

Running Head: RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

Looking into the Eyes of Temptation: The Impact of Construal Level on  
Relationship Commitment

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## Abstract

Individuals in committed, romantic relationships devalue attractive alternative partners as a means of maintaining their commitment. It is less clear, however, under which conditions that people will utilize this strategy. Past research suggests that people who process their surroundings in terms of global, abstract (high-level) vs. local, concrete (low-level) features make judgments consistent with their goals. This study tested the hypothesis that committed individuals induced to higher- vs. lower-level construals will be more likely to devalue attractive others. In this study, heterosexual female participants first reported their current dating status and then completed a construal manipulation task. Subsequently, participants were presented with photographs of available, attractive vs. unattractive males and asked to rate target attractiveness on a variety of dimensions. Contrary to my hypothesis, results suggested that individuals induced to a high-level of construal rated attractive photos as more attractive irrespective of relationship status than those at a low-level. These results are interpreted as suggesting that the threat to the relationship was not powerful enough to induce a need for self-control at the high-level of construal.

This work is dedicated to my grandmother, my father, and my aunt.  
They provided a light for me in my darkest moments and without their support and  
encouragement, I would not be who I am today.

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## Introduction

“There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable.”

—Mark Twain

It is Spring Quarter here on The Ohio State University’s campus, and on every corner there is a renewal of budding life and with it the inevitable college romances. With the long-belated arrival of warm weather comes the infamous pair-bonding that occurs each year—students stroll through the grounds holding hands and nestling with each other on benches. It is nearly impossible to ignore the prevalence of romance in our environments, not only in the spring, but throughout our entire life spans. As social beings, humans have an innate need to belong and to maintain interpersonal relationships (Maslow, 1943; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Moreover, being involved in exclusive, stable relationships has been shown to incur positive effects on physical health (Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978). Therefore, it is unsurprising that romantic relationships have been the subject of serious deliberation and speculation in philosophy as well as psychology. We have long been interested in constituents of attraction and satisfaction (e.g., Ajzen, 1974; Insko & Wilson, 1977; Tyler & Sears, 1977). It has not been until recently, however, that we have begun investigating the mechanisms by which people maintain their romantic relationships. What happens when a rain cloud looms in over a sunny romance?

### *Devaluating of Alternatives for Relationship Maintenance*

There are a variety of wrenches that can be thrown into the delicate machinery of a relationship, but one of the most recognizable threats to the stability of a romantic relationship is the presence of an attractive alternative to the partner (Kelley, 1983;



Rusbult, 1983). The investment model, as constructed by Rusbult (1980a), affords that commitment to maintain a relationship should increase to the degree that one is satisfied with the relationship, has no acceptable alternative, and has invested effort into the relationship. Moreover, having a higher standard of comparison in alternatives to an exclusive romantic partner can threaten one's commitment—the motivation to stay with someone is diminished when there are other appealing options out there. What sort of mechanisms could relationship partners employ to help them resist the powerful temptation of an attractive alternative? Prior research has shown that as people become progressively more involved with their partners, they describe attractive relationship alternatives in more negative terms (Rusbult, 1983). Furthermore, studies by Johnson and Rusbult (1989) demonstrated that people will devalue alternative partners as a means of maintaining their relationship commitment. As they noted, it is important that couples resist the lure of appealing others by “driving threatening alternatives from their minds...enhancing individual well-being by reducing internal conflict” (p. 979). This derogation of alternatives appears to be most robust when the alternatives are clearly threatening (i.e. they are attractive, single, and potentially attainable).

One might question why we are so affected by the superficial—how important is outward physical appearance to us anyway? Don't we really evaluate people on a deeper level? Not necessarily. When people make assessments of others, they calculate their judgments firstly, and sometimes solely, along dimensions of physical and sexual attractiveness compared to various other interpersonal attributes (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). It would only seem plausible then that a prototypical self-control dilemma would arise when a person in a committed romantic relationship is faced with an extremely

physically attractive person and forced to choose between the respective partner and said attractive person.

There are a couple of reasons committed people use this devaluation strategy to ward off succumbing to the temptation of attractive alternatives. Johnson and Rusbult (1989) proposed both a motivational and perceptual basis for utilization of alternative derogation. A motivational account would posit beliefs inferred from cognitive dissonance, whereby people alter their important conflicting cognitions in order to achieve consonance (Festinger, 1957; Greenwald & Ronis, 1978). Individuals who firmly believe that they are committed to their respective partners would find it troubling to find that they are strongly attracted to people outside their exclusive relationships. Therefore, it would become necessary for them to convince themselves that alternatives are really not all that attractive in order to prevent any conflict.

The other explanation proposed by Johnson and Rusbult (1989) is a perceptual one, tying back in to the idea of comparison level. Because committed people may often use their current partners as comparison standards for attractiveness in others, and “given that committed persons are often very satisfied with their relationships,” committed people will most often see others as less appealing than their partners (p. 968). Whichever rationalization—be it motivational, perceptual, or some other—devaluation of attractive potential alternatives outside an exclusive relationships proves to be a prominent strategy in the domain of protection and maintenance of stable commitment in romantic relationships.

*Determinants of Self-Control Strategy Adoption*

Under what circumstances will people be most capable of employing this devaluation strategy? Research has suggested that in order for utilization of self-control strategies to occur, one must experience a self-control problem, whereby immediate situational influences butt heads with one's long-term goals (Ainslie, 1992; Loewenstein, 1996; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999; Mischel, 1974; Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988; Rachlin, 1995, 1996, 1997; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990). In line with this assertion, individuals may feel a self-control problem when they are placed in a situation with an attractive person other than their respective partners—they may want to act according to their long-term goal of commitment rather than submitting to a short-term goal of immediate gratification of intimate involvement with prospective alternatives. The latter motive may stand in the way of the long-term aspiration (Trope & Fishbach, 2005).

Although this situation that is elicited by this short- and long-term goal dissonance is seemingly difficult, research by Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski (2003) has shown that the presence of temptations can activate higher priority goals, especially among those for whom the goal is important and that are “successful vs. unsuccessful self-regulators within a given domain” (pg. 296). In turn, thinking about a goal in the presence of temptation promotes self-control. This suggests that when committed people are faced with a temptation like attractive, available alternatives, they are likely to think about their goal of commitment to their partners. Furthermore, this process seems to occur automatically as a function of how important commitment is to them and how successful they are at controlling their behaviors in respect to fidelity. In fact, people need not even be aware that these tempting alternatives are activating their goal of

commitment; that is, one does not have to engage in conscious thought about his or her long-term commitment goal in order for that goal to influence information processing, choice, and behavior (Bargh, 1997; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). As such, a person could reasonably devalue the attractiveness of a potential alternative without even realizing they were doing so as a mechanism to promote self-control in favor of the superordinate goal of commitment.

Another way in which people are pre-disposed to actions either toward the long- vs. the short- term goal is whether these actions are initiated by the “hot system” or the “cold system,” (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Behaviors in the hot system are influenced by affective mental representations and are often hedonic and impulsive. On the other hand, behaviors in the cold system are influenced by emotionally neutral representations and are contemplative and reflective. Mischel and colleagues argued that people are able to exhibit strategies which promote self-control more easily when immersed in the cool vs. the hot system. A woman in a committed relationship that is trying not to be tempted by an attractive waiter is more likely to succeed if she evaluates using a cool approach (“He gives prompt service”) rather than a hot approach (“He looks handsome”).

Not only are derogation tactics used to diminish the appeal of an immediate, short-term, hedonic goal, but research by Trope and Fishbach (2000, 2005) has shown that a variety of other counteractive self-control strategies are useful in helping one promote the more long-term, primary goal. People may engage in evaluative bolstering of their superordinate goals. That is, a committed person may grant more credence to the satisfaction one feels or the attraction one has towards his or her respective partner in

order to justify not succumbing to the immediate gratification of pursuing attractive others external to the partnership. Once more, people need not exercise conscious deliberation in self-regulating—after recognizing a threat to the superordinate goal, they may use the self-control strategy, and then ultimately pursue that goal more rigorously without consciously acknowledging that this process is occurring (Trope & Fishbach, 2005). So, committed persons may engage in either devaluation of alternatives or potentially even bolstering of their own partnership without realizing they are doing so in an effort to protect their long-term goal of commitment.

#### *Construal Levels and Self-Control*

Recent research has revealed that the likelihood that one will engage in counteractive self control strategies may also depend on the construal that the person has of the situation at hand (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). By construal, we refer to one's interpretation or subjective mental representation of an object or event. Mental representations are inherently subjective in nature and can vary significantly from person to person. For example, people watching a football game can interpret the same event (e.g. a personal foul called on a player) in two opposing ways ("he fouled him") vs. ("he didn't even touch him") (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). Construal level theory (CLT), is a framework that ties distance with abstraction and posits that psychological distance is an influential factor in determining representation of a stimulus—that the same stimulus can be represented at multiple levels within a given individual (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Prior research has shown that various dimensions of psychological distance (time, space, social distance, and hypotheticality) can affect construals, which will subsequently guide evaluation, prediction, and behavior (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007).

Furthermore, greater distance along any one of these given dimensions yields more abstract representations known as high-level construals, which are cued in to primary, central characteristics. Decreased distance yields more concrete representations known as low-level construals, which are cued in to secondary, peripheral characteristics. (Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, 2006; Fujita et al., 2006). This association between distance and construals appears bidirectional – not only does increased distance promote higher level construals, but higher level construals also promote greater perceived distances (McCrea, Liberman, Trope, & Sherman, 2008; see also, Bar-Anan, Liberman, & Trope, 2006).

Consider the activity of “listening to a lecture in class.” A person representing the lecture in terms of lower levels of construal might activate a particular representation (“sitting in a stuffy classroom”), cuing in to the nearby, contextualized surrounding stimuli (hot, stuffy air; uncomfortable chair). Yet, an alternate representation might take place in terms of higher levels of construal, activating a more abstract notions (“learning about an important topic”) evoked by attention to encompassing, gist features (the information being taught, the relevance to education). Adopting a low-level construal might cause people to view “listening to a lecture” negatively because of the negative implications of “sitting in a stuffy classroom,” whereas adopting a high level construal might cause the opposite reaction because of the positive implications of “learning about an important topic.”

Fujita and colleagues (2006) assert that the ability to exert self-control is enhanced “when individuals are able to see the proverbial forest beyond the trees” (p. 352). By interpreting at higher level construals, people are adopting mental

representations that are more integrative, more weighted toward more global preferences and values, and more in psychologically distant dimensions (time, space, social distance, hypotheticality) compared to lower level construals (Trope & Liberman, 2000; Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). As a result, people who enact behaviors that are associated with high-level construals should display greater self-control, whereas people who enact behaviors associated with low-level construals should evidence greater self-control failure. Fujita et al. (2006) demonstrated through five experimental studies that higher level construals led to decreased preferences for immediate over postponed outcomes, greater physical endurance in the face of self-regulatory conflicts, stronger intentions to exert self-control, and less positive evaluations of temptations that undermine pursuit of their superordinate goals. Thus people who have activated higher levels of construal should be better able to exert self-control in the face of a goal conflict.

### *The Present Research*

Having an immediate, hedonic goal of being attracted to and potentially pursuing an accessible alternative partner as well as a long-term, overarching goal of remaining committed to a current relationship can undoubtedly produce a self-control conflict. This project aimed to provide further evidence for construal level perspective on self-control within the domain of romantic relationships. Specifically, I hoped to uncover who and under what circumstances do people adopt a devaluation strategy. For people in committed romantic relationships, being presented with attractive alternatives poses a threat. As such, I predicted that people are more likely to engage in processes that protect their relationships when they are at a higher level of construal, whereas those individuals induced to a lower level of construal should be less likely to employ such self-control

strategies. I expected no effect of construal levels on those uncommitted to relationships or that were presented with unattractive others, as these scenarios would not represent a meaningful self-control conflict.

To test my hypotheses, I used a paradigm similar to that previously used by relationship researchers (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), but I also included a construal-level manipulation task. Participants were asked to report their commitment status, then induced to either a higher or lower level of construal, and were then asked to rate the attractiveness of potential relationship alternatives. I predicted that individuals who are in committed relationships would be more likely to employ self-control strategies such as evaluation of alternatives when faced with a threat to their commitment. I particularly expected that those individuals at higher levels of construal would be more likely to employ these strategies. Thus, in my paradigm I expected that individuals who were in committed relationships would report lower attractiveness ratings of single, attractive target individuals when induced to a higher level of construal.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 156 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at The Ohio State University.<sup>1</sup> Students received partial course credit in return for their participation. One individual who did not indicate that she was interested in males was not included in analysis because we wanted to test a heterosexual demographic similar to that of Johnson and Rusbult (1989) and Rusbult (1983). Seven participants failed to do the construal manipulation task correctly and were also not



included in analysis. Also excluded were nine participants who expressed suspicion of the study's purpose and 11 individuals that did not complete their web-base pre-lab survey and therefore had no status variable (see below). Finally, three participants were removed from analysis due to experimenter error. A total of 112 female participants were included in final statistical analysis.

### *Procedure*

*Preliminary Session.* By selecting from a list of paraphrased experiments that offer partial course credit on a website offered by the Research Experience Program, participants were able to enroll in the experiment. Participants were then e-mailed with both an identification number and instructions on how to access a short web-based survey, which they completed approximately one day prior to the laboratory session. The items contained within this survey were used to assess participants' current romantic relationship status and were based on questionnaires used in previous research to measure relationship status and level of commitment (Rusbult, 1983). In this survey, an item designed to measure participants' self reported status, asked "Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship?" This was a 5-point Likert-type scalar item which was anchored at 1 (*no*) and 5 (*yes*), and containing an intermediate label 3 (*unsure*) (see Appendix A).

*Laboratory Session.* When participants arrived in groups of six to twelve for the experimental session, they were told that they were participating in a study about their perceptions of others. They were each seated individually and given an idiographic packet that was matched to responses on the web-based survey they had. All study

materials were contained within the paper packet, from which students read the instructions and completed the remainder of the study.

*Construal Level Induction Task.* Participants went on to complete what was ostensibly a word categorization task. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they were induced to interpret events either at high or at low-level construals using methods validated in previous research (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004; Fujita et al., 2006). Those assigned to the “high” condition were asked to generate category labels for 30 items unrelated to relationships or commitment. For example, a participant would be given the phrase “A *soda* is an example of...” and be asked to generate a higher-order category such as “beverage.” In contrast, those participants assigned to the “low” condition were asked to generate exemplars for the same 30 items. For example, if a participant was given the phrase “An example of a *soda* is...,” they would be asked to write down specific examples such as “Diet Coke” (see Appendix B). This manipulation has been shown in previous research to induce mindsets which carry over to influence subsequent unrelated tasks (e.g. Fujita et al., 2006).

*Presentation of Relationship Alternatives.* Following the construal-level manipulation, participants were shown pictures of four individuals of the opposite sex. Participants were randomly assigned to either the “attractive” or “unattractive” condition, and were shown photographs of individuals who were rated in a pre-experiment pilot study as either physically attractive or unattractive.

To evaluate the efficacy of the attractiveness manipulation, I presented the stimuli to 64 male and female undergraduate students from the same sample pool. They rated the attractiveness of the males depicted by answering the question, “How attractive is Male

1?” on items with a Likert-type scale ( $1 = \text{not at all to } 7 = \text{extremely}$ ) (see Appendix C). As expected, attractive males were rated as more attractive ( $M = 4.68, SD = .89$ ) than unattractive males ( $M = 2.23, SD = .81$ ),  $t(63) = 19.25, p < .01$ . There were no significant gender effects on attractiveness ratings present.

Accompanying the four photos was basic information about each target male including his age, their relationship status, and the gender in which the target individual was interested, which was always female (see Appendix D). Each photo was labeled as single and heterosexual, with an age ranging from 18 to 20, so as to maximize feasibility for our participants regarding target dating potential.

*Dependent Measures.* After each participant was exposed to either attractive or unattractive males, they were asked a number of questions concerning the desirability and attractiveness of each target. This questionnaire contained 10 items and was specifically designed to assess participants’ subjective physical attraction to the presented targets. Questions included one item measuring desirability (“How desirable do you find Male A?”), 3 items measuring attractiveness (“How physically attractive do you find Male A?”; “How good-looking do you find Male A?”; “How hot do you find Male A?”), 4 items measuring approachability (“Would you be interested in talking to Male A?”; “Would Male A be someone you would like to work with on a group project?”; “Would you enjoy hanging out with Male A?”; “Would you enjoy going on a date with Male A?”), and 2 items compatibility (“Would Male A make a good relationship partner for you?”; “Would you agree that Male A is ‘your type?’”). Each answer was given on a 7-point Likert-type scale ( $1 = \text{not at all to } 7 = \text{extremely}$ ) and was presented following each of the four photos (*Male A, Male B, Male C, and Male D*) (see Appendix E). After

participants provided ratings, they were then debriefed, thanked for participating, and dismissed from the experiment.

## Results

### *Aggregating Variables*

*Relationship status.* Each participant's self-reported status was determined by their response to a web-based pre-lab survey asking if they were 'currently involved in a romantic relationship.' To refresh, the item was answered using a Likert-type scale, which was anchored at 1 (*no*) and 5 (*yes*), with intermediary responses for those who felt unsure of their standing within their current relationships. Analysis of the frequency distribution of participants' status revealed that the data had a bimodal, rather than a normative distribution ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) (see Fig. 1). Since relatively few participants ( $n = 13$ ) fell between the two anchors, for ease of presentation and interpretation, I report only those analyses avoided having to interpret what an intermediary response meant by excluding those who fell within the middle-range from our analyses. Thus, a dichotomized-continuous variable of status was created as a measure of participants' romantic relationship commitment. Note that regression analyses performed using status as a continuous measure revealed similar results as those described below.

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*Figure 1*

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*Target attractiveness ratings.* Participants' subjective ratings of target attractiveness were averaged within and across all targets. Prior to data aggregation, I performed a series of reliability analyses on attractiveness ratings of the various targets. Within each target, attractiveness ratings across items were highly correlated: attractive male A ( $r = .25$  to  $r = .90$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ), attractive male B ( $r = .41$  to  $r = .89$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$ ), attractive male C ( $r = .49$  to  $r = .93$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$ ), attractive male D ( $r = .29$  to  $r = .92$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ), unattractive male A ( $r = .18$  to  $r = .79$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ), unattractive male B ( $r = .12$  to  $r = .87$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ), unattractive male C ( $r = .14$  to  $r = .84$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), and unattractive male D ( $r = .20$  to  $r = .93$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). When aggregating across all faces within the attractive condition, one of the attractive male photos (male D) substantially decreased reliability of the index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67$ ). As such, we excluded ratings of that target from subsequent analyses to improve overall reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ). Reliability of items across the unattractive faces was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ )

### *Primary Analysis*

Analysis of these data was performed using a 2 (status: committed vs. uncommitted) x 2 (construal: high-level vs. low-level) x 2 (target attractiveness: attractive vs. unattractive) between-subjects ANOVA. As might be expected, there was a significant main effect of target attractiveness,  $F(1, 112) = 159.37, p < .01$ . Those participants presented with attractive targets rated them as more attractive ( $M = 4.27, SD = .24$ ) than those presented with unattractive targets ( $M = 2.15, SD = .23$ ). There was also a significant effect of status,  $F(1, 112) = 7.02, p < .01$ . As anticipated, those participants who were uncommitted rated targets as more attractive ( $M = 3.43, SD = .23$ )

than those who were in committed relationships ( $M = 2.99, SD = .24$ ). There was also a significant interaction between status and construal  $F(1, 112) = 5.36, p < .05$ , as well as a marginal interaction between status and target attractiveness  $F(1, 112) = 3.02, p = .09$ . That is, committed participants induced to lower-level construals rated targets as less attractive than did uncommitted individuals. Moreover, irrespective of construal, participants who were committed rated attractive targets slightly less attractive than uncommitted participants.

Importantly, there was a marginally significant three-way interaction between status, construal, and target attractiveness,  $F(1, 112) = 3.30, p = .07$  (see Fig. 2). Although not significant by traditional standards, as I had strong *a priori* hypotheses, I conducted a series of follow-up analyses to further investigate the nature and implications of this three-way interaction.

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*Figure 2*

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*Separating by construal.* Paralleling results already described above, when I split my ANOVA by construal, I found a consistent significant main effect of target attractiveness among those induced to high-level construals,  $F(1, 52) = 71.93, p < .01$ . They rated attractive targets as more attractive ( $M = 4.34, SD = .37$ ) than unattractive target photos ( $M = 2.24, SD = .33$ ). Contrary to my predictions, there were no other significant effects or interactions among those induced to high-level construals. I had predicted that among those in the high-level condition, being in a committed relationship would lead to lower ratings of attractive vs. unattractive alternatives. The absence of a

statistically significant interaction, however, does not support this prediction,  $F(1, 52) = .00, p = .96$ .

Among those induced to low-level of construals, however, I found multiple significant effects. Once again, there was a significant main effect of target attractiveness,  $F(1, 60) = 89.34, p < .01$ , such that those participants presented with attractive targets rated them as more attractive ( $M = 4.21, SD = .32$ ) than those presented with unattractive targets ( $M = 2.05, SD = .33$ ). Additionally, there was also a significant main effect of status,  $F(1, 60) = 13.40, p < .01$ . Those participants who were uncommitted and induced to low-level construals rated targets as more attractive ( $M = 3.55, SD = .32$ ) than those who were committed ( $M = 2.71, SD = .32$ ). Unexpectedly, there was also a near-significant interaction between status and target attractiveness,  $F(1, 60) = 6.87, p < .05$ . Committed participants demonstrated greater devaluation of attractive alternatives than uncommitted participants, ( $M = 3.49, SD = .47$  and  $M = 4.93, SD = .43$ , respectively), thus replicating the effects proposed by Johnson and Rusbult (1989). These results suggest that it is only at the low-level of construal that participants felt the need to use derogation strategies in order to exert self-control

*Separating by status.* When dividing the preceding analysis apart by participants' status, among committed individuals there was, once again, a significant main effect of target attractiveness,  $F(1, 53) = 59.37, p < .01$ . Committed participants presented with attractive targets rated them as more attractive ( $M = 3.90, SD = .34$ ) than those presented with unattractive targets ( $M = 2.07, SD = .34$ ). There was also a main effect of construal,  $F = 5.39, p < .05$ , such that when committed individuals were induced to lower level construals, they rated targets as less attractive ( $M = 2.71, SD = .32$ ) than those induced to

higher level construals ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = .36$ ). Contrary to predictions, there was no interaction between construal level and target attractiveness,  $F(1, 53) = 1.32$ ,  $p = .26$ . This suggests that committed individuals did not differ in their ratings of attractive and unattractive targets as a function of construal.

Among uncommitted individuals, I again found a significant main effect of target attractiveness,  $F(1, 59) = 103.54$ ,  $p < .01$ . Uncommitted participants presented with attractive targets rated them as more attractive ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = .35$ ) than those presented with unattractive targets ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = .32$ ). As expected, there was no main effect of construal level and no interaction between construal level and attractiveness.

*Separating by target attractiveness.* The third and final two-way ANOVA was done by splitting the data by target attractiveness. For those participants looking at attractive targets, we found a significant main effect of status,  $F(1, 53) = 6.07$ ,  $p < .05$ . Individuals who were uncommitted rated targets as more attractive ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = .43$ ) than those who were committed ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = .42$ ). In addition, I found a significant interaction between status and construal,  $F(1, 53) = 5.38$ ,  $p < .05$  for those participants presented with attractive photos. Contrary to predictions, whereas those individuals at high-levels of construal rated the attractive faces nearly the same irrespective of status, those at low-levels rated the target photos as significantly less attractive when they were committed vs. uncommitted ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = .58$  and  $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = .52$ , respectively). As expected, participants looking at unattractive target photos showed no main effects or interactions.



*Discussion*

This study was designed to test the hypothesis that the tendency for committed individuals to exert self-control by devaluing attractive alternative partners will be stronger among those induced to adopt high vs. low-level construals. Contrary to predictions, in this study, participants primed with high-levels of construal using an established manipulation of construal levels (Freitas et al., 2004), showed no differences in the attractiveness ratings of physically attractive potential alternative partners as a function of status. That is, when participants were induced to see the “forest beyond the trees,” they did not devalue attractive others, regardless if they were romantically committed or uncommitted.

Interestingly, this research suggests that when people presented with this paradigm were interpreting attractive alternatives in terms of unique, contextualized features (low-level construals), they were more likely to subjectively derogate the attractiveness of the presented target when they were committed vs. uncommitted. This may suggest to some that lower level, not higher level, construals promote self-control. This interpretation, however, is inconsistent with previously published research (Fujita et al., 2006). It is thus difficult to understand how to make sense of these findings.

One possibility is that those individuals interpreting the target stimuli at the high-level did not experience any significant threat to their superordinate goals of commitment. It is important to note that self-regulatory strategies are engaged or adopted only to the extent that a person detects a meaningful self-control conflict present (Trope & Fishbach, 2000; 2005). That is, unless one detects a problem, there is little need to generate a solution to overcome the problem. It is possible that when participants were

induced to higher level construals, they did not perceive a threat to their commitment goals, whereas those at lower levels did. Because high-level construals promote attention to broad, categorical, global characteristics, those who participated in this paradigm interpreting the target photos in a construal-congruent manner might have recognized that “pictures are just pictures.” They may have been attuned to the assumption that providing a distant, global, and abstract evaluation of mere pictures of attractive individuals with whom they are not even acquainted is not a real threat to one’s relationship. Therefore, they would have no need to employ self-control strategies—specifically, to devalue the attractiveness of this *unthreatening* alternative. To the extent that this interpretation does indeed reflect participants’ psychology, future research should utilize a paradigm that is sure to produce a tangible threat to participants’ long-term goals of commitment.

On the other hand, the data did demonstrate this predicted degradation of alternatives as a function of whether or not they were committed as proposed by Johnson and Rusbult (1989). Those committed individuals induced to low-level construals did devalue the attractiveness of the alternative other. These results suggest the possibility that those at the low-level did experience some threat to their commitment, and therefore adopted the proposed derogation strategy. However, because it is difficult to interpret the results of those induced to high-level construals, these findings lack an appropriate comparison. That is, are those induced to low-level construals engaging in devaluation of alternates to a greater or lesser extent than “on average”? Although it may at present appear they are indeed engaging in devaluation of alternatives, it may still represent

comparatively less than they might otherwise have. Without additional data, no strong conclusions can be drawn.

Although the predicted interaction effects along dimensions of construal level did not emerge, these findings did replicate past research that suggest that people in committed relationship devalue attractive alternatives (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Rusbult, 1983). Ignoring the effects of construal levels, those in committed relationships rated attractive alternatives less attractive than those not in relationships. Also—not surprisingly—individuals rated targets who were pretested as physically attractive higher relative to targets pretested as physically unattractive.

#### *Limitations*

There are some limitations to this study that should be earnestly addressed in research to come. First, follow-up studies should ensure that long-term goals are indeed threatened by participants at both the high- and low-levels of construals. Participants in this study were only shown pictures of attractive vs. unattractive others. There was no acquaintance potential as participants were not led to believe that they would be actually meeting these individuals. Perhaps if there had been this potential for acquaintance, there might have been a more realistic sense of threat to a commitment goal. If one is able to induce a real sense of threat to a commitment goal, particularly at higher level construals, then I postulate there to be a greater propensity toward a felt meaningful self-control conflict, and therefore a greater chance of executing self-regulatory strategies. One option would be to more closely replicate the paradigm utilized by Johnson and Rusbult (1989), whereby participants evaluated ostensible candidates for a dating service. Furthermore, we could ask participants to provide some of their own personal

information (e.g. hobbies, values), and inform participants that they are ostensibly being evaluated by the attractive target for whom they were making judgments. Subsequently, we could use participants' willingness to meet the attractive alternative face-to-face given the ostensible information that the alternative held marked interest in the participant as a dependent measure (Lydon, Fitzsimons, & Naidoo, 2003). An actual "in the flesh" challenger with acquaintance potential might provoke stronger motivation to exert self-control.

What if we were to achieve this threat to all participants involved? What would happen to those representing at low-level construals? I postulate that one would still demonstrate the derogation effect at lower levels of construal, just not to as great extent as one that is induced to higher levels. This coincides with my predictions which are weighted toward high-level construals promoting more self-regulatory strategies.

Another limitation to this study was its limited scope for assessment of relationship commitment—I utilized a single self-reported status item. Indices measuring relationship commitment, satisfaction, exclusivity, and duration could provide more telling information concerning the nature and strength of participants' commitment to their respective partners than just my single status item (Rusbult, 1983). Although the research by Johnson and Rusbult (1989) suggested that variations in commitment influence evaluations of alternative partners independent of degree of satisfaction with the current relationship, it still might be interesting what how relationship satisfaction translates into our paradigm with construal level. Additionally, more reliable, carefully developed measures could be utilized to measure participants' attraction to targets. One possibility would be to include more idiosyncratic, universally positive information about

each of the target individuals, and to have participants' evaluate them based not only on physical attractiveness, approachability, and relationship potential, but also on perceived similarity of the targets' attitudes of interests to the participants'.

Yet another future direction would be to test the counteractive self-control strategy of evaluative boosting of the long-term commitment goal by bolstering the perceived attractiveness of the exclusive relationship partner (Trope and Fishbach 2000; 2005). A CLT approach to self-control would, once again, posit that individuals interpreting in terms of high- vs. low- level construals would be more likely to exert self-control by employing self-control strategies—only this time by bolstering the long-term, superordinate goal of commitment (inflate the current partners attractiveness) rather than derogating the immediate, subordinate goal of indulgence (show lower attraction to alternatives) when a meaningful self-control conflict is imminent (Fujita et al., 2006). There are numerous opportunities for further exploration that we sincerely hope are thoroughly investigated—especially in a realm as exciting as interpersonal, romantic relationships.

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## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> An additional 62 male participants were also run. However, analysis revealed no significant gender differences in terms of status, target attractiveness, and construal level. This may have been caused by statistically underpowered tests due to a relatively small *N*. In an effort to remain conservative, we opted not to include these individuals in our analysis. Moreover, past research has suggested that females show a much more pronounced effect of status such that those in exclusive relationships perceived young/opposite-sex persons less attractive than those who were not (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990).

## Appendix A

## Prescreening Measures

- 1) Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship?
- |     |   |        |   |    |
|-----|---|--------|---|----|
| 1   | 2 | 3      | 4 | 5  |
| Yes |   | Unsure |   | No |
- 2) In general, how important would you say it is to be committed while in a romantic relationship?
- |                      |   |   |   |   |   |                |
|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| 1                    | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7              |
| Not at all important |   |   |   |   |   | Very important |
- 3) How important is it to you that your current partner is committed to you?
- |                       |                      |   |   |   |   |   |                |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| N/A                   | 1                    | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7              |
| Do not have a partner | Not at all important |   |   |   |   |   | Very important |
- 4) How important is it to you that you stay committed to your current partner?
- |                       |                      |   |   |   |   |   |                |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| N/A                   | 1                    | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7              |
| Do not have a partner | Not at all important |   |   |   |   |   | Very important |
- 5) Would you consider someone who cheated on their romantic partner as being a bad person?
- |            |   |   |   |   |   |            |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7          |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   |   | Absolutely |
- 6) How likely is it that you would be unfaithful to your current partner?
- |                       |                   |   |   |   |   |   |             |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
| N/A                   | 1                 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7           |
| Do not have a partner | Not at all likely |   |   |   |   |   | Very likely |
- 8) Do you think commitment is necessary in order for a relationship to be successful?
- |            |   |   |   |   |   |            |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7          |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   |   | Absolutely |
- 9) Do you feel that it becomes more difficult to stay committed to someone the longer you are with him or her?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
 Not at all Absolutely

- 10) Do you feel that it becomes more difficult to stay committed to someone the further away you live from him or her?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
 Not at all Absolutely

- 11) How important to you is it that you avoid physical infidelity?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
 Not at all important Very important

- 12) How emotionally committed are you to your current relationship?

N/A 1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
 Not in a relationship Not at all committed Completely committed

- 13) Would you consider it being unfaithful to work closely in a group with an attractive person other than a romantic partner?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
 Not at all Absolutely

- 14) In general, would you consider looking lustfully at a person other than a romantic partner as being unfaithful?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
 Not at all Absolutely

- 15) Overall, how committed are you to your current partner?

N/A 1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
 Do not have a partner Not at all committed Very Committed

## Appendix B

## Construal Level Manipulation Task

*Category/Exemplar Task (Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita et al., 2006)*

*High-Level Construal Induction*

Instructions: In this task, you will be provided with a series of words. Your task will be to write a word that you think each provided word is an example of. That is, ask yourself the question, “[Provided word] is an example of what?” and then write down the answer you come up with. For instance, if we gave you the word “POODLE,” you might write down “DOGS” or even “ANIMALS,” as a poodle is an example of a dog or animal. Be creative and come up with the most general word for which the provided word is an example.

Please complete the following sentences in the spaces provided:

1. An ACTOR is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
2. A BEER is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
3. A BOOK is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
4. A CANDY is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
5. A COIN is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
6. A COLLEGE is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
7. A COMPUTER is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
8. A DANCE is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
9. A GAME is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_

10. A KING is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
11. LUNCH is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
12. MAIL is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
13. MATH is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
14. A MOUNTAIN is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
15. A MOVIE is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
16. A NEWSPAPER is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
17. A PAINTING is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
18. PASTA is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
19. A PHONE is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
20. A PROFESSOR is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
21. A RESTAURANT is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
22. A RIVER is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
23. A SENATOR is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
24. A SHOE is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
25. A SINGER is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_
26. A SOAP OPERA is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_



27. A SODA is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_

28. A SPORT is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_

29. A TREE is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_

30. A WHALE is an example of ... \_\_\_\_\_

*Low-Level Construal Induction*

Instructions: In this task, you will be provided with a series of words. Your task will be to write down a word that is an example of this word. That is, ask yourself the question, “An example of [provided word] is what?” and write down the answer you come up with. For example, if we gave you the word “DOGS,” you might write down the category “POODLE” or even “PLUTO” (the Disney character). Be creative, and try to think of as specific an example of the category as you can.

Please complete the following sentences in the spaces provided:

1. An example of an ACTOR is ... \_\_\_\_\_
2. An example of a BEER is ... \_\_\_\_\_
3. An example of a BOOK is ... \_\_\_\_\_
4. An example of a CANDY is ... \_\_\_\_\_
5. An example of a COIN is ... \_\_\_\_\_
6. An example of a COLLEGE is ... \_\_\_\_\_
7. An example of a COMPUTER is ... \_\_\_\_\_
8. An example of a DANCE is ... \_\_\_\_\_
9. An example of a GAME is ... \_\_\_\_\_
10. An example of a KING is ... \_\_\_\_\_
11. An example of LUNCH is ... \_\_\_\_\_

- 12. An example of MAIL is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 13. An example of MATH is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 14. An example of a MOUNTAIN is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 15. An example of a MOVIE is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 16. An example of a NEWSPAPER is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 17. An example of a PAINTING is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 18. An example of PASTA is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 19. An example of a PHONE is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 20. An example of a PROFESSOR is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 21. An example of a RESTAURANT is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 22. An example of a RIVER is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 23. An example of a SENATOR is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 24. An example of a SHOE is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 25. An example of a SINGER is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 26. An example of a SOAP OPERA is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 27. An example of a SODA is ... \_\_\_\_\_

- 28. An example of a SPORT is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 29. An example of a TREE is ... \_\_\_\_\_
- 30. An example of a WHALE is ... \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

## Pilot Target Attractiveness Questionnaire

Instructions: We are conducting a study which involves measuring people's perceptions of others' physical attractiveness. Please take a moment to observe the pictures and profiles of the 12 males presented in the slideshow.

Below, you will find scales for each person's level of attractiveness. Please rate each picture in either the male or female group on a scale from 1 to 7 in attractiveness; 1 representing NOT ATTRACTIVE, and 7 representing VERY ATTRACTIVE.

**Please provide your ratings for the following males:**

Male 1

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 2

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 3

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 4

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 5

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 6

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 7

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 8

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 9

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 10

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Attractive						Very Attractive

Male 11

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Not Attractive Very Attractive

Male 12

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Not Attractive Very Attractive

Finally, what is your gender?

1 2  
Male Female

Appendix D

Target Photos & Profiles

*Attractive Targets*

**Male A**



**Age:** 19  
**Relationship Status:** Single  
**Looking for:** Women

## Male B



**Age:** 20  
**Relationship Status:** Single  
**Looking for:** Women



## Male C



**Age:** 19  
**Relationship Status:** Single  
**Looking for:** Women

*Unattractive Targets*

**Male A**



**Age:** 19  
**Relationship Status:** Single  
**Looking for:** Women

## Male B



**Age:** 18  
**Relationship Status:** Single  
**Looking for:** Women

## Male C



**Age:** 19  
**Relationship Status:** Single  
**Looking for:** Women

## Male D



**Age:** 20  
**Relationship Status:** Single  
**Looking for:** Women

## Appendix E

## Target Attractiveness Questionnaire

Instructions: In the following task, you will be presented with pictures of various individuals accompanied by a few pieces of basic information about them. After you view each picture and profile, you will be asked a series of questions concerning your initial impressions and general opinions of the people you saw. Please look at each photo and profile carefully and answer the accompanying questions as best you can.

Please answer the following questions about **MALE A** by circling your choice:

1) How desirable do you find MALE A?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all desirable						Very desirable

2) How physically attractive do you find MALE A?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all attractive						Very attractive

3) How good-looking do you find MALE A?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all good-looking						Very good-looking

4) How hot do you find MALE A?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all hot						Very hot

5) Would you be interested in talking to MALE A?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all interested						Very interested

6) Would MALE A be someone you would like to work with on a group project?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Absolutely

7) Would you enjoy hanging out with MALE A?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Absolutely



Figure Captions

Figure 1. Frequencies of self-reported status on a scale of 1 (*not in a relationship*) to 5 (*in a relationship*) among 112 heterosexual female participants

Figure 2. Omnibus ANOVA of interaction of status, construal-level, and target attractiveness. Subjective attractiveness ratings determined on a scale of 1 (*not at all attractive*) to 7 (*extremely attractive*).



Figure 1

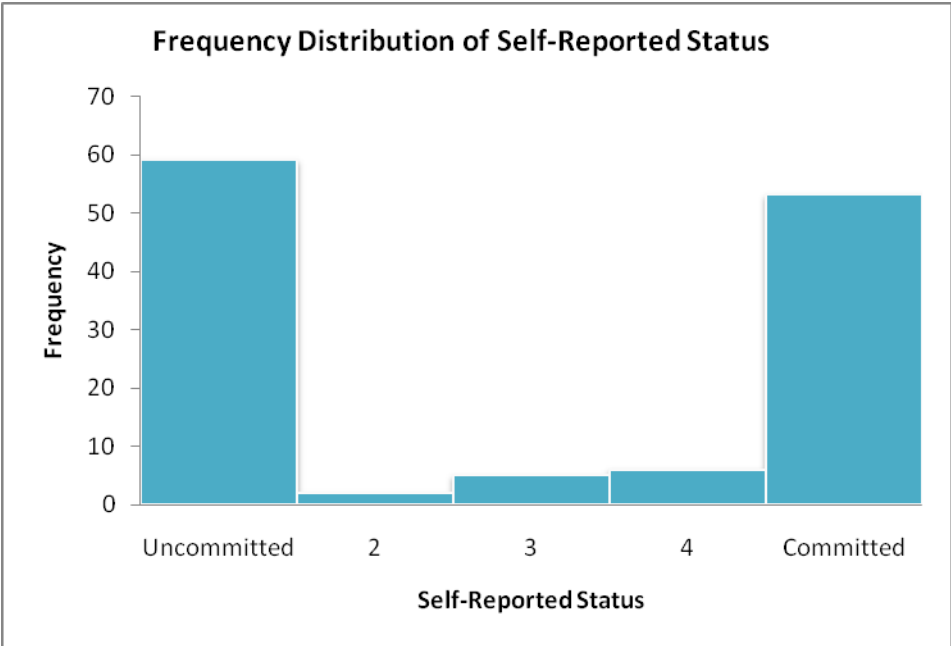


Figure 2

