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The presence of copycat private labels in a product set increases consumers' choice ease when shopping with an abstract mindset

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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates how the presence of copycat private labels (CCPLs) on retail shelves can positively affect consumers' shopping experience. Adopting a construal level theoretical perspective, Experiment 1 shows that when consumers shop with an abstract mindset, the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in a product set positively affects choice ease. Experiment 2 replicates this finding using different stimuli, manipulation of abstract mindset, and measure of choice ease. Experiment 3 demonstrates that the presence of CCPLs due to perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity positively influences choice ease and attitude toward the chosen product for those with an abstract mindset through conditional mediation. Experiment 4 extends these findings to practice by showing that when consumers shop at a far distance (i.e., ten feet), the presence of CCPLs once again positively affects choice ease and subsequent attitude toward the chosen product. The theoretical and practical contributions of this research are discussed.

1. Introduction

"When consumers enter a grocery store, a drug store, or a department store, literally thousands of SKUs [stock keeping units], representing thousands of brands, bombard their visual field. Some of the brands are national brands, but more and more of them are store brands or private labels" (Grewal & Levy, 2009; p. 523). It is apparent that product proliferation, specifically the marketing of insignificant variations of the same basic product to consumers (Berman, 2011), has increased in the U.S. (Schwartz, 2004) and has led consumers to experience greater choice difficulty as they shop for products to purchase (Broniarczyk, 2008; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2004). One major contributor to the current proliferation of products has been the recent influx of private labels into the marketplace (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2007). In 2015 and 2016, private labels in the U.S. reached record highs of $118 billion in sales, equating to an 18% market share (PLMA, 2017; Progressive Grocer, 2016). Combining sales from > 700 food and non-food product categories and sub-categories across major outlets (e.g., supermarkets, drug, club, dollar), this equates to an annual growth rate of 2% (PLMA, 2016).

Although various types of private labels exist, copycat private labels (hereafter CCPLs), which are brands owned by a retailer and imitate the trade dress (e.g., shape, color, font, and text) of popular national brands in a product set, should be of particular interest to retailers due to their abundance in the marketplace (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2007) and their criticism for negatively impacting customers' shopping experience (e.g., Goldstein, 2015). Specifically, for years, CCPLs have been touted as a source of confusion for consumers in the marketplace (Aribarg, Arora, Henderson, & Kim, 2014; Satomura, Wedel, & Pieters, 2014), as they are strategically designed to mimic the appearance of other brands in the product set (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012b, 2013) and are commonly placed on retail shelves directly next to the brands that they mimic (Valenzuela, Raghubir, & Mitakakis, 2013). However, the current research questions the veracity of such a claim (i.e., "Do CCPLs *always* hinder consumers' shopping experiences?") and theorizes how the mindset of a consumer may interact with CCPLs to *positively* affect consumers' shopping experiences.

Adopting a mental construal theoretical perspective (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010), we contend that product sets containing CCPLs are more compatible with consumers who shop with an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset. Across a series of four experiments, we examine the effects of such hypothesized compatibility. We start by measuring consumer mindset via the Behavioral Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) and showing how the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in a product set positively affects the choice ease of consumers who shop with more of an abstract mindset (Experiment 1). Next, we

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replicate this effect with a different product category, a different measure of choice ease, and a manipulation (vs. measure) of consumer mindset that is well-established in the literature (Experiment 2). Third, we utilize a conditional serial mediation model to test the process that underlies the effects established in Experiments 1 and 2 and whether the choice ease stemming from compatibility between CCPLs and abstract mindset positively extends to consumers' attitude of the chosen product (Experiment 3). Finally, we extend these novel theoretical findings to practice by using a manipulation of consumer mindset that is practically relevant for retailers (Experiment 4). Specifically, drawing from work that has established a relationship between spatial distance and mental construal (Slepian, Masicampo, & Ambady, 2015), we manipulate the amount of physical space that separates shopping consumers and retail shelves (hereafter shopping distance) and demonstrate how the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in a product set positively affects the choice ease and attitudes of consumers who shop at a far (vs. near) shopping distance (i.e., ten vs. two feet).

The findings from these four experiments make several important contributions. First, to the best of our knowledge, the current research is the first to document a theoretical link between private labels and abstract mental construal and to demonstrate the positive downstream effect of this link on consumers' shopping experiences (e.g., their choice ease and product evaluations). Second, these findings extend research on copycats by demonstrating how the presence of a particular type of copycat (i.e., CCPLs) positively affects the shopping experience of some consumers—those who shop with an abstract mindset. In doing so, this research also identifies mediating and moderating mechanisms that lead to the positive effect of copycats. In sum, the current research extends both the construal and copycat literatures while also providing novel consumer insights that should be of critical interest to practitioners who are concerned with creating positive consumer shopping experiences in brick-and-mortar stores where CCPLs are sold.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Copycat private labels

More than two-thirds of total U.S. households (70%) believe that private labels are a good alternative to national brands (Nielsen, 2016). As a result, the number of private-label SKUs is on the rise (PLMA, 2016), and they are grabbing consumers' attention and wallet. Private-label sales grew three times faster than national brand sales in 2017 (vs. 2016) (Kennedy, 2018), and while there are various types of private labels, the most popular is the copycat (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2007). Consistent with other private labels, CCPLs tend to utilize an overall branding strategy that is rather simplistic (i.e., basic graphics, one or two colors, and minimal text). However, CCPLs are unique in that they are strategically designed to imitate the trade dress of leading national brands (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012b, 2013). Importantly, to increase consumers' attention to such imitation, CCPLs are also often placed on the shelf directly next to the national brands that they mimic (Valenzuela et al., 2013). The goal of utilizing this combination of imitation and shelf placement is to draw consumers' attention to the fact that the CCPLs are the less expensive versions of popular national brands in the product set (Neff, 2009). In sum, CCPLs are brands with *simplistic* packaging that share a high degree of *similarity* with the national brands that they mimic. As such, they are positioned in the marketplace as *substitutes* for the national brands that they mimic (Nielsen, 2016). Drawing from construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010), we posit that these three characteristics of CCPLs (i.e., simple, similar, substitutable) are specifically compatible with consumers who shop with an abstract mindset.

2.2. Compatibility between copycat private labels and abstract consumer mindset

Construal-level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007) posits a relationship between psychological distance and how objects are mentally construed. Specifically, when psychological distance is far (vs. near), mental construal is more abstract (vs. concrete) in nature, leading to information processing that involves taking a big-picture (vs. narrow) perspective and focusing on the central (vs. detailed) features of focal objects. Notably, this well-documented relationship between psychological distance and mental construal has been established with various dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical; Trope & Liberman, 2010) and can be bidirectional (Smith, Wigboldus, & Dijksterhuis, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

A rich literature stream in consumer behavior demonstrates how abstractness shares a relationship with similarity, substitutability, and simplicity. With regard to similarity, when mental construal is relatively abstract (vs. concrete) in nature, consumers tend to focus more on the similarities among products (Goodman & Malkoc, 2012; Lamberton & Diehl, 2013; Xu, Jiang, & Dhar, 2013). For example, Lamberton and Diehl (2013) showed that when a product assortment (e.g., nutrition bars) was organized by benefits (e.g., muscle building, energy boosting, fat burning) as opposed to attributes (e.g., fruit, nuts, chocolate), consumers processed the product assortment more abstractly, and perceived the product offerings in the assortment to be more similar with one another. In addition, when processing abstractly, consumers tend to think more about the substitutability of products (Goodman & Malkoc, 2012; Van Kerckhove, Geuens, & Vermeir, 2015). For example, Goodman and Malkoc (2012) found that when consumers were choosing a vacation for next year (i.e., a time period that is construed more abstractly) as opposed to next month, they found the available destination options to be more substitutable with one another. Finally, when processing abstractly, consumers favor simplicity. For example, Liberman, Sagristano, and Trope (2002) examined individuals' preferences for doing activities (e.g., homework, watching the news, and meeting people) and found that when individuals believed that these activities would be done next year (i.e., once again a time period that is construed more abstractly) as opposed to tomorrow, their preferences for the activities showed a simpler structure. Interestingly, these effects associated with abstract mental construal (i.e., a focus on similarity, thoughts about substitutability, and a preference for simplicity) relate to the three defining characteristics of CCPLs, suggesting that a match may exist between the two.

2.3. Compatibility can have a positive effect on the shopping consumer

Unfortunately, factors in the current marketplace may be hindering this theorized match from even occurring. While consumers can process either abstractly or concretely as they shop (Lamberton & Diehl, 2013; Lee, Deng, Unnava, & Fujita, 2014), their default mindset tends to be more concrete in nature (Cho, Khan, & Dhar, 2013; Khan, Zhu, & Kalra, 2011). In addition, narrow aisles dominate the marketplace, forcing consumers to primarily shop at a close physical distance to retail shelves. Because proximity decreases construal level (Kim, Lee, & Choi, 2017; Slepian et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010), this means that consumers are likely processing at a lower, more concrete construal level, regardless of their default mindset. Finally, the marketplace is stricken by product proliferation (Schwartz, 2004), creating a shopping environment where the similarity among products is extremely high (Berman, 2011). Notably, the processing of similarity is not the primary focus of a concrete mindset (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In sum, we theorize that compatibility is simply lacking between the current shopping environment and the mindset of consumers.

However, if consumers could shop with more of an abstract mindset, then according to CLT, greater compatibility with the shopping

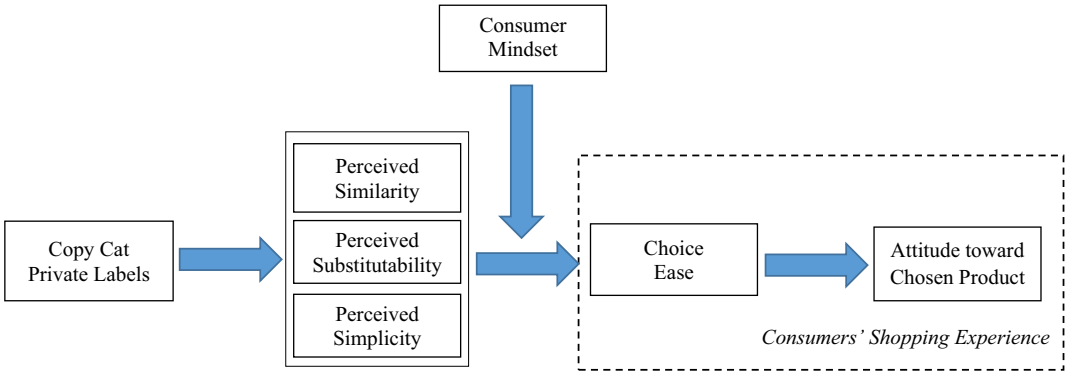

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

environment should exist, as consumers will be focusing more on the similarities among products (Goodman & Malkoc, 2012; Lamberton & Diehl, 2013), which are plentiful (Schwartz, 2004). Importantly, when CCPLs are present (vs. absent) on the retail shelves, two additional matches will now also exist (i.e., substitutability and simplicity). Therefore, we predict that when consumers shop product sets with an abstract mindset, the mere presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs on the shelf will create a condition of ultimate compatibility between the shopping environment and mindset of consumers. Based on prior research showing how compatibility between marketing strategies or specific products and consumers' mindsets can lead to positive effects (Tangari & Smith, 2012; Zhu, Yi, Qimei, & Miao, 2017), we further predict that compatibility between CCPLs and abstract mindset will positively influence consumers' shopping experience, specifically consumers will experience greater ease during choice and subsequently will evaluate their chosen product more favorably (see Fig. 1 for conceptual model).

Our proposition that CCPLs will positively affect the choice ease and product evaluations of consumers with an abstract mindset is based on fluency theory (Schwarz, 2004). Fluency research has shown that the ease with which consumers process external information affects their overall evaluations (Davis, Bagchi, & Block, 2016; Labroo & Lee, 2006; Wänke, Bohner, & Jurkowitsch, 1997). A key finding in the fluency literature is that when an object is easy (difficult) to process, positive (negative) feelings stemming from experienced ease (difficulty) are attributed to the object. Thus, attitude toward the object increases (decreases) in turn (Schwarz, 2004).

In summary, we predict the following. Consumers who shop a product set with an abstract mindset will experience greater choice ease if the product set contains (vs. does not contain) CCPLs. Specifically, the presence (vs. absence) of CPPLs will increase consumers' perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity. Due to the known links between abstractness and similarity, substitutability, and simplicity, respectively, these perceptions should positively influence the choice ease of those who shop a product set with an abstract mindset. In turn, this experience of choice ease should positively extend to consumers' attitude toward the product that is chosen. However, these effects will be non-existent for those who shop with a concrete mindset. Formally,

H1. When consumers shop a product set with an *abstract mindset*, the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in the product set will increase consumers' choice ease. This effect will not occur when consumers shop with a *concrete mindset*.

H2. Perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity will conditionally mediate the effect of the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs on choice ease. Specifically, the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs will positively affect consumers' perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity. When consumers shop a product set with an *abstract mindset*, these perceptions will increase their choice ease. This effect will not occur when consumers shop with a *concrete mindset*.

H3. When consumers shop a product set with an *abstract mindset*, perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity as well as choice ease will serially mediate the positive relationship between the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs and attitude toward the chosen product. This mediation effect will not occur when consumers shop a product set with a *concrete mindset*.

3. Experiment 1

The purpose of Experiment 1 is to provide an initial test of H1. In doing so, we seek to demonstrate that the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in a product set causes consumers, who naturally process with an abstract mindset, to experience greater choice ease.

3.1. Pretest

Since we conceptualize that CCPLs align with an abstract consumer mindset due to overlap on the characteristics of simplicity, substitutability, and similarity, we conducted a pretest of stimuli to verify that product sets with CCPLs are perceived as containing these characteristics. The pretest was a within-subjects quasi-experiment with two conditions (CCPLs: absent vs. present). A sample of 50 adults was recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Kees, Berry, Burton, & Sheehan, 2017). The mean age of the sample (in years) was 31.34 (SD = 10.84), 58% were male, the median income was $30,000 to $39,999, and 64% had obtained a four-year college degree. The stimuli was horizontally displayed on a computer screen and consisted of two product sets, each containing six different eye drop products (see Appendix A). The CCPLs *absent* product set contained six national branded products, while the CCPLs *present* product set contained three national branded and three CCPL products. All CCPL products displayed Walmart's CCPL brand name Equate on their packaging and were shelved directly to the right of the national branded products they mimicked. To control for potential order effects, the presentation of the product sets was counterbalanced.

Participants were asked to imagine that they were shopping at Walmart for eye drops and the available options were the ones conveniently displayed on their screen. Next, one of the two product sets was shown. Participants assessed the similarity, substitutability, and simplicity of the products in the set using nine seven-point Likert scale items (i.e., three items for each characteristic). Specifically, for the CCPL *absent* (*present*) product set, the following items assessed perceptions of (1) similarity: (a) blink Gel Tears (Equate Support Harmony) is very similar to Systane Balance, (b) Clear Eyes (Equate Redness Reliever) is very similar to Visine, and (c) Alaway (Equate Eye Itch Relief) is very similar to Zaditor; (2) substitutability: (a) blink Gel Tears (Equate Support Harmony) appears to be a substitute for Systane

Balance, (b) Clear Eyes (Equate Redness Reliever) appears to be a substitute for Visine, and (c) Alaway (Equate Eye Itch Relief) appears to be a substitute for Zaditor; and (3) simplicity: (a) Compared to Systane Balance, the blink Gel Tears (Equate Support Harmony) package is simple, (b) Compared to Visine, the Clear Eyes (Equate Redness Reliever) package is simple, and (c) Compared to Zaditor, the Alaway (Equate Eye Itch Relief) package is simple. Next, participants were exposed to the second product set and responded to the corresponding nine items for that set. For each condition, coefficient alpha reliabilities for the measure of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity exceeded 0.83.

To compare perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity across the two product sets, the nine items were combined and a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted. All participants who completed the measures were included in the analyses. As expected, the results revealed that the products in the CCPLs *present* (vs. *absent*) product set were perceived as more similar, substitutable, and simple ($t(48) = 3.66$, $p < .01$; $M_{present} = 5.46$, $SD_{present} = 0.86$ vs. $M_{absent} = 4.96$, $SD_{absent} = 0.92$). Furthermore, to ensure that perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity were each impacted by the product sets, three paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted. Results of the paired-samples *t*-tests reveal that the products in the CCPLs *present* (vs. *absent*) product set were evaluated as more similar ($t(48) = 2.62$, $p < .05$; $M_{present} = 5.61$, $SD_{present} = 0.98$ vs. $M_{absent} = 5.17$, $SD_{absent} = 1.13$), more substitutable ($t(48) = 2.80$, $p < .01$; $M_{present} = 5.47$, $SD_{present} = 1.00$ vs. $M_{absent} = 4.99$, $SD_{absent} = 1.15$), and more simple ($t(48) = 2.97$, $p < .01$; $M_{present} = 5.31$, $SD_{present} = 1.02$ vs. $M_{absent} = 4.73$, $SD_{absent} = 1.24$). Thus, the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs influenced perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity as expected.

3.2. Method

Experiment 1 was a 2 group (CCPLs: absent versus present) between-subjects study involving a shopping task. The stimuli from the pretest were used (see Appendix A). Participants were randomly assigned to view only one of the two product sets. The sample in this experiment consisted of 120 undergraduate students from a private university in the Midwest who participated in the study for partial course credit.

Participants were asked to imagine that they were shopping at a store for eye drops and the available options were the ones displayed in front of them. They were then asked to choose one product from the set using a single multiple-choice question. Participants' decision time (i.e., the amount of time (in seconds) to view the product set and make a choice) was unobtrusively recorded and served as the dependent measure, with less time equating to greater choice ease (Cho et al., 2013; Davis et al., 2016; Gupta & Harris, 2010). Next, participants were asked to complete the BIF. Specifically, participants were given 25 behaviors and were asked to choose which of two actions (concrete versus abstract) best identified a focal behavior (e.g., cleaning the house). The concrete action pertained to a specific mean by which people perform the action (e.g., “vacuuming the floor”), while the abstract action pertained to the end for which people perform the action (e.g., “showing one's cleanliness”). Behaviors identified with an abstract (a concrete) action were coded as 1 (0) (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). The 25 behaviors were summed to form an index of each participant's mindset, with higher scores indicating a relatively abstract mindset (Fujita, Henderson, et al., 2006; Slepian et al., 2015).[1]

[1] Because we administered the BIF to measure construal level after the manipulation of CCPLs, we examined the effect of the presence (versus absence) of CCPLs on consumer mindset to ensure that there was no effect. The result of an independent-samples *t*-test revealed that consumer mindset was not affected by the presence of CCPLs ($t(118) = 1.24$, $p = .22$).

All participants who completed the measures were included in the analyses.

3.3. Results

To test H1, we used model 1 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. The presence of CCPLs (coded as 1) versus absence of CCPLs (coded as 0) served as the independent variable, and consumer mindset (BIF) served as the moderator. To aid interpretation, the moderator was mean-centered before conducting the analysis (Hayes, 2013). The results showed a significant interaction effect of CCPLs and consumer mindset on decision time ($b = -1.66$, $t(116) = -2.24$, $p < .05$). The Johnson–Neyman technique was used to identify regions in the range of BIF index scores in which the effect of CCPLs on decision time was significant (Hayes, 2013; Johnson & Neyman, 1936). As shown in Fig. 2, the Johnson–Neyman value for significance at a 95% confidence level was 15.32 on the BIF index, which is 0.15 standard deviations above the mean of 14.48 ($SD = 5.74$). These results reveal that, for participants who construe more abstractly, the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in the product set resulted in lower decision time (in seconds). Forty percent of the sample fell in the region of significance (BIF > 15.32), indicating that the presence of CCPLs positively influenced choice ease for approximately 40% of the sample. In contrast, for participants who construe more concretely (i.e., BIF < 15.32), decision time did not vary as a function of CCPLs being present or absent in the product set ($p > .05$). These results support H1.

3.4. Discussion

Experiment 1 shows that when CCPLs are present (vs. absent) in a product set, consumers who shop with more of an abstract mindset spend less time choosing a product to purchase. In contrast, for consumers who shop with a relatively concrete mindset, decision time is unaffected by the presence/absence of CCPLs in the product set. Importantly, we do not believe these effects to be retailer or stimuli specific. To support this notion, we conducted a supplementary study with 110 undergraduate students from a large public U.S. university. This additional study was similar to Experiment 1 except for the focal retailer was Walgreens and the focal product category was low dosage aspirins (see Appendix A for stimuli). As expected, the results from this study replicate Experiment 1. Specifically, using model 1 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 bootstrap samples, a significant interaction emerged ($b = -0.67$, $t(106) = -1.98$, $p = .05$) with the Johnson-Neyman value for significance at 95% confidence interval being 18.05 on the BIF index, which is 0.82 standard deviations above the mean of 14.07. Thus, H1 is once again supported.

With initial support for how CCPLs can positively affect consumers' choice ease, we next aim to provide a more critical test of the proposed theoretical relationship among CCPLs, abstract mindset, and choice ease. As such, in our next study (Experiment 2), we manipulate both CPPLs and consumer mindset and measure how the interaction directly affects consumers' choice ease.

4. Experiment 2

4.1. Method

Experiment 2 was a 2 (CCPLs: absent versus present) x 2 (consumer mindset: concrete vs. abstract) between-subjects study involving a shopping task. The stimuli consisted of six different condom products displayed horizontally on a computer screen (see Appendix A). For participants in the *absent* CCPLs condition, the product set contained only national branded products. In contrast, for participants in the *present* CCPLs condition, the set contained three national branded and three private labeled products. All CCPL displayed CVS on their

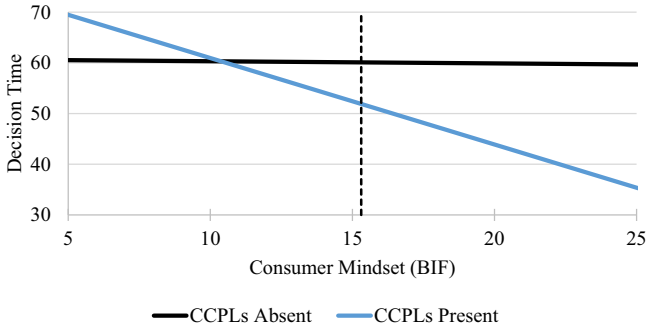

Fig. 2. Experiment 1. The influence of copycat private labels and individual consumer mindset (BIF) on decision time (i.e., choice ease).
Notes: We measured consumer mindset using the BIF, with higher values indicating more abstract construal and thus more of an abstract mindset. Time to make the choice was used to assess choice ease, with lower values indicating greater choice ease. The vertical dotted line shows the Johnson-Neyman point of significance (Hayes, 2013; Spiller, Fitzsimmons, Lynch Jr., & McClelland, 2013). Thus, when BIF is > 15.32, the difference between CPPLs present and absent is significant ($p < .05$).

packaging and were shelved directly to the right of the national brands that they mimicked. The sample in this study consisted of 139 undergraduate students from a large public U.S. university who participated in the study for partial course credit.

Upon arrival to the lab, participants were told that they would be completing several studies. In the assumed "first" study, consumer mindset was manipulated using the goal subordination/superordination priming procedure (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007). Specifically, participants in the abstract consumer mindset condition were asked to think about and explain why they would improve and maintain physical health by creating increasingly superordinate goals, while participants in the concrete consumer mindset condition were asked to think about and explain how they would improve and maintain physical health by creating increasingly subordinate goals (see Fujita, Trope, et al., 2006, Experiment 1 for full details).[2] Next, in the assumed "second" study, participants were asked to complete a shopping task. Specifically, they were asked to imagine shopping at CVS for condoms and the available products were the ones displayed. Participants were asked to choose a product from the set using a single multiple-choice question. Next, they evaluated their choice ease with two items ("Choosing a product from the selection was:" 1 = extremely difficult/overwhelming, 7 = not at all difficult/overwhelming; $r = 0.71$) that were adapted from prior research (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Kelting, Duhachek, & Whitler, 2017). Finally, all participants were thanked and dismissed. All participants who completed the measures were included in the analyses.

[2] To assess this manipulation, we followed an established procedure (Fujita et al., 2006b; Liberman & Trope, 1998). Specifically, two coders unaware of the experimental conditions assessed each participant's level of construal based on the abstractness of their responses. If a response met the criterion Y by X, where X was participant's response and Y was the prompt (i.e., the response was a way to "improve and maintain good physical health"), the response was coded −1. If a response met the criterion X by Y (i.e., the response was an outcome of improving and maintaining good physical health), the response was coded 1. If a response did not meet one of these criteria, it was coded 0. Ratings for each participant's four responses were then summed to create an index of consumer mindset, potentially ranging from −4 to 4, where lower (higher) values indicate a concrete (abstract) mindset. The coder's ratings were very consistent ($r = 0.95$), so the average of the two ratings was used. As expected, participants in the abstract condition (M = 3.72, SD = 0.73) generated more abstract responses than participants in the concrete condition (M = -3.66, SD = 0.61; $t(137) = 64.61$, $p < .001$).

4.2. Results

To test H1, we conducted a 2 × 2 between-subjects ANOVA. Results revealed, as predicted and consistent with Experiment 1, a significant interaction ($F(1,135) = 4.24$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$; see Fig. 3). Simple effects showed that when participants shopped with an abstract consumer mindset, the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in the product set led them to experience significantly greater choice ease ($F(1,135) = 4.00$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.51$; $M_{absent} = 5.67$, $SD_{absent} = 1.46$ vs. $M_{present} = 6.32$, $SD_{present} = 1.00$). In contrast, when participants shopped with a concrete consumer mindset, their choice ease did not vary as a function of CCPLs being present or absent in the product set ($F(1,135) = 0.85$, $p = .36$). These results support H1.

4.3. Discussion

Consistent with Experiment 1, the results from Experiment 2 show that the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in a product set enhances the choice ease of consumers who shop with an abstract mindset. With support now across two different experiments for how compatibility between CCPLs and abstract mindset positively affects consumers' choice ease, Experiment 3 will test the underlying mechanism for why such compatibility not only exists but also leads to choice ease. Specifically, we examine whether the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs increases consumers' perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity, and whether such perceptions also increase the choice ease of consumers with an abstract mindset due to compatibility (H2). We also seek to test whether consumers' choice ease positively extends to their attitude toward the chosen product through serial mediation (H3).

5. Experiment 3

5.1. Method

Experiment 3 was a 2 (CCPLs: absent versus present) between-subjects study involving a shopping task. To bolster external validity, a new product category was selected for stimuli. Specifically, the stimuli consisted of six different cereals displayed horizontally on a computer screen (see Appendix A). For participants in the *absent* CCPLs condition, the product set contained only national branded products. In contrast, for participants in the *present* CCPLs condition, the product set contained three national branded and three private labeled products. All CCPL products displayed Walmart's CCPL brand name Great Value on their packaging and were shelved directly to the right of the national branded products they mimicked. The sample in this study consisted of 148 adults who were recruited via Turk Prime and who were paid $1. The average age of the sample was 36.8 (SD = 11.4), 52.7% were male, the median income was $40,000–$49,999, and 46.6% had obtained a four-year college degree.

Participants were asked to imagine that they were shopping for cereal and the available options were the ones displayed. They were then asked to choose a product from the set using a single multiple-choice question. Next, they evaluated their attitude toward the chosen product with three items ($\alpha = 0.92$; "The product that I have chosen is: 1 = bad/dislikable/unattractive, 7 = good/likable/attractive" and their choice ease with the same two items used in Experiment 2 ($\alpha = 0.70$). Next, participants evaluated their perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity among the products in the set using items like those used in Experiment 1's pretest ($\alpha = 0.87$). Finally, participants completed the BIF and answered demographic questions. Due to the length of this study and it being conducted online, an attention check asking participants if they had ever heard of Facebook was embedded in the questionnaire (Kees et al., 2017); 26 participants failed this attention check and were not included in the analyses.

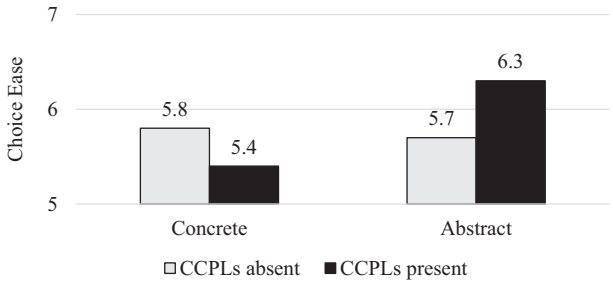

Fig. 3. Experiment 2. The influence of copycat private labels and consumer mindset on choice ease.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Mediation effects on choice ease

To assess the conditional indirect effect of the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs on choice ease through the mediating mechanism of perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity, we used Model 15 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. The presence (coded 1) versus absence (coded 0) of CCPLs served as the independent variable. Perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity served as mediator.[3] Choice ease served the dependent variable. Consumer mindset (BIF) served as the moderator. Results show that the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs increased perceptions about the similarity, substitutability, and simplicity of the products in the set (b = 2.22, t(146) = 15.03, $p < .001$). In turn, such perceptions were found to interact with consumer mindset to influence choice ease (b = 0.03, t(142) = 2.08, $p < .05$). The index of moderated mediation (index) was significant (index = 0.07, bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [0.01, 0.13]), indicating a conditional indirect effect. As expected, for participants who construe more abstractly (84th percentile on BIF), the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in the product set led them to experience significantly greater choice ease (IE = 0.77, bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [0.05, 1.48]). In contrast, for participants who construe more concretely (16th percentile on BIF), choice ease did not vary as a function of CCPLs being present or absent in the product set (bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [−1.04, 0.14]). These results support H2.

5.2.2. Serial mediation effects on attitude toward chosen product

To examine the conditional serial indirect effect of shopping a product set where CCPLs are present (vs. absent) on one's attitude toward the chosen product, we created a custom model using PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. Specifically, the model was the same model tested above but with an added path from choice ease to attitude toward the chosen product. As expected, results show a conditional indirect effect of CCPLs on attitude toward the chosen product through the mediating mechanisms of perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity and choice ease, respectively (index = 0.32, bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [0.001, 0.04]). Specifically, for participants who construe more abstractly (84th percentile on BIF), the experience of choice ease stemming from the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in the product set led them to have significantly more favorable attitudes toward their chosen product (IE = 0.18, bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [0.01, 0.45]). However, for those who construe more concretely (16th percentile on BIF), this indirect effect was nonsignificant (bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [−0.32, 0.03]). These results support H3.

5.3. Discussion

Experiment 3 tests the complete conceptual model and shows that the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in a product set increases perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity; in turn, these perceptions are positively related to the choice ease of consumers who shop with an abstract mindset. While such effects are consistent with our theoretical framework, for the retail practitioner, it is important to demonstrate these effects using a more practical manipulation of abstract consumer mindset for a brick-and-mortar retail environment. As alluded to earlier, we believe that this may occur through a manipulation of shopping distance.

Research has shown that in addition to chronical dispositions to mentally construe objects and events either more abstractly or more concretely (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), construal can be activated through contextual and situational factors. For example, an extensive body of research has identified how factors like the method of payment being credit (Chen, Xu, & Shen, 2017), upward physical location (Slepian et al., 2015; Van Kerckhove et al., 2015), and product assortments organized by benefits (Lamberton & Diehl, 2013) can activate an abstract consumer mindset. Here, however, we focus on a factor that is germane to a retail environment and related to the spatial distance of construal, specifically shopping distance. Like others who have examined the spatial distance of construal (Aggarwal & Zhao, 2015; Fujita, Henderson, et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2017; Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2007), we believe that greater shopping distance (e.g., ten vs. two feet) activates abstract construal. Thus, in Experiment 4, we aim to demonstrate a practical manipulation of consumer mindset in a retail environment. Specifically, we test the effect of the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in a product set on choice ease for consumers who shop from a far (vs. near) shopping distance.

6. Experiment 4

6.1. Method

Experiment 4 was conducted in a retail laboratory facility designed to realistically replicate a brick-and-mortar retail environment. This retail laboratory includes retail shelving and aisles that display a range of products. Experiment 4 was a 2 (CCPLs: absent versus present) by 2 (shopping distance: close vs. far) between-subjects experiment involving a shopping task. Stimuli consisted of six different pain reliever products displayed horizontally on an actual shelf like one would see at a retail store (see Appendix A). For participants in the *absent* CCPLs condition, the product set contained only national branded products. For participants in the *present* CCPLs condition, the product set contained three national branded and three private labeled products. All CCPL products displayed Walmart's CCPL brand name Equate on their packaging and were shelved directly to the right of the national branded products they mimicked. Shopping distance was manipulated by varying the physical space between participants and the retail shelf.[4]

[3] To ensure that the effects were consistent across perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity, we conducted a 2 (CCPLs: absent vs. present) x 3 (perceptions: similarity, substitutability, and simplicity) mixed-ANOVA. As expected, results indicated that perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity were greater for the present (M = 5.47) condition than the absent condition (M = 3.25; F(1, 146) = 0.13, $p < .001$). Importantly, the CCPLs by perceptions interaction was nonsignificant (F(1, 146) = 226.00, $p = .72$), indicating that the presence of CCPLs uniformly impacted perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity.

[4] To determine the norm shopping distance for consumers, 29 undergraduate students from a private university in the Midwest participated in a pretest for partial course credit. The pretest involved visiting a retailer, finding the pain reliever aisle, picking a spot on the floor where they could stand and evaluate the various products, and then after identifying this “spot” measuring the distance (in inches) between their toes and the retail shelf using a provided tape measure. The results revealed that participants' shopping distance ranged from 1.17 to 3.5 ft, with the average being 2.68 ft. Thus, based upon these results and research showing that a distance of 10 ft activates abstract processing (Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2007), we reasoned a close (far) shopping distance being two (10)

Specifically, in the *close* shopping distance condition, two feet separated participants and the shelf, while in the *far* shopping distance condition, ten feet separated participants and the shelf. The sample in this study consisted of 85 undergraduate students from a large public U.S. university who participated in the study for partial course credit.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and were asked to imagine that they were shopping for a pain reliever and the available products were the ones displayed in front of them. They were asked to choose a product from the set using a single multiple-choice question. Next, participants chose a product using a single multiple-choice question. They then evaluated their attitude toward the chosen product ($\alpha = 0.79$) and choice ease ($r = 0.67$) via the same measures used in Experiment 3. Finally, all participants were thanked and dismissed. All participants who completed the measures were included in the analyses.

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Choice ease

To assess whether CCPLs and shopping distance interact with one another as expected, we conducted a 2 × 2 between-subjects ANOVA, which revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 81) = 4.55$, $p = .03$ $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$; see Fig. 4). Simple effects indicate that when participants shopped a product set at a distance of ten feet (i.e., far shopping distance), the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in the product set led to significantly greater choice ease ($F(1, 81) = 5.08$, $p = .03$, Cohen's $d = 1.06$; $M_{absent} = 5.29$, $SD_{absent} = 1.21$ vs. $M_{present} = 6.32$, $SD_{present} = 0.64$). In contrast, when they shopped a product at a distance of only two feet (i.e., close shopping distance), choice ease did not vary as a function of CCPLs being present or absent in the product set ($F(1, 81) = 0.32$, $p = .57$).

6.2.2. Mediation effects on attitude toward chosen product

To examine the conditional indirect effect of shopping a product set where CCPLs are present (coded 1) versus absent (coded as 0) on consumers' attitude toward the chosen product, we used Model 8 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. The results show a conditional indirect effect of CCPLs on attitude toward the chosen product through the mediating mechanism of choice ease (index of moderated mediation = 0.32, bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [0.07, 0.77]). As expected, when CCPLs were present (vs. absent) in the product set, participants who shopped at a far shopping distance held a more favorable attitude toward their chosen product (IE = 0.27, bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [0.09, 0.58]). However, this indirect effect of CCPLs on attitude toward the chosen product was nonsignificant for those who shopped at a closer distance (bias-corrected 95% bootstrap CI [−0.29, 0.14]).

6.3. Discussion

Experiment 4 provides evidence that the presence of CCPLs in a product set positively affects consumers' choice ease and subsequent evaluations of their choice yet only under a condition of far shopping distance. Drawing from the known link between distance and construal (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) coupled with the findings from Experiments 1–3, we believe that these positive effects involving CCPLs emerge under a condition of far shopping distance because shopping at a far (spatial) distance prompts consumers to shop with more of an abstract mindset (Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2007); this creates a condition of greater compatibility when CCPLs are present (vs. absent) in the product set.

(*footnote continued*)
feet.

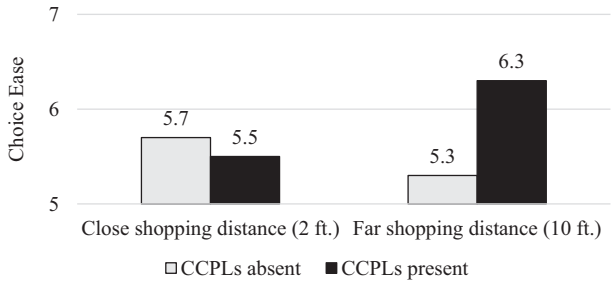

Fig. 4. Experiment 4. The influence of copycat private labels and shopping distance on choice ease.

7. General discussion

7.1. Conclusion

With the brick-and-mortar retail environment plagued by little or no growth (Nielsen, 2016), retailers are seeking ways to improve their customers' shopping experience (Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Concomitant with this goal, the current research has examined how two factors—CCPLs and consumers' mindset—interact with one another to affect consumers' shopping experience. In addition, this research demonstrates the conditions under which CCPLs can facilitate instead of hinder consumers' shopping experience. Specifically, using mental construal and fluency as our theoretical lens, we demonstrate that when consumers shop with an abstract mindset, the presence (vs. absence) of CCPLs in the product sets enhances their choice ease, subsequently leading them to evaluate their chosen product more favorably. We show that these effects occur due to the overlap that CCPLs and abstract mindset share in regard to the notions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity.

Notably, we show that the interactive effect of CCPLs and consumer mindset on choice ease generalizes across several product categories (i.e., eye drops, low-dosage aspirins, cereal, condoms, and over-the-counter pain relievers), retailers (i.e., Walmart, Walgreens, and CVS) and copycat private label packaging. Further, we find that this relationship exists regardless of whether consumers' abstract mindset is measured or manipulated or whether choice ease is examined as a self-reported or behavioral measure. In addition, consistent with our fluency theoretical framework, we show that greater choice ease, stemming from the relationship between CCPLs and abstract mindset, extends to consumers' attitude toward the product that they ultimately choose through mediation. In sum, the findings in this paper provide novel theoretical and managerial insights. As such, the remainder of the paper highlights the contributions of this research and proposes several areas for future research to pursue.

7.2. Contributions

7.2.1. Contributions to theory

By bringing together the copycat, CLT, and fluency literatures, the current research advances theory. First, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to tie the unique characteristics of CCPLs to CLT. Specifically, CCPLs embody similarity, substitutability, and simplicity. Notably, all three characteristics are also used to describe processes that occur under conditions of abstract mental construal (e.g., Goodman & Malkoc, 2012; Lamberton & Diehl, 2013; Liberman et al., 2002), suggesting a condition of compatibility between CCPLs and abstract consumer mindset that we show affects choice ease and product attitudes (Novemsky, Dhar, Schwarz, & Simonson, 2007).

In addition, we contribute to the extant copycat literature in two ways. First, research has predominantly demonstrated the negative effects of imitation strategies on store brand shares, due to consumer confusion (Kapferer, 1995) and lower purchase intentions (Steenkamp

& Geyskens, 2013; Van Horen & Pieters, 2012b, 2017). However, since pleasurable choice experiences and increased product evaluations encourage store return and loyalty (Gourville & Soman, 2002), the current research shows a condition under which retailers may seemingly *benefit* from the availability of CCPLs. Second, the copycat literature to date has largely focused on the features of a copycat (Aribarg et al., 2014; Loken, Ross, & Hinkle, 1986; Van Horen & Pieters, 2012a, 2012b; Warlop & Alba, 2004) and the metrics for identifying customer confusion caused by copycats (Kapferer, 1995; Satomura et al., 2014). As a result, choice has been a focal outcome (see c.f. Kelting et al., 2017). The current research is different. By focusing on how copycats affect the shopping experience, the current research highlights how copycats can have an impact before a choice is even made.

7.2.2. Contributions to marketing and retailing practice

This research examines two specific retailer decisions that are bundled under the umbrella of shopper marketing (Ailawadi, Beauchamp, Donthu, Gauri, & Shankar, 2009; Shankar, 2011): (1) what brand of merchandise to sell and (2) how much shopping distance. Specifically, this research suggests that if retailers sell CCPL products and want to enhance customers' shopping experience in their stores, then they should consider ways to activate an abstract mindset among consumers. Here we have demonstrated a customer experience management strategy to do so. In particular, Experiment 4 showed how increasing the physical distance between consumers and retail shelves and offering a product set that contains CCPLs has a positive effect on consumers' choice ease and attitudes toward the chosen product. Both outcomes are potentially beneficial to retailers and manufacturers alike.

As extant research has noted, marketers and retailers should be concerned with consumers' subjective feeling of ease (or difficulty) that arises when they choose a product among an assortment (Novemsky et al., 2007). This is because choice ease has been shown to influence various outcomes of importance to retailers, such as the deferral of choice and customers compromising on their selection. Because of these findings, Novemsky et al. (2007) encouraged marketers to proactively strive to create conditions in the retail environment that are helpful in increasing customers' choice ease. Thus, the current research extends these findings by identifying two critical factors in the retail environment (i.e., CCPLs and shopping distance) that can be used in conjunction to enhance customers' choice ease and product attitudes.

Finally, for retailers with store designs that currently involve aisles that are narrower than their competitors (e.g., the Fresh Market, Walmart), it is important to highlight how the findings in the current paper show no impact of CCPLs on consumers' choice ease when consumers' shopping distance is close like two feet (Experiment 4, $p = .57$) or when the consumer's mindset is more concrete (Experiments 1–3, $p's > 0.10$). In other words, we find no evidence to support the idea that CCPLs *impair* consumers' shopping experience. Rather, the evidence in the paper is more positive; specifically, we show a way for retailers to enhance their customers' shopping experience.

7.3. Further research

Building on our findings, further research could examine whether the positive effects of processing product sets with an abstract mindset are limited to the inclusion of CCPLs in a product set. In other words, is imitation by a private label unique, or could the same effects hold for other types of high similarity, substitutability and simplicity existing in a product set, such as national brands imitating other national brands (van Horen & Pieters, 2017)? Based on our conceptual framework, we believe that the compatibility between CCPLs and abstract mindset leads to the positive found on choice ease due to perceptions of similarity, substitutability, and simplicity. Therefore, identifying and examining other brands that generate these same perceptions could be an important consideration for future researchers and retailers alike.

Furthermore, we contribute to the CLT literature by examining the relationship between mental construal and shopping distance. We did this by having consumers stand at a physical distance of either ten or two feet from the product set and showed how such a manipulation interacts with CCPLs in a manner like classic methods used to activate consumers' mental construal. However, there is the potential that the found effects on choice ease may begin to diminish at distances beyond 10 ft, providing the potential for curvilinear effects; therefore, testing these potential curvilinear effects could be in interesting avenue for future research. Further, given the prevalence of successful psychological distance manipulations in the CLT literature, other established retail manipulations of abstract consumer mindset, such using signage that emphasize why consumers should buy around product sets (Tangari, Burton, & Smith, 2015) or organizing product sets by consumer benefits (Lamberton & Diehl, 2013), could be examined when considering the effects of CCPLs on choice ease. Similarly, future research could attempt to manipulate the *perceived* shopping distance by holding actual physical distance between consumers' and retail shelves constant while manipulating perceptions of shopping distance to be near or far. For example, a ten-foot space could be manipulated to be crowded or not, respectively (Maeng, Tanner, & Soman, 2013). Such research, examining other relevant marketplace factors, may build on the insights the current research has provided by demonstrating under which conditions the availability of CCPLs increases, instead of decreases, consumers' shopping experience.

Given the theoretical framework of the current research, only choice ease and attitude toward the chosen product were examined. However, compatibility between CCPLs and abstract mindset has the potential to impact additional outcomes. In this regard, the interactive effects of CCPLs and consumer mindset, whether it be dispositional or due to marketplace factors, on behavioral outcomes should be examined. For example, outcomes assessed at the product-level (e.g., product choice, basket size) and retailer-level (e.g., retailer patronage) could be interesting and potentially fruitful avenues for future research. In addition, for those interested in better understanding the downstream effects of choice ease, it might also be worthwhile to compare effects to a control condition (i.e., no involvement of a product set) to see just how much the underlying effect of choice ease stemming from the compatibility between abstract mindset and CCPLs is accentuating consumers' evaluations.

Finally, the current research asked all participants to shop a product set that contained only six product offerings. We purposely designed stimuli this way to control for alternative theoretical explanations as we examined the novel relationship among CCPLs, abstract mindset, and choice ease. However, future research could relax these constraints on the stimuli and examine whether the effects hold for larger and/or more varied assortments. Further, the role of price in the product sets warrants additional consideration by future research because the inclusion of prices may impact choice ease.

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Appendix A. Experimental stimuli

Experiment 1

CCPLs Absent

CCPLs Present

Supplementary study

CCPLs Absent

$7.49 $7.29 $7.39 $7.19 $7.29 $7.09

CCPLs Present

$7.49 $7.29 $7.39 $7.19 $7.29 $7.09

Experiment 2

CCPLs Absent

CCPLs Present

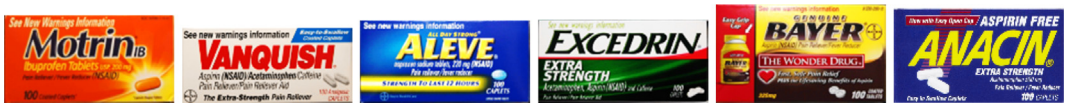
Experiment 3

CCPLs Absent

CCPLs Present

Experiment 4

CCPLs Absent



CCPLs Present

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