Received: 24 February 2022 | Accepted: 17 February 2023

DOI: 10.1002/mar.21804

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Psychology & Marketing WILEY

The proximal self: Why material objects are particularly relevant for consumers' self-definition

Philipp Scharfenberger[1] | Daniel Wentzel[2] | Luk Warlop[3] | Verena Riegler[2]

[1]Institute for Marketing and Customer Insight, University of St. Gallen, St. Gallen, Switzerland

[2]Department of Marketing, RWTH Aachen University, Aachen, Germany

[3]Department of Marketing, Norwegian Business School (BI), Oslo, Norway

Correspondence
Philipp Scharfenberger, Institute for Marketing and Customer Insight, Dufourstrasse 40A, 9000 St. Gallen, Switzerland.
Email: philipp.scharfenberger@unisg.ch

Daniel Wentzel, Department of Marketing, RWTH Aachen University, Kackertstraße 7, 52072 Aachen, Germany.
Email: wentzel@time.rwth-aachen.de

Abstract

Previous research has extensively investigated the relationships that consumers create and maintain with their possessions. However, little is known about why material objects (compared to immaterial ones) may be particularly relevant for consumers' self-definition. In this research, we argue that being physically close to objects helps consumers to feel psychologically close to the more abstract meaning of these objects. Four experimental studies provide converging support for this reasoning. Specifically, these studies indicate that being proximal to an object reduces the psychological distance to the object's meaning and enhances the benefits that consumers associate with the object. Moreover, the effect of bodily proximity on perceived benefits is moderated by separation anxiety, such that consumers that are highly anxious about being separated from the object's meaning derive higher benefits from being proximal to it. The findings contribute to research on the extended self and highlight the potential importance of physical proximity as a motivational driver of consumer behavior.

KEYWORDS

anxiety, attachment theory, embodied cognition, extended self, material objects, possessions, proximity, self-definition

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumers tend to surround themselves with self-defining objects. They wear clothes that suit their personalities, they keep souvenirs of vacations they like to remember, and they are fond of pictures of people or events that are central to their selves. As Belk notes, "that we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior" (Belk, 1988; p. 139).

While many of the things that consumers incorporate into their selves are concrete and material, others are of a more ideational and immaterial nature, such as their values, beliefs, ideas, relationships, and personal experiences. Prior research has tended to neglect a thorough differentiation between material and immaterial domains of the extended self. Hence, although a considerable amount of research has investigated the self-extending nature of possessions (e.g., Atasoy & Morewedge, 2018; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Belk, 1988, 2013), there remains a lack of knowledge regarding the question of whether and how the ability to refer bodily to possessions affects their self-defining function.

Consumers indeed tend to materialize abstract parts of their extended self, for example, by wearing a necklace with a cross pendant that symbolizes a religious belief or by holding on to a keepsake from a cherished vacation. Many of these objects have a strong personal value; some even become constitutive symbols

within their cultural contexts. Current consumer research, however, is missing a thorough explanation for this prevalent tendency of consumers to value bodily proximity to material objects that embody important personal meanings.

Building on notions of embodied cognition and attachment theory, this paper addresses this important research gap. We argue that seeking bodily proximity to material objects relates to a general proximity need as conceptualized in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and helps consumers to establish a psychological proximity to the meaning of these objects (Ackerman et al., 2010; Noble & Walker, 1997). That is, by being bodily proximal to an object, consumers may also feel psychologically close to the meaning that the object represents. Moreover, we argue that this need to be physically close to self-relevant objects will be particularly pronounced when consumers feel anxious about being separated from the object's meaning.

Four experimental studies that rely on established connections between objects and personal meanings, as well as newly established connections, provide converging support for these predictions. In doing so, our studies make several contributions to the literature. First, our research highlights a potentially important quality of material possessions that has been neglected in existing research: Bodily proximity to material possessions may support consumers in feeling close to self-relevant entities that are physically and mentally distant. Second, in identifying this proximity-seeking behavior, our paper extends research on compensatory consumption and need-for-touch effects (e.g., Keefer et al., 2012; Peck & Shu, 2009; Post el al., 2023). As such, the value of bodily proximity to self-relevant objects may derive not only from a distance-reducing function to their associated meaning, but also from their quality of providing a material reference point in situations of anxiety. That is, being proximal to self-relevant objects may be valued even more when consumers feel anxious about being distant from the meaning the object represents. In this sense, our research also points more generally to the importance of physical objects in a world that is becoming increasingly digitized and dematerialized. Third, our research also has important managerial implications by showing how firms can strategically use objects to foster a deeper connection between their customers and the more abstract meanings of their offerings.

2 | EMBODIED COGNITION, ATTACHMENT THEORY, AND PROXIMITY SEEKING

Previous research has extensively investigated the relationships that consumers create and maintain with their possessions (see Table 1 for an overview). For example, literature on the extended self has focused on understanding how external entities are integrated into the self. However, this research has not comprehensively examined the relevance of bodily interactions with such external reference points. A similar argument can be made with regard to related fields such as symbolic, compensatory, digital, or postmodern consumption. At the same time, research that has investigated bodily interactions with material objects (e.g., touch) has not examined the relevance of such experiences to self-extension processes. We position our research at the intersection of these literature streams with the aim of conceptualizing material objects as vehicles that enable consumers to relate to important personal meanings. To do so, we build on embodied cognition and its inherent link to attachment theory and proximity.

According to the concept of embodied cognition, humans' cognitive processes are strongly influenced by bodily experiences (Barsalou, 2008; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ranaweera et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2023). As a result, the way humans think and feel is linked to their experience of the physical world. Accordingly, humans tend to transfer metaphorically notions from the physical to the conceptual context. As a consequence of this interrelation between mind and body, physical sensations may also inform emotional states. For example, holding a warm mug may influence the perceived warmth of a social counterpart (Williams & Bargh, 2008a) and the manipulation of distance between individuals may influence their perceived emotional connection (Williams & Bargh, 2008b).

Furthermore, Williams and Bargh (2008a, 2008b) connect the importance of social judgment dimensions such as "distance" and "warmth" to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and the infantile sensory experience of "physical distance" to, and "bodily warmth" from, caregivers (see also Fay & Maner, 2012). Bowlby (1969) argues that infants have an innate need for proximity to their caregivers and that maintaining proximity to caregivers during infancy is critical to the survival of many living beings (see also Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Thus, according to embodied cognition and its relationship to attachment theory, proximity is an early-acquired and particularly important cognitive concept.

In this research, we define proximity as a continuous construct ranging from close to distant (with extreme forms of *being one* and *being unreachable*; Bowlby, 1969). However, we further argue that within this continuous conceptualization of proximity there are sub-categories with ordinal qualities (Bowlby, 1969; Sorce & Emde, 1981). More specifically, proximity as a continuous construct may be subdivided into classes such as bodily connection (i.e., touch), access (i.e., in reach), and presence (i.e., something can be perceived through the senses and/or is somehow present).[1] As outlined above, the notion of proximity can be applied to the bodily as well as to the psychological domain.

Bridging research on the self and possessions to the idea of embodied cognition offers a promising perspective on the question of why consumers tend to attach to material objects that embody important personal meanings. If bodily experience is fundamental for cognitive processes, then the bodily experience of physical objects

[1]Bowlby (1969), for example, outlines that one aspect of children's proximity seeking is (a) the need to know that their caregiver is present, (b) to see, or (c) be in touch with their caregiver. Hence, although to our knowledge, he does not explicitly conceptualize proximity as a continuous dimension with sub-categories, he implicitly refers to these categories with ordinal qualities (see also Brosnan et al., 2012; Sorce & Emde, 1981).

TABLE 1 Literature review.

Literature stream	Research focus	Main methodology	Exemplary literature	Contribution of present research
Possessions and self	This literature stream investigates the relationships between consumers and their possessions and provides a thorough understanding of the integration of external entities into the self.	Conceptual/ qualitative	Belk et al. (1989); Belk (1988); Noble and Walker (1997)	The present paper contributes to this literature stream by more specifically investigating the relevance of physical/material factors to self-extension processes. The current research focuses on an experimental approach to complement the predominant conceptual/qualitative approaches in this field. Our findings point to a more careful differentiation between bodily experienceable and more abstract domains of the extended self.
Symbolic consumption	This literature stream mainly concentrates on the symbolic meaning and value of goods and how they are utilized for self-related and identity-signaling purposes.	Experimental/ conceptual	Berger and Heath (2007); Grayson and Shulman (2000); Noble and Walker (1997); Richins (1994)	The present paper contributes to this literature stream by more specifically investigating the relevance of bodily interactions with material objects, as well as bodily proximity, to symbolic consumption and self-extension processes. Our research emphasizes the relevance of bodily/material factors to the perception of and interaction with symbols/self-relevant meanings.
Compensatory consumption and insecurity	This literature stream provides a thorough understanding of the relevance of insecurity to materialism and compensatory consumption.	Experimental/survey	Keefer et al. (2012); Pieters (2013); Proksch et al. (2015); Rindfleisch et al. (2009)	The present paper more specifically investigates the relevance of bodily proximity to material objects with regard to their function as security providers and substitutes for their associated meanings.
Touch, product evaluation, and ownership	This literature stream investigates the effects of touch (including individuals' need-for-touch) and haptic object properties on consumers' attitudes and behaviors towards objects (including perceived ownership).	Experimental	Krishna and Morrin (2008); Peck and Shu (2009); Peck and Wiggins (2006); Post et al. (2023); Ranaweera et al. (2021); Wei et al. (2023)	The present paper contributes to this literature stream by more specifically investigating the relevance of object proximity to self-extension processes. We furthermore broach the idea of touch as a subdimension of proximity.
Digital consumption	This literature stream concentrates on consumption of digital products with their specific properties. Although it refers to the relevance of the materiality of products, it stays vague in its investigation of the relevance of bodily proximity to material objects for self-extension processes.	Conceptual/ qualitative/ experimental	Atasoy and Morewedge (2018); Belk (2013); Konok et al. (2016); Nagy and Koles (2014)	The present paper contributes to this literature stream by developing a generalizable concept of the relevance of bodily proximity to self-extension processes. Our concept may support future research on differences between digital and non-digital possessions.
Postmodern consumption	This literature stream develops new understandings of the relationships between consumers and economic goods. These understandings are particularly influenced by new consumption practices and lifestyles such as digital and access-based consumption (including sharing). It predominantly suggests a	Conceptual/ qualitative	Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017); Bardhi et al. (2012); Belk (2010); Caprariello and Reis (2013); Van Boven and Gilovich (2003); Vargo and Lusch (2004)	The present paper contributes to the current discussion on postmodern consumption by critically reflecting on the particular relevance of physical/bodily aspects of consumption and the self-defining and soothing function that traditional possessions may still fulfill. We intend to foster a view that integrates more traditional with more

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Literature stream	Research focus	Main methodology	Exemplary literature	Contribution of present research
	decrease in the importance of stable/physical relationships to possessions.			modern conceptualizations of consumption (instead of seeing them as conflictive). We focus on an experimental approach to complement the predominantly conceptual/qualitative approaches in this field.

may support consumers' mental reference to the meaning attached to the objects. In other words, material objects may serve as metaphorical devices that support consumers' mental reference to meanings that are important to them (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2010; Noble & Walker, 1997; Williams & Bargh, 2008b). In this context, it is noteworthy that the pertinent expression "extended self" per se suggests a metaphorical application of a physical notion (i.e., extension) to a cognitive concept (i.e., the self; Belk, 1988). That is, it indicates that the self may be mentally construed as space and that individuals may bodily incorporate things into this space (Belk, 1988; Claus et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021). Hence, being physically close to a material object may support individuals in feeling psychologically close to the meaning associated with that object (Belk, 1990). For example, being close to an object associated with a beloved person may reduce the perceived psychological distance to this person. In this manner, material objects may serve a self-supporting function by metaphorically providing proximity to self-important entities (Belk, 1988; Bowlby, 1969).

H1 *Bodily proximity to a material object reduces the psychological distance to the meaning of the object.*

Apart from reducing psychological distance, proximity may also affect the benefits that consumers perceive with regard to the object (e.g., Bardhi et al., 2012; Bowlby, 1969; Brosnan et al., 2012; Richins, 1994). As such, research on attachment theory and embodied cognition indicates that humans seek proximity to important attachment figures and objects (Bowlby, 1969; Williams & Bargh, 2008b). Building on these findings, we argue that individuals may generally seek bodily proximity to concepts that are important to them and their self-concept (in line with our conceptualization of the extended self as an embodied concept).

If material objects indeed help consumers to establish a metaphorical connection to self-relevant meanings, then this property of material objects should translate to a higher perception of benefits. Importantly, the benefits that consumers perceive as stemming from a material object should depend on the extent to which the object manages to reduce the psychological distance to a personally important meaning. Hence, building on H1, we postulate that bodily proximity leads to higher perceived benefits of the object and that this effect is mediated by a reduced psychological distance to the meaning represented by the object.

H2 *Bodily proximity to a material object increases its perceived benefits by reducing psychological distance to the object's meaning.*

According to attachment theory, the need to be proximal to attachment figures is determined by a person's need to feel safe, secure, and protected (Bowlby, 1969; Konok et al., 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Proksch et al., 2015; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2014). Thus, the need for proximity is particularly strong in situations of high anxiety, that is, in situations in which individuals feel stressed or threatened (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Shaver &

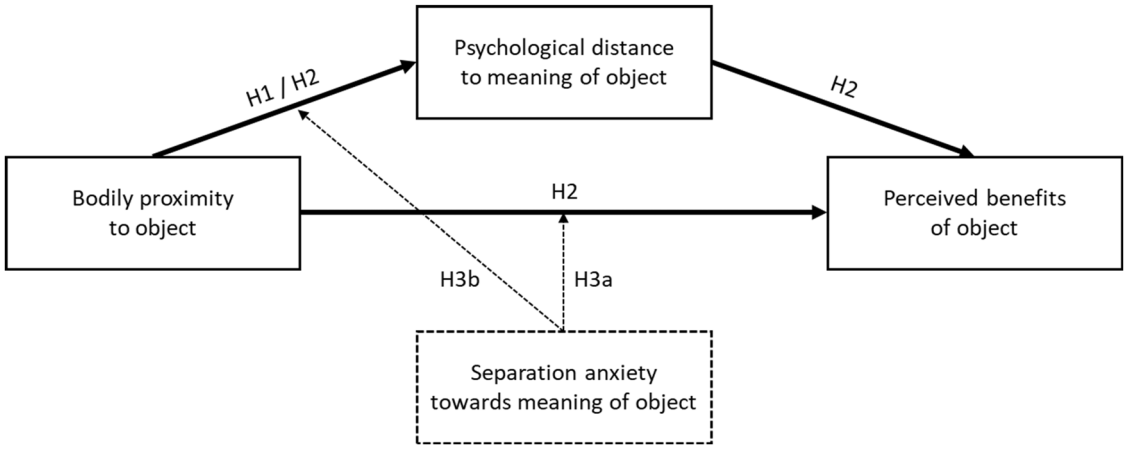

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

Mikulincer, 2014). Bowlby (1969), as well as Freud (1926), argues that separation from attachment figures is a particularly important cause of anxiety (see also Bretherton, 1992; Fraley, 2019; Twenge, 2000). According to these authors, anxiety reflects two facets that closely relate to proximity: (a) the unpleasant feeling of being separated from (i.e., distant to) an important attachment entity and (b) the desire to return (i.e., to be proximal) to this entity.

While the above arguments mainly refer to interpersonal relationships, they may also extend to people's motivation to be close to material objects (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). That is, they point to the possibility that the desire to be physically close to material objects is also affected by the extent to which consumers feel anxious about being separated from the meaning represented by the object. Specifically, we propose that anxiety moderates the effect of proximity on perceived benefits. When consumers experience high separation anxiety, they may feel a particularly strong desire to be reunited with the meaning. However, as this is not possible (i.e., because the meaning cannot be experienced directly), they may focus more strongly on a material object that symbolizes the meaning (Bowlby, 1969). Hence, consumers will perceive greater benefits from being physically close (vs. distant) to material objects when they experience higher levels of anxiety. Moreover, we postulate that this effect is mediated by the interaction between proximity and anxiety on psychological distance. Because high separation anxiety creates a stronger urge for proximity, consumers may experience the reduction in psychological distance that is facilitated by bodily proximity more intensely when they are more anxious about being separated from the meaning than when they are less anxious. In turn, this reduction in psychological distance translates into a higher perception of the benefits of the object (Figure 1).

H3a *The effect of bodily proximity to a material object on its perceived benefits is stronger at high versus low levels of separation anxiety.*

H3b *The interactive effect of bodily proximity and separation anxiety on perceived benefits is mediated by psychological distance. Specifically, the effect of proximity to an object on psychological distance to its meaning is stronger at high versus low levels of separation anxiety, and psychological distance, in turn, shapes perceived benefits.*

3 | STUDY 1

The aim of Study 1 was to test H1 and H2. Participants were asked to think of an object that was associated with a personally important memory or experience. All studies focused on self-relevant objects, reflecting our assumption that possessions transmit important psychological meanings into the material world and render these meanings accessible in a material sense.

3.1 | Method

Study 1 relied on a one-factorial design with object proximity (close/distant) manipulated between subjects. A total of 248 participants were recruited from MTurk, filtered via CloudResearch. Eight individuals failed a one-item attention check, resulting in a final sample size of 240 participants (51% females, mean age = 44 years).

In the first part of the study, individuals were asked to think of a personal possession that they felt attached to because it embodied self-important memories or experiences. In particular, they were asked to explain this connection in writing. Following this, they were exposed to one of two scenarios that differed with regard to bodily proximity (see also Appendix 1). In the high-proximity scenario, participants read the following instructions: "Now think about this object that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine holding the object in your hand or wearing it (e.g., wearing a ring of your mother's or holding a vacation souvenir in your hands). How does it feel to you to have this important object really close to you? Does this closeness affect your feelings about its associated meaning?" Conversely, the instructions for the low-proximity scenario read: "Now think about this object that has this important meaning to you.

Then, imagine being unable to hold or wear the object (e.g., you lost the object or forgot it somewhere you can't remember, e.g. the ring your mother gave to you). How does it feel to you to have no option to be really close to your important object? Does this distance affect your feelings about its associated meaning?"

Again, participants had to explain in writing how they felt about the current proximity of their self-relevant object. Once they completed this task, they indicated the object's perceived benefits as well as their perceived psychological distance to the object's meaning. Perceived benefits were measured with a three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.943$; see also Bardhi et al., 2012; Bowlby, 1969; Richins, 1994). Psychological distance to the meaning was measured with a two-item scale ($\alpha = 0.915$, Liberman et al., 2007; Ross & Wilson, 2002). For control purposes, participants rated the personal relevance of the self-important object, and indicated their age and gender. All items used in this study and the other studies are reported in Appendix 3.

3.2 | Results

A manipulation check for proximity revealed that the high-proximity condition was associated with higher proximity perceptions than the low-proximity condition ($M_{close} = 1.89$, SD = 1.32 vs. $M_{distant} = 4.33$, SD = 2.17, $F(1, 239) = 111.02$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.31$). Furthermore, another check indicated that participants had focused on objects that were highly important to them ($M = 6.02$, $t(238)_{diff\_from\_4} = 25.58$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, this judgment did not differ between the conditions.

Next, a one-factor ANOVA for psychological distance revealed a main effect for object proximity ($M_{close} = 2.05$, SD = 1.46 vs. $M_{distant} = 3.54$, SD = 2.15, $F(1, 239) = 39.66$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.14$). As such, participants experienced a lower psychological distance to their self-relevant meaning when they imagined being close to the object symbolizing this meaning. Hence, these results provide support for H1.

Another one-factor ANOVA for perceived benefits showed a significant effect of proximity ($M_{close} = 5.84$, SD = 1.49 vs. $M_{distant} = 5.15$, SD = 1.88, $F(1, 239) = 10.04$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$). As expected, participants ascribed higher benefits to the objects when they imagined being close to them. To test H2, we ran a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 4, Hayes 2013). In this analysis, we tested whether the effect of proximity on benefits was mediated by psychological distance. Indeed, a bootstrapping analysis (10,000 resamples) showed that the indirect effect of object proximity on perceived benefits was significant ($B = 0.563$, SE = 0.141, 95% confidence intervals [CI] = [0.313–0.865]). Importantly, the direct effect of object proximity was no longer significant once the indirect effect had been included in the model. Hence, these results provide support for H2.

3.3 | Discussion

Study 1 examined whether bodily proximity to a self-relevant object leads to a greater valuation of this object in situations in which the meaning cannot be experienced directly. Our findings suggest that bodily proximity increases the object's perceived benefits because the object reduces the psychological distance to its associated meaning. While these results provide support for H1 and H2, one limitation of Study 1 is that participants were asked to *imagine* being bodily close or distant to the object. That is, they did not experience distance or proximity directly. To address this limitation, Study 2 directly manipulated different degrees of bodily proximity. Another aim of Study 2 was to test whether the effect of bodily proximity on psychological distance would also be present for objects for which the connection to the meaning was newly formed (and not firmly established, as with the objects of Study 1).

4 | STUDY 2

Study 2 was conducted in a laboratory setting. As part of the study, participants were asked to connect a mug with the imprint "remember" to a personal experience from the previous year. According to H1, we predicted that bodily distance to the mug would influence perceived distance to the meaning (i.e., the past experience). Study 2 used a one-factorial design with object proximity (close and touch/close and no touch/distant and no touch) manipulated between subjects. Because we wanted to examine if the effects of proximity would be affected by the opportunity to touch the object, we included one condition where participants were close to the mug and were encouraged to touch it, and one condition where participants were close to the mug but were not allowed to touch it. Participants in the distant condition were not within reaching distance of the mug. Mugs were chosen as objects because they have been successfully used in similar study designs (Peck & Shu, 2009) and because they are often bought as souvenirs and frequently serve as carriers of personal meanings or experiences.

4.1 | Method

A total of 126 students from a Swiss university participated individually in the study (51% females, mean age = 22 years). Four participants were excluded from the analyses because, contrary to the instructions, they specified very negative (e.g., divorce of parents, death of a close relative) or regularly recurring (e.g., an annual university party) events. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants received a chocolate bar as an incentive. Participants were first asked to recall a personal experience that had occurred in the previous year and that they liked to remember. Subsequently, their attention was drawn to a mug that was placed at a 40-centimeter (short distance) or a 4-m distance (long distance) on the table in front of them. Participants were asked to connect the mug mentally to the recalled experience and to describe this associative connection in a short writing task.

In the short-distance condition without touch as well as in the long-distance condition, participants were then instructed to "please take another look at the mug." In the short-distance condition in

which the mug was touched, participants were instructed to "please take the mug into your hand and take another look at the mug." An experimenter ensured that participants complied with these instructions. Following this, participants were asked to indicate the distance they perceived with regard to their personal experience (i.e., the meaning). Psychological distance to the meaning was measured with two 7-point items (Van Boven et al., 2010; Ross & Wilson, 2002; $\alpha = 0.790$). Note that we did not include perceived benefits as a dependent variable in Study 2. As such, we reasoned that the benefits associated with an object accrue over time. That is, for an object to be beneficial, it first needs to be linked to a specific self-relevant meaning. As, however, one of the purposes of Study 2 was to examine whether people can purposefully transfer a self-relevant meaning to a newly acquired object in the first place, we felt that the design of the study would not allow us to assess perceived benefits validly.

4.2 | Results

An ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of mug distance on psychological distance to the experience ($F(2, 119) = 3.30$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.052$). In line with H1, planned contrasts indicated a significant difference between the long-distance condition ($M = 4.02$, SD = 1.48) and the short-distance conditions without touch ($M = 3.38$, SD = 1.35; $t(119) = 2.02$, $p = 0.045$) and with touch ($M = 3.34$, SD = 1.29; $t(119) = 2.35$, $p = 0.02$). However, no significant difference was found between the two short-distance conditions ($t(119) = 0.13$, $p = 0.89$).

4.3 | Discussion

Study 2 sought to address a limitation of Study 1 by directly manipulating the bodily proximity between participants and an object symbolizing a self-relevant meaning. In line with Study 1, Study 2 shows that proximity to an object reduces the psychological distance that participants experience with regard to the meaning represented by the object. Arguably of greater interest, Study 2 did not focus on established connections between an object and a meaning (as in Study 1) but on connections that were newly formed in the course of the study. That is, in Study 1 participants described objects that had already attained a meaning and were in their possession. In Study 2, however, participants were exposed to an object that did not have any significance before the study and connected that object with an important experience they had lived through. Hence, Study 2 shows how trivial objects such as a mug may acquire value by allowing consumers to feel closer to a meaning they cannot experience directly and how consumers purposefully construct connections between objects and their associated meanings.

Finally, rather than operationalizing proximity in a dichotomous fashion, Study 2 employed three different degrees of proximity, including a condition where participants could actually touch the mug. As such, touching the mug did not significantly influence the perceived distance to the mug's meaning, indicating that the reduction of psychological distance is primarily driven by a reduction of physical distance. In Study 3, we aimed to follow up on these results by examining different degrees of proximity in a more fine-grained manner.

5 | STUDY 3

The aim of Study 3 was to gain further insights into how bodily proximity to an object affects the psychological distance to the meaning and the object's perceived benefits. Importantly, this required a consideration of the particular qualities of proximity and the testing of our conceptualization of proximity as a continuous construct with sub-categories. Study 3 was designed as an 11 (object distance: eleven different positions of the object) × 2 (measures: psychological distance/perceived benefits) lab experiment, with object distance manipulated within subjects and the measures manipulated between subjects. To test the effects of proximity in a tangible, physical setting, participants were asked to bring a personally important possession to the lab and had the chance to experience and rate the bodily proximity to their self-relevant object in different positions.

5.1 | Method

Sixty-three students (48% females, mean age = 22 years) participated in the experiment and were asked to bring a self-relevant object to the lab. Three individuals indicated that they did not own any objects that were particularly important to them and were consequently excluded from the study. This resulted in a final sample of 60 cases.[2] All participants were led through the experimental procedure in a 1-to-1 setting by one member of the research team. After showing their possession and explaining its symbolic meaning, participants experienced their objects in 11 different positions and were asked to compare either the perceived benefits ($N = 29$) or the psychological meaning distance ($N = 31$) between these positions. The order of positions was randomized and participants were allowed to re-compare various positions as often as they wanted.

In line with our theorizing, we manipulated proximity as a continuous dimension, thereby controlling for categories such as accessibility and sensory experience (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Brosnan et al., 2012; Peck & Shu, 2009; Ranaweera et al., 2021; Sorce & Emde, 1981). More specifically, the object was placed on a large table in directly accessible reaching distance (1RD; 70 cm), double reaching distance (2RD; 140 cm), triple reaching distance (3RD; 210 cm), and quadruple reaching distance (4RD; 280 cm)—once each in front of

[2]Eighty-five percent of the indicated objects related to other people (e.g., partners, family, and friends), 42% were associated with important experiences (e.g., vacations, prom night, and festival), and 55% to more abstract self-relevant dimensions (e.g., ability to self-actualize, importance of progress, and luck).

individuals (with seeing: 1RDF, 2RDF, 3RDF, 4RDF) and behind them (without seeing: 1RDB, 2RDB, 3RDB, 4RDB). Additionally, in one position, individuals were allowed to touch the object while seeing it (TS), and in one position participants were allowed to touch the object while holding it under the table and not seeing it (TNS). Finally, in one position the object was placed at quadruple reaching distance but in an adjacent room (4RDR) and hence was less accessible. Depending on the experimental condition, participants were asked to indicate either (a) the perceived benefits of the object or (b) the psychological distance to the object's meaning in each object position. To this end, participants used a slider scale that allowed them to put the different proximity levels into relation to each other. Finally, participants indicated their age and gender, were debriefed, and received their payment.

5.2 | Results

A one-factorial repeated measures ANOVA for perceived benefits revealed a main effect of object proximity ($F(10, 19) = 54.55$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.97$). While benefits increased overall with decreasing bodily distance (even when the objects were behind participants), this relationship was structured in accordance with the postulated sub-categories of proximity. The highest perceived benefits were indicated for positions in which the object was touched or in an immediately accessible position ($M_{TS} = 6.64$, $M_{TNS} = 5.83$, $M_{1RDF} = 5.40$). A group of lower benefits was identified for positions in which the object was known or perceived to be present but not immediately accessible ($M_{4RDB} = 2.29$, $M_{3RDB} = 2.44$, $M_{2RDB} = 2.71$, $M_{1RDB} = 3.28$, $M_{2RDF} = 4.17$, $M_{3RDF} = 3.47$, $M_{4RDF} = 3.09$; $p < 0.01$). The lowest benefits were indicated for the position in which the object was not present in the same room and hence was even less accessible ($M_{4RDR} = 1.40$; $p < 0.01$). The categorization of the 11 tested object distances into the specified three groups was supported by a hierarchical cluster analysis. Figure 2 depicts the results.

Further analyses yielded a similar, but reversed pattern of results for psychological distance to the meaning ($F(10, 21) = 30.53$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.94$; $M_{4RDR} = 6.36$, $M_{4RDB} = 5.32$, $M_{3RDB} = 5.26$, $M_{2RDB} = 5.03$, $M_{1RDB} = 3.89$, $M_{TNS} = 2.00$, $M_{TS} = 1.40$, $M_{1RDF} = 2.45$, $M_{2RDF} = 4.03$, $M_{3RDF} = 4.57$, $M_{4RDF} = 4.86$). That is, psychological distance was lowest when the object was immediately accessible to participants, and increased with higher degrees of bodily distance.

5.3 | Discussion

Study 3 provides further support for the notion that bodily proximity to personal objects leads to a decrease in psychological distance regarding the object's meaning and a corresponding increase in the object's benefits. These patterns were supported even though meaning distance and benefits were measured between participants. Importantly, Study 3 supports the notion that proximity may be conceptualized as a continuous variable with sub-categories—such as access and presence—that have ordinal properties.

Overall, we find the strongest effects of object proximity for positions in which objects are directly bodily accessible or actually touched. More specifically, touching *and* seeing the object resulted in stronger effects than solely touching *or* seeing the object. This indicates that the multisensory perception of the object—enabled through its proximal position—may partially cause the observed effects. It is important to note that these effects differ somewhat from the findings of Study 2, in which we did not observe an

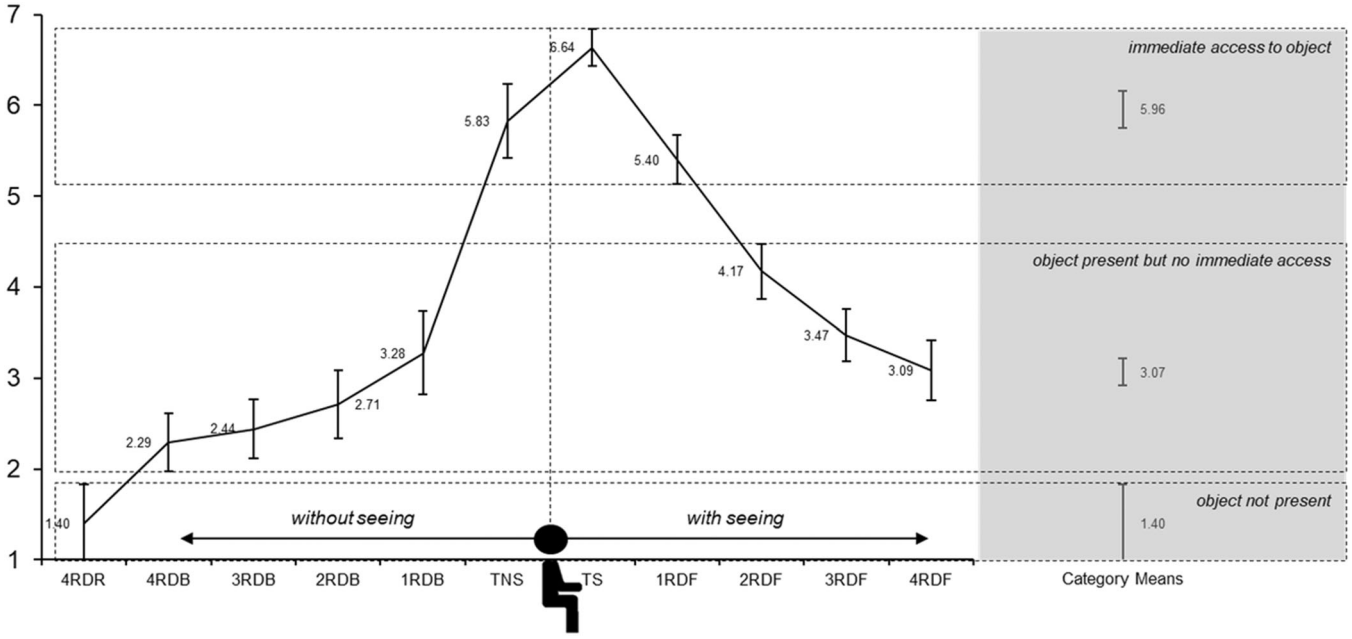

FIGURE 2 Perceived benefits as a function of object distance (error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals).

additional decrease in psychological distance associated with touching the object. One important difference, however, between the two studies concerns the specific manipulation of proximity. Whereas Study 2 featured a between-subjects manipulation of proximity, proximity was manipulated within-subjects in Study 3. Hence, participants in Study 3 experienced multiple degrees of proximity and, importantly, could judge the additional effect of touching the object vis-à-vis only being able to see the object within reaching distance. It is likely that this methodological difference led them to appreciate touching the object to a greater degree than the participants in Study 2.

6 | STUDY 4

The aim of Study 4 was to test H3a and H3b. Specifically, Study 4 examined (a) whether the effect of proximity on benefits was moderated by separation anxiety and (b) whether this effect was mediated by a corresponding reduction in psychological distance. Separation anxiety was conceptualized as a current inability to approach the object's meaning combined with a feeling of unease about this separation.

6.1 | Method

Study 4 relied on a 2 (object proximity: close/distant) × 2 (separation anxiety: high/low) between-subjects design. A total of 491 participants were recruited from MTurk, filtered via CloudResearch. Eleven individuals failed a one-item attention check, resulting in a final sample size of 480 participants (46% females, mean age = 41 years).

Study 4 used a similar procedure to Study 1. In the beginning of the study, participants were asked to think of a personal possession to which they felt particularly attached. Next, they were exposed to a scenario depicting a specific combination of bodily proximity and separation anxiety. For example, in the low proximity/high anxiety condition, participants read the following instructions: "Now think about this object that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine being unable to hold the object in your hand or wear it. At the same time, the meaning the object represents is also not close to you. For example, imagine you received a t-shirt from a good friend. Now imagine your friend is far away—you are really unsettled/unhappy about him/her being away and you miss him/her very much. Now imagine the t-shirt is at a safe but distant location – meaning you cannot wear/touch it at this moment. How beneficial would the t-shirt be to you exactly in this moment (considering that it is at a distant/safe location)?" The other conditions were drafted accordingly (see Appendix 2).

After reading these instructions, participants indicated in writing how they felt about their current distance to their self-relevant object. Once they completed this task, they indicated the object's perceived benefits and the psychological distance to the meaning. Perceived benefits ($\alpha = 0.943$) and psychological distance ($\alpha = 0.915$) were measured with the same items as in Study 1. Subsequently, participants rated the personal relevance of the object and indicated their age and gender.

6.2 | Results

A manipulation check for proximity revealed that the high-proximity conditions were associated with higher proximity than the low-proximity conditions ($M_{close} = 2.52$, SD = 1.72 vs. $M_{distant} = 5.17$, SD = 1.59, $F(1, 479) = 305.78$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.39$). Moreover, a manipulation check for separation anxiety indicated significant differences between the high-anxiety and low-anxiety conditions ($M_{high\ anxiety} = 4.61$, SD = 1.70 vs. $M_{low\ anxiety} = 5.31$, SD = 1.56, $F(1, 479) = 22.03$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$). Furthermore, another check indicated that participants had focused on objects that were highly important to them ($M = 5.56$, $t(479)_{diff\_from\_4} = 21.88$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, this judgment did not differ between the experimental conditions.

To test H3a, we ran a 2 × 2 ANOVA for perceived benefits. This analysis revealed significant main effects of proximity ($F(1, 479) = 103.93$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.18$) and anxiety ($F(1, 479) = 9.96$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$). More importantly, the interaction effect was also significant ($F(1, 479) = 5.17$, $p = 0.023$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$) (see Figure 3). The effect of proximity on benefits was significant in the low-anxiety ($M_{close} = 4.86$, SD = 2.03 vs. $M_{distant} = 3.57$, SD = 1.92, $F(1, 476) = 31.38$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.062$) as well as in the high-anxiety condition ($M_{close} = 5.74$, SD = 1.35 vs. $M_{distant} = 3.71$, SD = 1.78, $F(1, 476) = 77.70$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.14$). However, the difference between low and high proximity was more pronounced in the high-anxiety condition. Moreover, participants derived higher benefits from a proximate object when they experienced anxiety ($M_{high\ anxiety} = 5.74$, SD = 1.35 vs. $M_{low\ anxiety} = 4.86$, SD = 2.03, $F(1, 476) = 15.52$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$). These results provide support for H3a.

To test H3b, we first ran a 2 × 2 ANOVA for psychological distance. The analysis showed an insignificant main effect of anxiety ($F(1, 479) = 0.29$, $p = 0.592$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$), a significant main effect of proximity ($F(1, 479) = 172.26$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.27$), and a marginally significant interaction effect ($F(1, 479) = 3.46$, $p = 0.064$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.007$). Similar to the previous analysis, while participants always perceived a smaller psychological distance when the object was proximate, this difference was more pronounced in the high-anxiety ($M_{distant} = 5.07$, SD = 1.53 vs. $M_{close} = 2.73$, SD = 1.75, $F(1, 476) = 112.21$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.19$) than in the low-anxiety conditions ($M_{distant} = 4.86$ SD = 1.68 vs. $M_{close} = 3.10$, SD = 1.87, $F(1, 476) = 63.48$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$). Moreover, participants experienced a lower psychological distance due to a proximate object in the high-anxiety condition ($M_{high\ anxiety} = 2.73$, SD = 1.75 vs. $M_{low\ anxiety} = 3.10$, SD = 1.87, $F(1, 476) = 112.21$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.19$).

Next, we ran a moderated mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (10,000 resamples, Model 8, Hayes 2013). This analysis showed that the indirect effect of proximity through psychological

distance on benefits was significant at low ($b = 0.84$, 90% CI = [.6196−1.0795]) as well as high levels of separation anxiety ($b = 1.11$, 90% CI = [.8602−1.3976]). However, in line with our reasoning, the bootstrapped index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) shows that the indirect effect at high anxiety is significantly stronger than the effect at low anxiety, albeit at a 10% level of significance (Δb = 0.2765, 90% CI: [.0333−0.5407]). Hence, H3b is marginally supported.

6.3 | Discussion

Replicating the findings of the previous studies, Study 4 again shows that bodily proximity leads to a decrease in psychological distance and thus to an increase in perceived benefits. Furthermore, Study 4 also shows that the effect of proximity on benefits is moderated by separation anxiety. That is, being bodily proximate to a symbolic object was associated with higher benefits when participants were more (rather than less) anxious about being separated from the object's meaning. More importantly, the results also show that the benefit of proximal objects is rooted in a reduced psychological distance to the meaning of these objects and that perceived separation anxiety intensifies this interrelation (Figure 4).

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to examine whether and how the ability to refer bodily to material objects relates to their self-defining function. In particular, we argued that bodily proximity to material objects may serve consumers as a metaphor for psychological proximity to the meaning of these objects. All four studies provide support for this reasoning and indicate that proximal objects may reduce the distance to their associated meanings.

Importantly, our findings also show that bodily proximity affects the perceived benefits that people derive from self-relevant objects, providing further support for our theorizing. That is, a general proximity seeking behavior is not restricted to references to attachment figures (Bowlby, 1969), but further extends to other self-relevant domains. Moreover, object proximity was rated as particularly beneficial when participants felt anxious about being separated from the meaning associated with the object. These

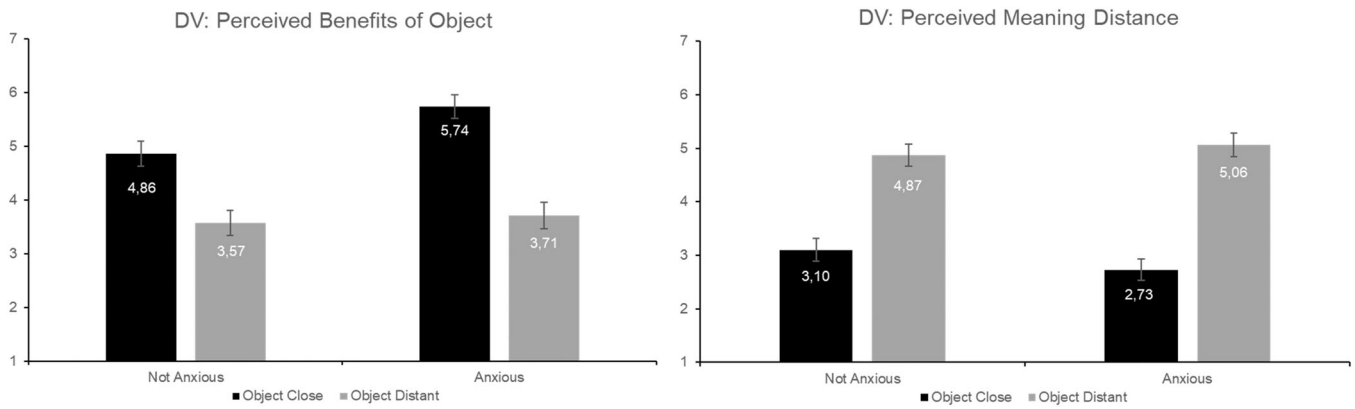

FIGURE 3 Results of study 4 (error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals).

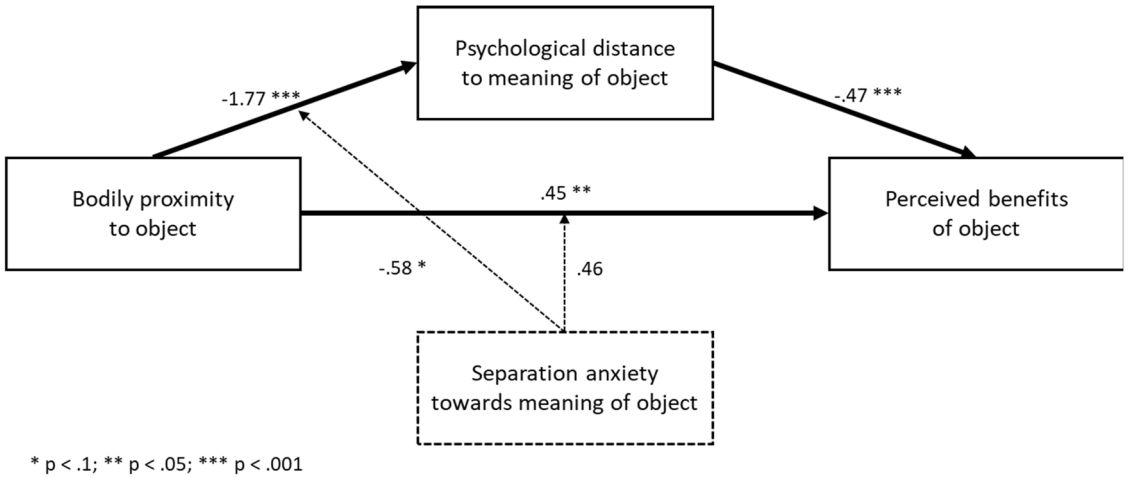

FIGURE 4 Moderated mediation analysis.

findings suggest that an object's perceived benefits are not shaped by distance per se but by the anxiety that is triggered by this distance.

In this manner, our findings also highlight the twofold nature of anxiety and its relationship to distance. On the one hand, anxiety may result from the separation from a personally important entity. On the other hand, anxiety may also refer to the idea of striving to reach this distant entity. Hence, separation anxiety may be described as (1) an unpleasant emotional and motivational reaction to *distance*, (2) resulting in individuals' *proximity* seeking (Bowlby, 1969; Freud, 1926). In sum, the results of our studies bring forth the notion that meaningful objects may serve as important reference points, particularly in situations of anxiety—metaphorically similar to the idea of a life vest. While proximity to these objects is not crucial at every moment, the knowledge of having access to them and being able to cling to them at moments of anxiety may award them a crucial importance in consumers' lives.

In addition, our studies examine the particular properties of proximity in greater detail. As such, our findings indicate that proximity can be conceptualized as a continuous construct with ordinal gradations. Importantly, proximity may not require that the object can be sensorially experienced and may also relate to the assurance of the object's presence and direct accessibility. Accordingly, our results reveal a proximity seeking behavior towards important possessions that is very similar to the well-investigated behavior of humans towards attachment figures (Bowlby, 1969; Fraley, 2019; Noble & Walker, 1997).

7.1 | Theoretical implications

From a broader perspective, our findings have various implications for research on consumer behavior. First, our studies point to a more careful differentiation between bodily experienceable and more abstract domains of the extended self. Our results support the notion that physical objects (material domains of the extended self) may support consumers in feeling proximal to conceptual domains of the extended self. That is, material possessions (such as jewelry or souvenirs) may make it possible to relate bodily to parts of the extended self (such as relatives or experiences) that are not directly experienceable at a given moment. Furthermore, while current research highlights trends towards liquid and digital relationships to possessions (e.g., Bardhi et al., 2012; Belk, 2010, 2013; Nagy & Koles, 2014), our research emphasizes that the bodily relation to physical reference points yields important emotional benefits that should not be neglected.

Second, our results underscore the notion that at a time when consumers' surroundings are turning increasingly digital, abstract, and unstable, bodily reference points may have an important self-defining and soothing function (Atasoy & Morewedge, 2018; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2007; Twenge, 2000). Importantly, our theoretical approach and empirical findings offer a new perspective on the idea of self-extension. In some instances, referencing the self to external entities may not only correspond to an *extension* (i.e., an encompassing growth) of the self (Belk, 1988) but may, alternatively, correspond to an *inclusion* of external entities into the self—in the sense that external entities are pulled more proximal to the self (Claus et al., 2020).

Third, our research adds to a long-lasting discussion on the personal importance of experiences versus material possessions. Our research suggests that these two categories are complements rather than substitutes. That is, while direct experiences (e.g., with other people, of events, or self attributes) may be particularly important for the development of a happy and fulfilled life (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), material objects may help consumers to relate to these important entities at times when they cannot be experienced directly (see also Belk, 1990).

7.2 | Managerial implications

Our findings also have important managerial implications. As discussed earlier, recent years have seen an ongoing development towards an immaterial perspective of economic goods. From a conceptual perspective, theories such as the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) have advocated that firms should understand their products and services from the perspective of their immaterial uses and benefits. From a substantive perspective, developments such as digital consumption models, access-based consumption, and sharing practices also emphasize immaterial facets of consumption.

To a certain degree, our research may be considered a counterpoint to these developments. Our findings show that physical products provide an essential value to consumers that is neglected in contemporary, utility-focused perspectives of economic goods. Of course, our view is less concerned with plain functional benefits, but emphasizes the emotional potential that may lie in such objects. For example, visitors to music festivals often continue wearing their entrance bracelets for many months, even years, after the festival because these simple objects provide psychological proximity to an important life experience that cannot be experienced directly anymore. Hence, companies may benefit from meaningfully associating material objects with the more immaterial aspects of their offerings. Importantly, "re-materializing" the customer journey may be important not only for firms that sell experiences (e.g., vacations, sports, museums, theater plays, and concerts), but also for firms that offer more conventional services and that want to establish a psychological connection between their customers and their brands (e.g., banking and airlines).

In addition to decreasing psychological distance, material objects may serve two further purposes. First, they may provide an attractive source of income for companies, as, for example, evidenced by the high prices that sports fans will pay for jerseys of their favorite teams. Second, they may also act as triggers for future consumption episodes. For example, wearing a festival entrance bracelet may not only allow consumers to connect to a self-defining meaning, but also fuel the desire to re-experience that meaning by visiting the festival again.

Finally, our research also speaks indirectly to the kind of objects that may be particularly suitable for these purposes. As our findings demonstrate, psychological proximity is enabled by physical proximity, which, in turn, may be more readily facilitated by objects that can be held or carried. For instance, while commercial experiences such as vacations or music festivals may constitute important self-relevant meanings, they are also ephemeral. Material objects that can be held or carried (e.g., souvenirs, shirts, and bracelets) allow consumers to hold onto these meanings and, in a figurative sense, carry them along with them through time and space. Indeed, most of the possessions that were mentioned throughout our studies were objects that were portable and durable (such as jewelry, lucky charms, religious objects, and pictures). While these arguments are somewhat speculative, they may nonetheless provide a starting point for companies that want to consider material objects more strategically.

7.3 | Limitations and future research

Our studies also have limitations that may be addressed in future research. First, while we argue that possessions and experiences should be understood as complementary rather than separated entities, our research cannot provide specific guidance on the interplay among them. Hence, future research may want to examine this interplay in greater detail. Another possible avenue for future studies follows from our finding that proximity seeking may be an emotional reaction to separation anxiety. One could reason that anxiety may not only shape the benefits of specific objects in certain situations, but also that individuals with a generally higher level of anxiety may perceive self-relevant objects as more important than do those with lower levels of anxiety (see also Proksch et al., 2015; Rindfleisch et al., 2009). This argument could provide a possible explanation for individual differences in object attachment that could be addressed in future research (see Study 3, e.g., those participants that indicated they did not own any objects that they felt attached to).

Moreover, it is noteworthy that only a minority of participants referred to digital devices (e.g., a smartphone) across all studies and no participant referred to a digital object (such as a picture or album on a device). This may be due to the inherent nature of digital objects, which are situated in the digital, nonphysical world. Because consumers cannot physically relate to digital objects, this may result in an inability to form emotional bonds and transfer self-relevant associations to these objects. In addition, that participants did not refer to digital possessions may also stem from a conventionalized idea of possessions and the particular instructions used in the studies (i.e., "please bring a personal possession to the study that you feel particularly attached to"). This possibility, however, would still re-emphasize the differences between digital and traditional self-extending objects (Atasoy & Morewedge, 2018). In this regard, our conceptualization of proximity may offer an interesting avenue for future research. For instance, future studies may examine whether digital devices and objects differ in their ability to create proximity to self-relevant meanings compared to their traditional counterparts, and if so, how? In sum, we believe that our studies provide intriguing starting points for a wide range of future studies exploring the role of possessions in consumers' lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Daniel Wentzel http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0170-4435

REFERENCES

Ackerman, J. M., Nocera, C. C., & Bargh, J. A. (2010). Incidental haptic sensations influence social judgments and decisions. *Science*, *328*(5986), 1712–1715. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1189993

Atasoy, O., & Morewedge, C. K. (2018). Digital goods are valued less than physical goods. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *44*(6), 1343–1357. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx102

Bardhi, F., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2017). Liquid consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *44*(3), 582–597. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx050

Bardhi, F., Eckhardt, G. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2012). Liquid relationship to possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *39*(3), 510–529. https://doi.org/10.1086/664037

Barsalou, L. W. (2008). Grounded cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *59*(1), 617–645. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.59.103006.093639

Bauman, Z. (2007). *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (1st ed.). Polity Press.

Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *15*(2), 139–168. https://doi.org/10.1086/209154

Belk, R. W. (1990). The Role of Possessions in Constructing and Maintaining a Sense of Past. Advances in Consumer Research, Vol *17*, In M. E. Goldberg, G. Gorn, & R. W. Pollay (Eds.), *Association of Consumer Research*, p. 669–676.

Belk, R. W. (2010). Sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *36*(5), 715–734. https://doi.org/10.1086/612649

Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended self in a digital world. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *40*(3), 477–500. https://doi.org/10.1086/671052

Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M., & Sherry, Jr. J. F. (1989). The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *16*(1), 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1086/209191

Berger, J. & Heath, C. (2007). Where consumers diverge from others: identity signaling and product domains. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *34*(2), 121–134. https://doi.org/10.1086/519142

Bowlby, J. (1969/1997). *Attachment and loss*. Vol. 1. Pimlico.

Bretherton, I. (1992). The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. *Developmental Psychology*, *28*(5), 759–775. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.28.5.759

Brosnan, S. F., Jones, O. D., Gardner, M., Lambeth, S. P., & Schapiro, S. J. (2012). Evolution and the expression of biases: Situational value changes the endowment effect in chimpanzees. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *33*(4), 378–386. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2011.11.009

Caprariello, P. A., & Reis, H. T. (2013). To do, to have, or to share? Valuing experiences over material possessions depends on the involvement

of others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *104*(2), 199–215. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030953

Claus, B., Eelen, J., & Warlop, L. (2020). A bird in the hand is yours: The relationship between psychological ownership and psychological distance. *First Virtual 2020 ACR Conference*, 2020.

Fay, A. J., & Maner, J. K. (2012). Warmth, spatial proximity, and social attachment: The embodied perception of a social metaphor. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *48*(6), 1369–1372. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.05.017

Fraley, R. C. (2019). Attachment in adulthood: Recent developments, emerging debates, and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *70*(1), 401–422. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010418-102813

Freud, S. (1926/2013). Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety, Martino Fine Books.

Grayson, K., & Shulman, D. (2000). Indexicality and the verification function of irreplaceable possessions: A semiotic analysis. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *27*(1), 17–30. https://doi.org/10.1086/314306

Hayes, A. F. (2013). Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process, *Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*. The Guilford Press.

Hayes, A. F. (2015). An index and test of linear moderated mediation. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, *50*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/00273171.2014.962683

Johnson, M. (1987). *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. University of Chicago Press.

Keefer, L. A., Landau, M. J., Rothschild, Z. K., & Sullivan, D. (2012). Attachment to objects as compensation for close others' perceived unreliability. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *48*, 912–917. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.02.007

Konok, V., Gigler, D., Bereczky, B. M., & Miklósi, Á. (2016). Humans' attachment to their mobile phones and its relationship with interpersonal attachment style. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *61*, 537–547. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.062

Krishna, A., & Morrin, M. (2008). Does touch affect taste? The perceptual transfer of product container haptic cues. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *34*(6), 807–818. https://doi.org/10.1086/523286

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we Live by*. The University of Chicago Press.

Liberman, N., Trope, Y., & Stephan, E. (2007). Psychological distance. In A. W. Kruglanski & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 353–381). The Guilford Press.

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2003). The attachment behavioral system in adulthood: Activation, psychodynamics, and interpersonal processes. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol 35, pp. 53–152). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21022

Nagy, P., & Koles, B. (2014). My avatar and her beloved possession": Characteristics of attachment to virtual objects. *Psychology & Marketing*, *31*(12), 1122–1135. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20759

Noble, C. H., & Walker, B. A. (1997). Exploring the relationships among liminal transitions, symbolic consumption, and the extended self. *Psychology and Marketing*, *14*(1), 29–47. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6793(199701)14:1<29::AID-MAR3>3.0.CO;2-Q

Peck, J., & Shu, S. B. (2009). The effect of mere touch on perceived ownership. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *36*(3), 434–447. https://doi.org/10.1086/598614

Peck, J., & Wiggins, J. (2006). It just feels good: Customers' affective response to touch and its influence on persuasion. *Journal of Marketing*, *70*(4), 56–69. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.70.4.56

Pieters, R. (2013). Bidirectional dynamics of materialism and loneliness: Not just a vicious cycle. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *40*(4), 615–631. https://doi.org/10.1086/671564

Post, R. A. G., Blijlevens, J., Hekkert, P., Saakes, D., & Arango, L. (2023). Why we like to touch: Consumers' tactile esthetic appreciation explained by a balanced combination of unity and variety in product designs. *Psychology & Marketing*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21798

Proksch, M., Orth, U. R., & Cornwell, T. B. (2015). Competence enhancement and anticipated emotion as motivational drivers of brand attachment. *Psychology & Marketing*, *32*(9), 934–949. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20828

Ranaweera, A. T., Martin, B. A. S., & Jin, H. S. (2021). What you touch, touches you: The influence of haptic attributes on consumer product impressions. *Psychology & Marketing*, *38*, 183–195. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21433

Richins, M. L. (1994). Valuing things: The public and private meanings of possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *21*(3), 504–521. https://doi.org/10.1086/209414

Rindfleisch, A., Burroughs, J. E., & Wong, N. (2009). The safety of objects: Materialism, existential insecurity, and brand connection. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *36*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1086/595718

Ross, M., & Wilson, A. E. (2002). It feels like yesterday: Self-esteem valence of personal past experiences, and judgments of subjective distance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*(5), 792–803. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.5.792

Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2014). Adult attachment and emotion regulation. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of Emotion Regulation* (pp. 446–465). The Guilford Press.

Song, S., Gonzalez-Jimenez, H., & Belk, R. W. (2021). Extending diderot unities: How cosmetic surgery changes consumption. *Psychology & Marketing*, *38*, 745–758. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21463

Sorce, J. F., & Emde, R. N. (1981). Mother's presence is not enough: Effect of emotional availability on infant exploration, *Developmental Psychology*, *17*(6), 737–745. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.17.6.737

Twenge, J. M. (2000). The age of anxiety? The birth cohort change in anxiety and neuroticism, 1952–1993. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *79*(6), 1007–1021. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.6.1007

Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*(6), 1193–1202. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.6.1193

Van Boven, L., Kane, J., McGraw, A. P., & Dale, J. (2010). Feeling close: Emotional intensity reduces perceived psychological distance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *98*(6), 872–885. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019262

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, *68*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.68.1.1.2403

Wei, J., Jiang, M., Li, Y.-N., Li, W., & Mead, J. A. (2023). The impact of product defect severity and product attachment on consumer negative emotions. *Psychology & Marketing*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21778

Williams, L. E., & Bargh, J. A. (2008a). Experiencing physical warmth promotes interpersonal warmth. *Science*, *322*(5901), 606–607. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1162548

Williams, L. E., & Bargh, J. A. (2008b). Keeping one's distance: The influence of spatial distance cues on affect and evaluation. *Psychological Science*, *19*(3), 302–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02084.x

How to cite this article: Scharfenberger, P., Wentzel, D., Warlop, L., & Riegler, V. (2023). The proximal self: Why material objects are particularly relevant for consumers' self-definition. *Psychology & Marketing*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21804

APPENDIX 1: Scenarios in Study 1

Introduction

Over the course of life, people often develop strong feelings of attachment to certain belongings because they symbolize important experiences or stand for beloved people or important values. Please take a moment and think of an object that is particularly important to you. Next, think of why this object is so important to you. Is it a personal possession that you, for example, associate with an important experience in the past, or do you associate the item with a close friend or family member? To give you a few examples: People often feel attached to presents they received from their parents (e.g., a ring, a necklace, or a watch) or objects that they relate to memorable holidays (e.g., a collected shell or stone).

Object proximity: Close

Now think about this object, that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine holding the object in your hand or wearing it (e.g., wearing a ring of your mother; or holding a vacation souvenir in your hands). How does it feel to you to have this important object really close to you? Does this closeness affect your feelings about its associated meaning?

Keep this scenario in mind for the rest of the study and please describe below in 2–4 bullet points, how beneficial the object would feel to you in this moment. Importantly: Would you consider it as more or less beneficial than in other situations?

Object proximity: Distant

Now think about this object, that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine being unable to hold or wear the object (e.g., you lost the object or forgot it somewhere you can not remember, for example, the ring your mother gave to you). How does it feel to you to have no option to be really close to your important object? Does this distance affect your feelings about its associated meaning?

Keep this scenario in mind for the rest of the study and please describe below in 2–4 bullet points, how beneficial the object would feel to you in this moment. Importantly: Would you consider it as more or less beneficial than in other situations?

APPENDIX 2: Scenarios in Study 4

Object proximity: Close x Anxiety: High

Now think about this object that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine holding the object in your hand or wearing it. At the same time, the meaning the object represents is not close to you.

For example, imagine you received a t-shirt from a good friend.

Now imagine your friend is far away—you are really unsettled/unhappy about him/her being away and you miss him/her very much.

Now imagine the t-shirt is at a safe and close location—meaning you can directly wear/touch it at this moment. How beneficial would the t-shirt be to you exactly at this moment (considering that it is at a close location)?

Object proximity: Close x Anxiety: Low

Now think about this object that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine holding the object in your hand or wearing it. At the same time, the meaning the object represents is not close to you.

For example, imagine you received a t-shirt from a good friend.

Now imagine your friend is far away—but you feel very comfortable about him/her being away because you don't miss him/her very much.

Now imagine the t-shirt is at a safe and close location—meaning you can directly wear/touch it at this moment. How beneficial would the t-shirt be to you exactly at this moment (considering that it is at a close location)?

Object proximity: Distant x Anxiety: High

Now think about this object that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine being unable to hold the object in your hand or wear it. At the same time, the meaning the object represents is also not close to you.

For example, imagine you received a t-shirt from a good friend.

Now imagine your friend is far away—you are really unsettled/unhappy about him/her being away and you miss him/her very much.

Now imagine the t-shirt is at a safe but distant location—meaning you cannot wear/touch it at this moment. How beneficial would the t-shirt be to you exactly at this moment (considering that it is at a distant/safe location)?

Object proximity: Distant x Anxiety: Low

Now think about this object that has this important meaning to you. Then, imagine being unable to hold the object in your hand or wear it. At the same time, the meaning the object represents is also not close to you.

For example, imagine you received a t-shirt from a good friend.

Now imagine your friend is far away—but you feel very comfortable about him/her being away because you don't miss him/her very much.

Now imagine the t-shirt is at a safe but distant location—meaning you cannot wear/touch it at this moment. How beneficial would the t-shirt be to you exactly at this moment (considering that it is at a distant/safe location)?

APPENDIX 3

(Table A3).

TABLE A3 Overview of measures.

Measure	Items		Reliability
Dependent variable			
Perceived benefits of object	3	How personally beneficial does the object feel to you in the given scenario?[a] (*1 = little beneficial, = highly beneficial*)	Study 1 $\alpha = 0.943$ Study 4 $\alpha = 0.964$
		Thinking about the object's location in the given scenario, to what extent would you describe the object as beneficial to you personally in that moment? (*1 = little beneficial, 7 = highly beneficial*)	
		Do you consider your object as highly personally beneficial or little personally beneficial in that moment? (*1 = little beneficial, 7 = highly beneficial*)	
Mediator			
Psychological distance to meaning	2	When you think about the object's location in the given scenario, how distant does the object's meaning feel to you?[b] *(1 = feels very close, 7 = feels very distant)* Do you feel the object's meaning being close or being distant at this moment? *(1 = feels very close, 7 = feels very distant)*	Study 1 $\alpha = 0.915$ Study 4 $\alpha = 0.902$
	2	When you think about your experience, how distant does the experience feel to you? *(1 = feels very close, 7 = feels very distant; 1 = feels as if it was Do you feel yesterday, 7 = feels as if it was long time ago)*	Study 2 $\alpha = 0.790$
Manipulation check			
Object relevance	1	How important would you consider your chosen object for you personally? (in general, independent of the scenario) (*1 = not at all important, 7 = highly important*)	-
Separation anxiety	1	In the given scenario, how did you feel about the position of the meaning? (*1 = very anxious, 7 = not at all anxious*)	-
Object distance	1	In the given scenario, as how distant would you describe your object? (*1 = very close, 7 = very distant*)	-
Meaning distance	1	In the given scenario, how close do you feel to the object's meaning? (*1 = very close, 7 = very distant*)	-

[a]Item that measured perceived benefits in Study 3 using a slider scale;

[b]Item that measured psychological distance in Study 3 using a slider scale.