social distance and consumers' product evaluations. That is, narrowing social distance from distant to moderate to close leads to increasing consumer product evaluations.

2.2   Mediating role of connectedness

Narrowed social distance as a relational approach in celebrity endorsements happens under a relational and social influence underlying mechanism. This paper proposes that connectedness mediates the relationship between narrowed social distance and endorsement evaluations in particular, product attitudes and purchase intentions).

Connectedness is formally defined as "the level of intensity of the relationship(s) that a viewer develops with the characters and contextual settings of a program in the parasocial television environment (Russell, Norman, & Heckler, 2004). It pertains to the degree of satisfaction from the pseudo-relationships that could manifest even beyond the immediate media experience with the celebrity (Russell et al., 2004; Russell & Puto, 1999). Connectedness is a higher order effect of media consumption that entails effects on attitudes and behaviors towards the media personae. These effects on behaviors towards media persona such as celebrities establish perceptions of relationship realism that develops as part of the parasocial interaction that happens during media consumption as an atypical effect (Newton & Buck, 1985).

Audience members (consumers) have then regard celebrities as referent others (Fiske, 1992) with characters providing strong models for viewers' point of identification and influence (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957), a source of social comparison (Richins, 1991) and goal inspiration (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). These mechanisms have resulted to formation of resemblance to interpersonal relationships from the viewers towards the celebrities (Levy, 1962). Thus, the parasocial effects of television watching as reinforced by narrowing social distance have further enhanced connectedness that in turn, have resulted in behavioral modeling among consumers in advertising contexts (Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989).

The persuasive effect of connectedness as a result of narrowed social distance comes from individuals' self-construal in relation to others who influence their self-schemata or their own definition and knowledge of self (Markus & Oyserman, 1989). Connected self-schema sees the self as a continuation of others or others as an extension of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Interestingly, appeals in advertising that elicit connectedness are often used in Asian markets than Western (Lu Wang & Chan, 2001). Finally, Russell and colleagues (2004) contended that one of the consequences of connectedness was that consumers imagine the celebrities (or their characters) as consumers of real products and brands.

Thus, from these mechanisms of connectedness, this paper argues that activating narrowed social distance results to connectedness among consumers. Such connectedness enhances the current advertising evaluation.

H2: Connectedness mediates the effects of narrowed social distance towards product evaluations.

2.3   Moderating role of product familiarity

Consumers may engage in a more analytic processing when the product category is familiar than unfamiliar. Unfamiliar product categories may demand an analytic processing as well but the evaluation is normally lower than familiar products, and is unstable because of its uncertainty. In conditions where a social influence is present during processing, evaluations of familiar product category are not affected by the said influence, but the evaluations of unfamiliar category will increase. This suggests that in unfamiliar product categories the presence a social influence may provide normative cues for consumers to resort instead to heuristic processing to justify their decision or to provide ease in the decision-making itself.

Extant research has well recognized the importance of product familiarity—a consumer's prior experience with the product category—in influencing new product evaluation (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Consistent with Peracchio and Tybout (1996), the paper proposes that product familiarity plays an important role in moderating the evaluations of attributes because the degree to which an attribute is perceived as favorable may depend on the consumer's familiarity with the product. Consumers who are familiar with a category usually possess superior knowledge about existing products and have developed a set of expectations about the product category, such as typical attributes, attribute importance, and relations among the attributes (Sujan & Bettman, 1989). When viewing an unfamiliar product, consumers' prior experience about the product may be not enough and evaluating it means complex task because of their impoverished knowledge structure about it. Consumers may know only a little about the category and product attributes, which leads them to pay attention to those aspects that are seemingly favorable among the compared instances so they may give justice to their evaluations (Spalding & Ross, 1994). That is, consumers evaluate the unfamiliar product based on their generalizable belief about the category based on their belief estimations which are generally uncertain in processing the attributes. The perceived favorability and unfavorability of attributes may vary between familiar and unfamiliar products, however the weight given to the importance of the attributes may be higher to familiar products because the certainty of such attribute importance. Because of the uncertainty it holds when evaluations of weight and its importance are done, an unfamiliar product may in fact be more heuristic than analytic in processing style. In most contemporary practices in advertising and persuasion, celebrity endorsers with familiar faces and favorable characters are used in attracting consumers. Such presence of a social influence may give another value in the evaluation processes among consumers. In the case of product familiarity, familiar products may bear little significance for such social influence. However, unfamiliar products, because of their given difficulty in evaluations, presence of a social influence (i.e., celebrity endorser) may give ease to the evaluation where consumers use their feelings and impressions towards celebrity to evaluate an unfamiliar product, thus a heuristic processing.

Previous research have suggested that consumer evaluations may be influenced by others' evaluations of products (Cohen & Golden 1972), such as word-of-mouth and other sources interpersonal and social influence, when intangible products (e.g., hospitality and tourism) are difficult to evaluate prior to their consumption (Litvin, Godsmith, & Pan, 2008; Lewis & Chambers, 2000). Also, third-party endorsements and opinions lend credibility in assessing products that pose some risk and lack of trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hallahan, 2000). These suggest that in unfamiliar product category evaluations where uncertainty and difficulty of judgments are present, the personality of an influence provides a substantial amount of heuristic source of evaluation. However, the said endorsement effect could only be pronounced among unfamiliar products and has no effect in a familiar product category evaluation.

H3a: Narrowed social distance generates more favorable product attitudes and purchase intentions when the celebrity-endorsed product is unfamiliar than familiar.

H3b: Levels of narrowed social distance have no significant effects on product attitudes and purchase intentions on familiar products.

2.4   Moderated mediation by product familiarity

As argued, unfamiliar products have more pronounced increasing evaluations when narrowed social distance appeals are utilized in celebrity endorsements. This paper proposes that this is because the familiarity schema of products offered in the advertisement piece also mediates connectedness. In other words, when the product featured is familiar among consumers, then the social distance appeals become void because the prior knowledge on the product may affect their evaluation. Meanwhile, when the product is unfamiliar, consumers reference their evaluations to the activated connectedness they feel towards the narrowed social distance with the celebrity. For example, an activated 'family member' schema leads to higher connectedness, thus, increased likelihood of persuasion.

H4: Connectedness mediates narrowed social distance to increasing evaluations with unfamiliar products, and not with familiar products.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework showing the mediator connectedness and moderator variable product familiarity.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Conceptual Framework
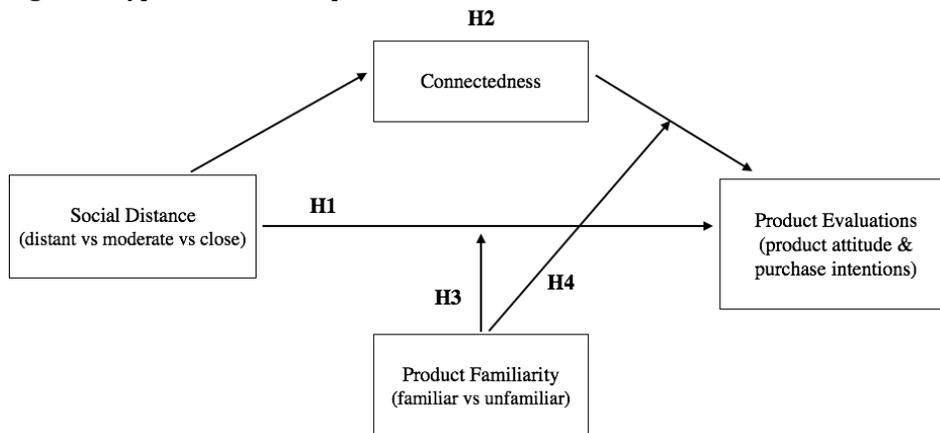
3   Method

3.1   Research context: The Philippines

The Philippines is a sovereign archipelagic country of 101.6 million people (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015) consisting of 7,107 islands located strategically in Southeast Asia. The Philippines, as an Asian country, predominantly collectivist in cultural upbringing, is a relevant context in studying a relational paradigm of celebrity endorsements where high-context culture blends with the popular media culture where celebrities serve as extensions of one's social reality. The growth of celebrity endorsements in the country has been a necessary tool in the past decades (Mallo, 2012). A tremendous amount of advertisements have featured celebrity endorsers "to attract attention and represent a particular brand personality" (Pe, 2012). However, as argued, celebrities have also acted as extended social intimates as a function of media consumption effects.

3.2   Materials and methods

3.2.1   Experimental vignette pretests

Pretest 1: Celebrity Selection. Ruling out possible confounds such as extreme popularity and physical attractiveness, also those who can be appealing to both genders, celebrity endorsers to be featured in the stimulus materials were pretested. Seven famous female celebrities in the Philippines back in early 2015 (i.e., Sarah Geronimo, Toni Gonzaga, Liza Soberano, Barbie Forteza, Anne Curtis, Marian Rivera, and Julie Ann San Jose) were pretested among 45 undergraduate students from a marketing undergraduate class in the University of the Philippines (Diliman, Quezon City, Metro Manila, age ranges from 18-20, with 25 females and 20 males) excluded from the main study by asking them to rate their familiarity (1 = not very familiar, 5 = very familiar) with the celebrities in three aspects: "recent shows and programs", "personal life information", and "media/showbusiness news". Also, they were asked to rate the physical attractiveness of the celebrities (1 = very unattractive, 5 = very attractive). Finally, they were asked to indicate their genders. For familiarity measures, the average scores for the three aspects of familiarity were computed. Results showed that among the seven celebrities, singer-actress Sarah Geronimo was rated in the middle of the seven celebrities both in terms of familiarity and physical attractiveness. Also, the scores for both familiarity and physical attractiveness towards Sarah Geronimo did not differ between males and females. Thus, she was then selected to be featured in the stimulus advertisements in the main experiment.

Pretest 2: Social distance manipulation pretest. To test whether the manipulations designed to be used in the study actually lead to social closeness, a pretest of the vignette was conducted with fifty-six (56) undergraduates of a Communication course in the University of the Philippines–Diliman (age

range 17 to 20; 37 females and 19 males) who were divided into three groups. They were asked to read a write-up about a local celebrity in three separate conditions: celebrity's profile as a singer-actress vs celebrity as a friend vs celebrity as a family member. After reading the write-up, they were exposed to an advertisement of a mineral water (as a neutral product). The advertisement has a text on the celebrity's signature that also aims to prime narrowed social distance (i.e., "Singer-actress" vs "Your good friend here," vs "Your sister here,"). Finally, the subjects were asked to answer a semantic differential scale using keywords relevant to measuring social distance (c.f. Magee & Smith, 2013). In particular, subjects indicated in a 7-point scale how much they (1) "like", (2) "love", (3) "feel close", to the celebrity in the vignette. Results showed that the three manipulation vignettes differed in their average effects to perceived social distance with the celebrity ($M_{singer-actress}$ = 3.45; M_{friend} = 5.7; M_{family} = 6.1; $F(2, 58) = 16.54$, $p<.001$).

3.2.2   Dependent variables and other measures

Product evaluation as the dependent variable used in the study was measured as an aggregate of both product attitudes and purchase intention. A simple average is computed condensing the 5-point measure of both attitudes and intention. Product attitude was measured on six, five-point semantic differential scales (good/bad, convincing/unconvincing, informative/uninformative, interesting/uninteresting, pleasant/unpleasant, likeable/not likeable, Cronbach's a =.86) adapted from previous research (Krishnamurthy & Sujan, 1999). Purchase intention was measured on three five-point scales (probable/improbable, likely/unlikely, possible/impossible, Cronbach's a=.81) from MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986). Demographic information was also asked (age, gender, and income). To check whether the manipulation on social distance indeed created the intended effects on celebrity's social closeness, this paper used the same set of semantic scale discussed above.

3.3   Study 1: Main Effects and Mediation

The first study aims to gather evidence to test hypotheses 1 (i.e., main effects of narrowing social distance to product evaluations) and 2 (mediating effects of connectedness).

3.3.1   Participants and design

Five hundred twenty-one (205 females and 316 males) from the University of the Philippines-Diliman participated in the study in exchange for course credit and a chance to win in a raffle for gift certificates. They were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions: 3 (social distance: distant [celebrity profile] vs moderate [as a 'friend'] vs close [as a family member']) simple factorial between-subjects design.

Participants were told that this study was being done for a research on 'socialization processes, language ability, and personality'. All participants were asked to read a feature article about an interview with a celebrity featuring her "being a family member" (socially-close condition), or "being a friend" (moderate social distance condition) or the "celebrity's profile" (distant condition).

Following the article reading, they were asked to evaluate an advertising material with the celebrity posing as an endorser, along with a product description of a mobile phone. The advertising materials also varied in three social distance appeals on two elements: complimentary close ("Your sister here!" vs "Your good friend here!" vs "Singer-actress"), and a portion of the advertising copy ("...for yourself and our families" vs "...for yourself and our friends" vs "...for yourself and for everybody").

After they evaluated the advertisement by answering measures on product attitude and purchase intentions, they also answered a four-item connectedness scale capturing dimensions on fashion, imitation, modeling, and aspiration (Russell et al., 2004). Then, to check the manipulation, they indicated the social distance degree they could feel from the article they read in a scale of one to five using a semantic scale as described in the pretest above. The procedure lasted for 20 minutes. Participants were debriefed after the experiment.

3.3.2   Mediating variable

Connectedness was measured using the scale developed by Russell and others (2004) with slight modification in this study. The items included were the dimensions on 'modeling' ("I learn how to handle real life situations by watching <celebrity>"; "I get ideas from <celebrity> about how to interact in my own life"; I relate what happens to <celebrity> to my own life") and 'aspiration' ("I would love to meet <celebrity>"). The responses were anchored to a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) (Cronbach's a = .82). Since all items formed reliable scales, the items were averaged for analyses.
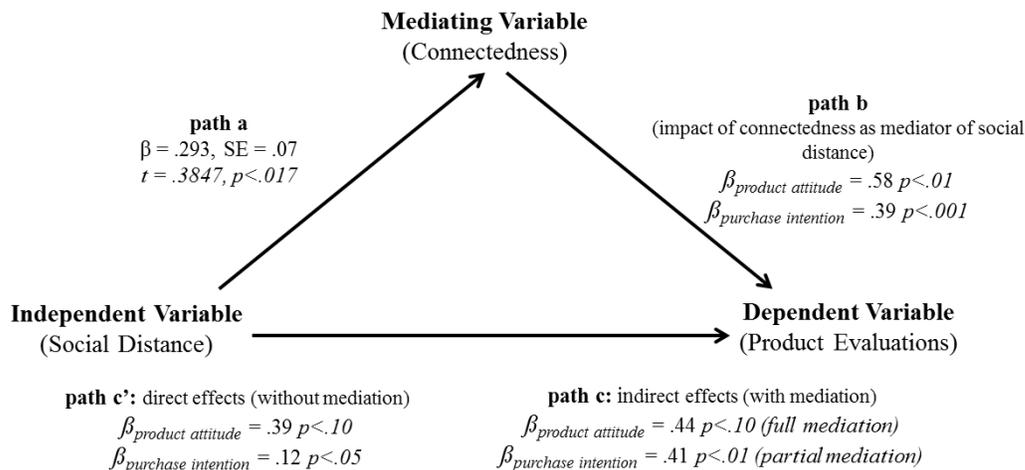
3.3.3   Results

It was hypothesized in H1 that narrowing social distance leads to increased attitudes and purchase intentions towards the endorsed product. Consistent with the expectations, consumers in socially-close condition ('family') provided higher product attitude ($M_{attitude}$ = 4.01, $SD_{attitude}$ = .80) and purchase intentions ($M_{purchase\ intention}$ = 3.8, $SD_{purchase\ intention}$ = 1.22) than those who were primed with 'friends' appeal ($M_{attitude}$ = 3.4, $SD_{attitude}$ = .76); $M_{purchase\ intention}$ = 3.53, $SD_{purchase\ intention}$ = 1.13) and least with socially-distant condition ($M_{attitude}$ = 2.65, $SD_{attitude}$ = .79; $M_{purchase\ intention}$ =3.1, $SD_{purchase\ intention}$ = 1.09). The main effects of social distance to product attitudes were significant $F(1,522)$ = 249.62, p<.01, η_p^2 = .727; as well as with purchase intentions $F(1,522)$ = 208.1, $p < .01$, η_p^2 = .565.

When product attitudes and purchase intentions were aggregated into product evaluations, a one-way ANOVA showed that the differences among social distance levels were significant, $F(2,524)$ = 26.85, p <.001. Planned contrasts showed that there were significant differences on the effects among the three levels of social distance. The first contrast confirmed that the mean level of socially distant level ($M_{distant}$ = 3.4) was indeed lower than moderate ($M_{moderate}$ = 3.89) and socially close (M_{close} = 4.15); $t(521)$ = -6.92, $p < .001$). The second contrast showed that moderate social distant was significantly lower than close social distance, $t(521)$ = -2.502, p = .013. These results support hypothesis 1 of this study pertaining to the linear relationship between social distance and product evaluations: narrowing social distance increases product evaluations.

Hypothesis 2 tested the mediation effects of connectedness on attitudes and purchase intentions. Two sets of regression analyses were performed following the recommendations of Preacher and Hayes (2013). Regression results showed significant main effects in connectedness among the consumers primed with three-level social distance conditions (β = .293, $p < .017$, figure 2 path a), suggesting a strong relation between social distance and connectedness.

To test the mediation hypothesis, the analysis used the Preacher and Hayes (2008) bootstrapping procedure and corresponding SPSS macro to test for a significant indirect effect of social distance on product evaluations via connectedness. One thousand bootstrap resamples were performed. (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Estimation of the *connectedness* mediation path coefficients for social distance conditions (H2), measured in study 1

Mediating Variable
(Connectedness)

path a
β = .293, SE = .07
t = .3847, p<.017

path b
(impact of connectedness as mediator of social distance)
$\beta_{product\ attitude}$ = .58 p<.01
$\beta_{purchase\ intention}$ = .39 p<.001

Independent Variable
(Social Distance)

Dependent Variable
(Product Evaluations)

path c': direct effects (without mediation)
$\beta_{product\ attitude}$ = .39 p<.10
$\beta_{purchase\ intention}$ = .12 p<.05

path c: indirect effects (with mediation)
$\beta_{product\ attitude}$ = .44 p<.10 (full mediation)
$\beta_{purchase\ intention}$ = .41 p<.01 (partial mediation)

The total effects of social distance on product evaluations via connectedness was statistically significant (*c* path), $B = .46$ (SE = .05), $t(240) = 6.78$, $p < .001$. Social distance influenced connectedness (*a* path), $B = .28$ (SE = .07), $t(240) = 2.47$, $p = .0143$. Furthermore, connectedness directly affected product evaluations (*b* path), $B = .50$ (SE = .04), $t(240) = 8.8$, $p < .001$. The direct effects of social distance on product evaluations, after controlling for the mediated influence of connectedness, was not significant (*c'* path), $B = .19$ (SE = .045), $t(240) = 6.35$, $p = .10$. These results suggest a complete mediation by connectedness on the relationship between social distance and product evaluations. In other words, hypothesis 2 (mediation by connectedness) is supported. This explanatory role of connectedness was assessed by means of a bootstrapping mediation test encompassing 1000 bootstraps (lower bound 95% CI = .0161, upper bound 95% CI = .1388) (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Hypothesis 2 was supported where connectedness significantly mediated the relation between social distance and product evaluations. In other words, celebrity endorsements using close relationship appeals that narrow social distance leads to connectedness that in turn affects product evaluations.

3.4   Study 2: moderating effects of product familiarity

Whilst study 1 demonstrates that narrowing social distance leads to increasing product evaluations, this effect could be conditional on the type of product that is endorsed in the advertising material. As hypothesized above, the effect of social influence from celebrities is contingent upon the consumers' familiarity of the product category: narrowed social distance effects could be more pronounced towards unfamiliar than familiar products. Moreover, it is argued that connectedness might be indirectly affecting this conditional effect of social distance towards product familiarity, thus a moderated mediation. Study 2 addresses these hypotheses.

3.4.1   Pretest: product familiarity

A pretest was done to determine appropriate product categories that could exemplify familiar and unfamiliar products. Since past research have suggested that in conditions of unfamiliarity, consumers may know little about the attributes and utility of the products (Spalding & Ross, 1994). A list of fifteen product categories[2] were pretested among 45 undergraduate students excluded from the main study by asking them to rate their familiarity with the product attributes ("characteristics") on a five-point scale (1 = very unfamiliar, 5 = very familiar). Consequently, coffee was a product to which pretest respondents are most familiar with ($M = 4.22$), while a gadget insurance was most unfamiliar to them ($M = 1.34$).

3.4.2   Main experiment

Four hundred three (403) undergraduate students—191 males, 212 females—from two universities in the Philippines participated in the study for an extra course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. The experimental design involved two treatment variables, specifically, a 3 (social distance: distant [celebrity profile] vs moderate [as a 'friend'] vs close ['family member'] x 2 (product familiarity: familiar [coffee] vs unfamiliar [gadget insurance]) between-subjects factorial design. The mediating variable connectedness was measured as within-subjects factor. The procedure replicated that of study 1 with the main difference of product categories.

3.4.3   Results
3.4.3.1   Manipulation check

A manipulation check to assess if social distance was appropriately manipulated suggested that celebrity profile was socially-distant ($M_{low} = 1.88$) than the friend appeal (moderately distant) ($M_{moderate} = 2.53$) and family as socially-close ($M_{high} = 4.05$; $F(1, 404) = 116.80$, $p < .001$).

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[2] Product categories included: coffee, cinema movies, cars, restaurant, laundry detergent, smart phones, sport shoes, gadget insurance, personal computers, furniture, yogurt, beer, cereal, dental toothpaste, energy drinks

3.4.3.2 Moderation test on product familiarity

Hypothesis 3 predicts that consumers who were primed with narrowed social distance generate higher attitudes and purchase intentions to celebrity-endorsed products when the product category is unfamiliar than familiar. In this study, the product that was pretested to be unfamiliar among young consumers is gadget insurance and a familiar product among the choices in the pretest is coffee in terms of familiarity with the product benefits and possible harm. There was a significant main effect of social distance on product evaluations: Analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that socially-distant condition (family) ($M_{\text{product attitude}}$ = 3.6, $SD_{\text{product attitude}}$ = .80) resulted in a higher product attitudes than moderate (friend) ($M_{\text{product attitude}}$ = 2.5, $SD_{\text{product attitude}}$ = .85) and distant (celebrity profile) ($M_{\text{product attitude}}$ = 1.3, $SD_{\text{product attitude}}$ = .77) relationship in unfamiliar product condition, $F(2,404)$=76.85, p < .05. Also, the same pattern was observed in social distance level towards purchase intentions: consumers primed with socially-close condition reported higher purchase intention ($M_{\text{purchase intention}}$ = 3.06, $SD_{\text{purchase intention}}$ = 1.34) than those primed in moderate ($M_{\text{purchase intention}}$ = 2.51, $SD_{\text{purchase intention}}$ = 1.33) and low ($M_{\text{purchase intention}}$ = 1.78, $SD_{\text{purchase intention}}$ = 1.32) social distance conditions.

Three-way interaction among social distance, product evaluations (aggregated product attitudes and purchase intentions), and product familiarity was significant: F (1,402) = 11.927, p < .001. See Table 1 for the results.

Table 1. Study 2: Three-way Interaction among Social Distance and Product Evaluations moderated by Product Familiarity

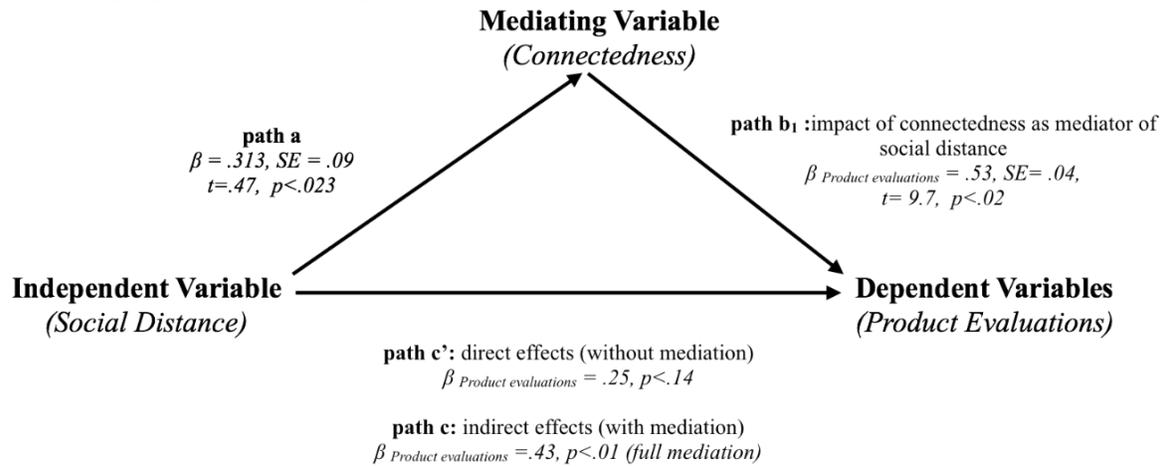| Social Distance Conditions	Product Attitude[1] 5-point scale (SD)		Purchase Intentions[4] 5-point scale (SD)	
	Familiar Product[2]	Unfamiliar Product[3]	Familiar Product[5]	Unfamiliar Product[6]
Distant (Celebrity Profile)	2.02 (.80)	3.3 (.77)	2.5 (1.37)	2.78 (1.32)
Moderate (Friend)	2.20 (.67)	3.8 (.85)	2.55 (1.16)	3.51 (1.33)
Close (Family)	2.40 (.81)	4.1 (.80)	2.67 (1.34)	4.06 (1.34)

Note:

[1] 2-way interaction between social distance vs product familiarity was significant at F (1,403) = 36.65, p<.001, DV=attitude

[2] familiar product contrast: NS, p<.10

[3] unfamiliar product contrast: $F(1, 201)$ = 1.273, p<.02

[4] 3-way interaction among social distance, product familiarity, and product evaluation was significant at F (1,402) = 11.927, p<.001; DV= purchase intention

[5] familiar product contrast: NS, p<.60

[6] unfamiliar product contrast: $F(1, 201)$ = .94, p<.001

3.4.3.3 Mediation test on connectedness

As study 1 provides support for hypothesis 2, where connectedness mediates the effects of narrowed social distance towards product evaluations, study 2 also provides an opportunity for its validation. A mediation test was done using the dataset gathered in study 2. Again, regression results showed that there is significant main effect in connectedness among consumer primed with three-level social distance conditions regardless of product familiarity. (See figure 3). Regression results first showed significant main effects in connectedness among the consumers primed with three-level social distance conditions (β = .313, p < .023, figure 3 path *a*), suggesting a significant relation between social distance and connectedness.

To test the mediation hypothesis, the analysis used the Preacher and Hayes (2008) bootstrapping procedure and corresponding SPSS macro to test for a significant indirect effect of social distance on product evaluations via connectedness. One thousand bootstrap resamples were performed. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Estimation of the *connectedness* mediation path coefficients for social distance conditions (H2), measured in study 2

Mediating Variable
(Connectedness)

path a
$\beta = .313, SE = .09$
$t=.47, \ p<.023$

path b$_1$:impact of connectedness as mediator of social distance
$\beta_{\text{Product evaluations}} = .53, SE= .04,$
$t= 9.7, \ p<.02$

Independent Variable
(Social Distance)

Dependent Variables
(Product Evaluations)

path c': direct effects (without mediation)
$\beta_{\text{Product evaluations}} = .25, p<.14$

path c: indirect effects (with mediation)
$\beta_{\text{Product evaluations}} =.43, p<.01 \text{ (full mediation)}$

The total effects of social distance on product evaluations via connectedness was statistically significant (*c* path), $B = .43$ (SE = .05), $t(402) = 7.8$, $p < .01$. Social distance influenced connectedness (*a* path), $B = .313$ (SE = .09), $t(402) = 1.7$, $p = .023$. Furthermore, connectedness directly affected product evaluations (*b* path), $B = .53$ (SE = .04), $t(402) = 9.7$, $p < .02$. The direct effects of social distance on product evaluations, after controlling for the mediated influence of connectedness, was not significant (*c'* path), $B = .25$ (SE = .045), $t(402) = 4.5$, $p = .14$. These results suggest a complete mediation by connectedness on the relationship between social distance and product evaluations. In other words, hypothesis 2 (mediation by connectedness) is supported. This explanatory role of connectedness was assessed by means of a bootstrapping mediation test encompassing 1000 bootstraps (lower bound 95% CI = .0261, upper bound 95% CI = .188) (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).
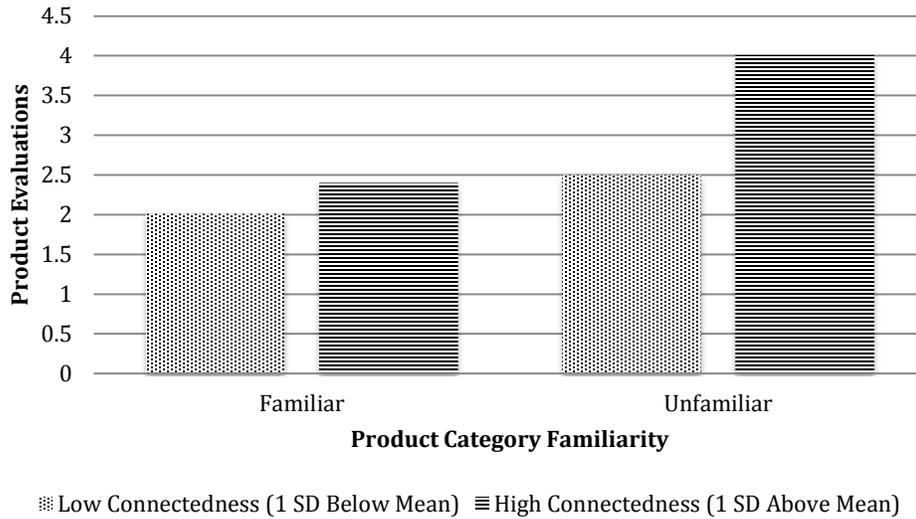
3.4.3.4 Moderated mediation test on connectedness and product familiarity

Finally, hypothesis 4 tested on a moderated mediation by product familiarity on connectedness. The model evaluated the moderating role of product familiarity (familiar vs unfamiliar) on the direct and indirect paths between connectedness and product evaluations. This assessed whether product familiarity moderates the "b path" (e.g., relation between connectedness and product evaluations) and "c path" (e.g., the relation between social distance and product evaluations). (See model 15 of Hayes, 2015)

The model summary showed that the main effect of social distance to connectedness was significant with $\beta = .102$, $R^2 = .0083$; *MSE* = .7819, $F(1, 404) = 4.64$, $p = .0316$. Using a moderated mediation test, the overall model showed a higher effect size of $R^2 = .16$, *MSE* = .45, $F(5, 404) = 20.88$, $p < .001$. The interaction term for connectedness and product familiarity was significant $\beta = .024$, *SE* = .067, $t = .35$, $p = .023$. Meanwhile, the interaction between social distance and product familiarity was marginally significant at $\beta = .067$, *SE* = .073, $t = .92$, $p = .058$. The conditional direct effect ("path c") of social distance on product evaluations reflected a higher effect towards an unfamiliar product: $\beta = .856$, *SE* = .055, $t = 1.56$, $p = .011$; than a familiar product: $\beta = .182$, *SE* = .049, $t = .37$, $p = .071$ (ns). Finally, the conditional indirect effects of social distance on product evaluations ("path b") showed different directions between familiar product ($\beta = - .0330$, Boot *SE* = .0174, between BootLLCI = -.0704 and BootULCI = .0032) and unfamiliar product ($\beta = .0354$, Boot *SE*= .0170, between BootLLCI = -.0721 and BootULCI = .0040). Meaning, varying amount of connectedness leads to different levels of product evaluations.

These interactions on conditional indirect effects were probed at 1 SD above the mean and 1 SD below the mean of the connectedness (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). The results indicated that the unfamiliar product was more strongly related to connectedness among product evaluations (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Interaction on the Indirect effects of the relation between connectedness and product evaluations for the familiar vs unfamiliar product categories

⬚ Low Connectedness (1 SD Below Mean)   ☰ High Connectedness (1 SD Above Mean)

Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported where the indirect effects through moderated mediation were significant: product familiarity moderated the effects of the mediator connectedness to product evaluations. In other words, the results of this conditional indirect effects by connectedness means that: those consumers who feel more connected than less connected to the celebrity provide higher evaluations toward unfamiliar products than familiar products as initially effected by narrowed social distance.

4   Conclusion

Consistent with the weighted averaging model of information integration in consumer information processes, the effects of narrowing social distance to evaluations, in particular, consumer attitudes and purchase intentions are contingent upon the familiarity of products. The piece of information is characterized by two parameters (scale and weight). Scale represents the subjective position of the information on the dimension of judgment, while weight represents its psychological importance (Anderson, 1991; Anderson & Graesser, 1976). It is assumed that the scale value remains constant and that weight may vary as a function of the judgmental and contextual situation such as in evaluation of familiar versus unfamiliar products. Furthermore, the data from the experiment support connectedness as a mediating mechanism for explaining differences in product evaluations. It was found that the extent to which young consumers were influenced by celebrity's socially-close appeal is greater for unfamiliar product than familiar, and this effect is mediated by connectedness.

In line with Liviatan and colleagues (2008) idea of construal social distance, interpersonal similarity as a social distance dimension has implications on consumers' evaluative actions. The findings that as the degree of social distance narrows (i.e., celebrity to friends, or to family members), evaluations of endorsements also tend to increase. In general, the trend suggests that as endorsers' framing in marketing communication become more interpersonally close, evaluations towards the products and advertisement material tend to increase. This finding where varying social distance have direct effects to product evaluations suggest that such social distance with celebrities should be made salient explicitly in advertising. In line with construal and social identity theories, celebrities' social distance leads to nearness and less distant appeals through the relational mechanism of advertising. The differences in social distance effects which involved a larger effect size attest that when socially-close appeals made salient help alleviate informative and value uncertainties of unfamiliarity more pronouncedly than the information and value given by familiar products where consumers may have experienced certainty of the attributes and utility of the product (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975).

The findings that social distance appeals significantly differ in their effects suggest insights on the development of relational perspective in celebrity endorsements: that social distance utilizing social intimate schemas might provide effective message design strategy in the context of advertising. Sociological and anthropological insights may also help explain why social distance matters among celebrity construal among consumers. Celebrities have different "masks" that may drive social construction of their identities both on-stage and off-stage (Marshall, 2010). However, audience-consumers also possess critical unmasking where they search for authenticity and keen to differentiate the 'real' versus the 'onscreen' characters of celebrities. In other words, although celebrities may possess trademark images such as Lady Gaga's outrageous character onscreen, audience members also seek unmasked identity of her, such as being an ordinary, socially-close persona to whom they can construe a real person more emotionally. Wall Street Journal reported that with Lady Gaga's Barnes and Noble advertisement with Tony Bennett, "the ad is part of an effort to tap into an emotional connection between the bookstore chain and consumers." (Trachtenberg, 2015).

It is important to note that the research being done in the Philippines takes particular cultural distinction as a collective society. Celebrities in the Western societies such as in the United States and European countries may be received differently as they are in an Asian context such as the Philippines where they are seen and treated as real social intimate more than actors and actresses playing roles (Choi et al., 2005). As an effect of such extended social circle given to the inclusion of celebrities, their heuristic value comes into play when judgment of unfamiliarity calls for endorsements.

Among the findings' insights is that one of the major considerations in consumers' product evaluative judgments is their familiarity with the product. The general criterion of familiarity suggests that there is previous experience and knowledge with the product; meanwhile, unfamiliarity poses uncertainty with the product and its attributes (Martin & Mitchell, 1998). The magnitude of perceived risk on the unfavorable product attribute plays role in this uncertainty criterion as a result of unfamiliarity (Bauer, 1960; Martin & Mitchell, 1998). As a result, in an unfamiliar product, other criteria might be relevant in the evaluative judgment such as presence of a social influence (Bearden & Etzel, 1989), and in product advertising domain it can be in the form of a celebrity endorser.

Thus, these imply that product evaluations on familiar goods/services become a heuristic judgment (Traversky & Kahneman, 1992; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) based on product familiarity (and implicitly the risk magnitude of the unfavorable attribute), independent of endorser influence, as consumer tend to based their simplified judgments on previous experience with the familiar product.

However, in an unfamiliar product attribute condition, the influence of an endorser begins to have an impact, as consumers tend to weigh a social influence that aids the judgment formations, and incrementally when social distance appeals to social relationships.

Benefits on managerial perspective are explicitly shown in terms of designing appeals of celebrities in advertising messages. That is, advertising message design, especially in Asian markets, could benefit from the relational approach where celebrity value is more received and utilized when they are projected in the personae of social intimates. Moreover, the findings show that such celebrity relational approach may be conditional upon the product type – that is, unfamiliar product evaluations bear heuristic anchorage from celebrities.

5   Directions for Future Research

Although the results have provided statistically significant evidence that narrowed social distance leads to higher product evaluations, that connectedness explains this effect, and that product familiarity varies that extent to which products are evaluated favorably; future research can extend the main argument through other several ways. Firstly, celebrity social distance may be framed in other forms of social categories that suggest narrowing distance. Secondly, other explanatory variables may be explored – liking, the credibility of social categories, cognitive schemata towards social categories, and affective mechanisms that come from narrowed social distance. Also, representatives of product familiarity variable can always be changed according to the array of

product categories in which certain target markets' familiarity levels might vary. Moreover, going beyond the methodological premises of experiments, a traditional survey on consumers' pre-existing social distance with endorsers can be measured alongside with their connectedness and the familiarity that consumers might have towards the products the endorsers have been promoting.

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