**How Less Congruent New Products Drive Brand Engagement: The Role of Curiosity**

**1. Introduction**

*Burger-scented candles* by an established fast-food chain, *Chocolate Mayonnaise* by a long-standing producer of sauces and condiments, a *beer brewed with frozen pizza and banknotes* released by a European brewery known for its Pilsners, and fashionable streetwear by a discount supermarket chain known for its low prices are some recent examples of brands announcing incongruent new products on social media (Barr, 2018; Guzman & Ries, 2020; Jarnit-Bjergsø, 2014; Kühnl, 2020). With the increasing importance of digital marketing channels, brands are taking more drastic measures to stand out from the competition and generate brand engagement (i.e., the liking, commenting, or sharing of posts on social media) (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020; Malhotra et al., 2013). In particular, producers of low-involvement products, such as foods and fast-moving consumer goods, are struggling to inspire consumers to engage with their content online (Humphris, 2015). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the introduction of incongruent new products can help those brands generate buzz. For example, Heinz attracted a great deal of attention on social media with its announcement of Ketchup Caviar for Valentine's Day (Jonze, 2019).

This is surprising, as most people would usually describe such incongruent new products as "weird," "odd," or "strange." Perhaps unsurprisingly, literature on branding highlights the importance of congruence when launching a new product or extending a brand into a new category (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Boush & Loken, 1991; Park et al., 1991). Brands constantly introduce new products to the market to increase their revenue and gain competitive advantages. Most of these new products (or brand extensions) are congruent with a brand's current product portfolio to leverage the expertise and image of a brand in a particular product category (Gierl & Hüttl, 2011). For example, Coca-Cola relied on

consumers' positive associations with original Coke when it launched its new lines of sugar-free sodas (e.g., Coca-Cola Zero Sugar).

When launching new products, companies normally tend to stick to the given rules of the markets in which they operate. Any new product announcement or launch operates within a set of legitimated norms and conventions that help meet the expectations of different stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). For example, research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) shows how companies may benefit from creating a dialogue with stakeholders when they introduce and communicate new practices (Colleoni, 2013; Monfort et al., 2019; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Pérez et al., 2019), especially when such dialogue contributes to increasing the congruence with stakeholders' expectations. Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) note that organizations should avoid unexpected events and maintain a business-as-usual stance. With regard to marketing and branding, especially in a business-to-consumer setting, treating consumers as key stakeholders is crucial. Consumers' values and expected norms are key variables that may determine the success or failure of company initiatives (Freeman, 1984), including the introduction of new products. Yet products such as Chocolate Mayonnaise prove that brands do not always follow such practices. Thus, we ask the question: Why and when does the launch of a less congruent new product generate positive outcomes for a brand?

The consumer behavior literature identifies some circumstances when products that deviate from the norms still have high appeal to consumers. Scholars have investigated several psychological and social factors that lead customers to tolerate—and even appreciate—products and brands that diverge from what has been deemed legitimate so far in the marketplace. Bellezza et al. (2014), for example, show how a non-conforming brand may convey a higher status than a brand that conforms with the norms. Similarly, Warren and

Campbell (2014) show that consumers view brands and products that do not conform with the norms (especially those deemed illegitimate) as cooler.

In this article, we propose that a new product that is less congruent (vs. more congruent) triggers consumers' curiosity and that such curiosity, in turn, affects their willingness to engage and share information about this new product with other people. Across three experimental studies, we aim to contribute to current research in three ways. First, while legitimacy theory establishes that organizations benefit by meeting stakeholders' expectations (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995), in this study we present circumstances in which brands successfully deviate from such expectations regarding their purpose by introducing less congruent new products. Specifically, we focus on the role of consumers as key stakeholders in reacting to such product launches (Freeman, 1984).

Second, by building on schema-congruity theory (Mandler, 1982), we answer Noseworthy et al.'s (2014) call to explore the role of congruence in generating curiosity for a new product. While recent work suggests that less congruent new products can drive curiosity (Daume & Hüttl-Maack, 2020; Sääksjärvi et al., 2017), to our knowledge, no prior research has examined the impact of congruence in the context of social media. Thus, we posit that low congruence brand extensions generate higher levels of curiosity and brand engagement than their high congruence counterparts. Work in the context of social media identifies several drivers of brand engagement. On the one hand, brands are expected to post informative content that aligns with their audience's interests or self-concept and is approved by their social system—especially in a CSR context (Colleoni, 2013; Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Monfort et al., 2019). On the other hand, entertaining, humorous, and unanticipated content drives brand engagement on social media (Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Borah et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Dhaoui & Webster, 2020). We add to this by treating brand engagement an outcome of product announcements and by identifying

brand congruence of the newly announced product as a driver of brand engagement, while proposing curiosity as the mechanism of this effect.

Finally, prior research has examined several boundary conditions of the schema-congruity effect (Campbell & Goodstein, 2001; Maoz & Tybout, 2002; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Noseworthy et al., 2014; Noseworthy & Trudel, 2011; Stayman et al., 1992). We add to this stream of literature and contribute to the current branding literature (Chun et al., 2015; Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2004) by introducing brand background (i.e., a brand's history of product launches) as a novel boundary condition of such effect. In particular, we demonstrate that brands known for their traditional products generate more curiosity and brand engagement in cases of low brand congruence while non-traditional brands benefit more from new products that are congruent to their brand.

In the following, we will review the relevant literature and present our hypotheses. The paper will then present the methodology and findings of three experimental studies, before concluding with a discussion and an outlook for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Congruence, brand extensions, and new products

According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), corporations may follow one of three main brand architecture approaches to structure the branding of their offerings. In a *house-of-brands* strategy, a brand may decide to develop new brands to enter new product categories. For example, PepsiCo created the brand Aquafina to compete in the bottled water category. The introduction of new products by a brand is a time-consuming and expensive process, as it must invest in research and development as well as brand-building activities. Thus, brands often choose to follow a *branded-house* or *endorsed-brand* strategy to introduce new products under the umbrella of an existing brand name. In a branded-house strategy, a single master brand is used across all offerings, which operate with only descriptive sub-brands

(e.g., FedEx Ground, FedEx Express, FedEx Office). In an endorsed-brand strategy, the brands are more independent than in a branded-house architecture, but they are still endorsed by a master brand (e.g., Courtyard or Fairfield by Marriott). For example, Monfort et al. (2021) show that a firm's market value may increase if the introduction of a corporate foundation follows an endorsed-brand architecture.

Considering the high costs to introduce new products, brand extensions have become an increasingly popular strategy (Hayran & Gürhan-Canli, 2016). A *brand extension* encompasses the use of an established brand to introduce a new product (or service) into a new category in which the brand does not yet operate.

Another type of brand extension involves the introduction of a new product in a category in which the parent brand operates already—also known as a *line extension* (Keller & Aaker, 1992). For example, over the years Coca-Cola has introduced a series of new soft drinks that were a derivation of the original product (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Boisvert & Ashill, 2018; Rahman & Areni, 2014).

Both scholars and practitioners in marketing have explored brand extensions under different perspectives. For example, previous research has focused on the financial benefit of a brand extension, demonstrating how extensions capture greater market share, realize greater advertising efficiency (Smith & Park, 1992), and reduce the cost for developing a new product (Sullivan, 1992). From a different but related viewpoint, research has also shown how brand extensions can benefit from consumers' general associations with parent brands (Park et al., 1991). General associations include, for example, the transfer of quality and reputation from the parent brand to the extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Keller & Aaker, 1992), which facilitates consumers' decision making and leads to faster adoption of the new product (Rotemberg, 2013). This is particularly true for central brand associations in comparison with peripheral brand associations (Michel & Donthu, 2014). Consumers may

also focus on specific attributes, favorably evaluating a product in a different category with the same taste (e.g., a Cola Ice lollipop, Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994) or with complementary functions (e.g., food and beverages consumed on the same occasions; Estes et al., 2012).

Arguably, one of the most important factors contributing to the success of the launch of a new product (or a brand extension) is its perceived congruence with the parent brand (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Boush & Loken, 1991). As companies seek legitimacy in the marketplace, they orient their actions toward being desirable, proper, or appropriate within a system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). In doing so, organizations often stay put and follow a business-as-usual approach (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). In seeking this legitimacy, companies need to know and meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Thus, consumer-facing companies are often wary of undermining their purpose and irritating their most important stakeholders—their customers—by launching a less congruent new product.

According to Mandler's (1982) schema-congruity theory, new information aligned with existing knowledge structures is deemed schema congruent, while new information that does not fit into an existing semantic network is often rejected given its schema incongruity. Scholars use the term "congruence" almost interchangeably with terms such as "fit" and "similarity" (Hayran & Gürhan-Canli, 2016). Consumers need to see the connection between the parent brand and the new product to categorize it as congruent and make sense of it. High perceived congruence facilitates the transfer of an association from the parent brand to the new product. Conversely, low congruence obstructs—and may even prevent—the transfer of such associations. According to schema-congruity theory, the mismatch between new information and existing schemas and expectations about a brand and the resulting difficulty to resolve extreme incongruity drive negative evaluations of the incongruent information (Mandler, 1982). Scholars have demonstrated the robustness of this congruity–affect

relationship, while identifying boundary conditions (Campbell & Goodstein, 2001; Maoz & Tybout, 2002; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Noseworthy et al., 2014; Noseworthy & Trudel, 2011; Stayman et al., 1992). For example, Jhang et al. (2012) show that eliciting cognitive flexibility through positive affect, future framing, or priming may mitigate this effect and make consumers more open to less congruent new products. Moreover, Peracchio and Tybout (1996) identify elaborate knowledge about a product category as a boundary condition of the effect.

While previous research has stressed the role of high fit in the success of a new product launch—and especially in relation to brand extensions (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Boush & Loken, 1991; Park et al., 1991)—the marketplace also offers examples when low-fit extensions managed to achieve discrete success. The whiskey producer Jack Daniel's, for example, managed to launch a new charcoal product under its brand name, while the vehicle manufacturer Jeep managed to extend to luggage (Bambauer-Sachse et al., 2011). Previous research suggests that inserting cues (e.g., slogans, endorsers, pictures) typically associated with the parent brand contributes to enhancing consumers' evaluations of low-fit extensions (Bambauer-Sachse et al., 2011). Hem et al. (2014) show that consumers react more positively to brand extensions if their awareness set size is small and if they possess positive attitudes toward the category. Miniard et al. (2020) posit that congruence plays a particular part in evaluating a brand extension if parental associations are accessible. Wang and Liu (2020) show that conceptual competence leads to higher evaluations of less congruent brand extensions. Moreover, Chun et al. (2015) show that consumers evaluate low-fit extensions of brands with strong reputations more favorably if innovative brand benefits are presented. Similarly, Noseworthy et al. (2014) show that consumers express different levels of arousal when presented with less congruent new products. While they find the strongest effect for a moderately incongruent product, they also suggest how future research could test whether the

release of highly incongruent products (e.g., with a low fit with the parent brand) could

benefit the company by attracting consumers' interest, curiosity, and engagement.

*2.2. Brand engagement on social media*

According to Keller (2001), the goal of brand building is to establish brand resonance

in the form of psychological bonds with consumers. One category of brand resonance is

engagement, which Keller (2001, p. 19) defines as customers' willingness to "invest time,

energy, money, or other resources into the brand beyond those expended during purchase or

consumption of the brand." Many forms of engagement and its cognitive, affective, and

behavioral aspects have been discussed and conceptualized in the literature (e.g., Hollebeek

et al., 2014; Sashi, 2012; Sprott et al., 2009). An aspect of brand engagement that is

particularly relevant in the context of social media is content engagement. Obilo et al. (2020)

define "content engagement" as the interaction of consumers with objects associated with a

brand, such as fan pages, posts, or media. Similarly, consumers may engage with brands on

social media in the form of online brand-related activities (COBRAs; Muntinga et al., 2011;

Schivinski et al., 2016; Shao, 2009). Using the COBRA framework, Muntinga et al. (2011)

propose three levels of brand-related social media use. On the first level, consumers may

merely *consume* content provided by brands, such as videos. On the second level, consumers

may *contribute* to brand-related content by conversing about a brand with others or liking or

commenting on branded posts. Most of these activities are unidirectional and reactive in

nature (e.g., liking a post) rather than bidirectional and conversational (e.g., exchanging

messages with brands) in nature. For example, Monfort et al. (2019) find that dialogues

between consumers and brands about CSR topics are scarce. On the third level, consumers

may *create* brand-related content by writing reviews or producing their own branded media.

For example, Brodie et al. (2013) discuss engagement in the context of co-creation of value

in virtual brand communities. In line with Muntinga et al. (2011), Khan (2017) distinguishes

between two types of engagement on social media: participation and consumption. They categorize viewing and reading content as *consumption* and liking, commenting, and sharing of such content as *participation*.

As our research aims to examine consumers' reactions to the announcements of less congruent new products by brands on social media, we focus on the *contribution* and *participation* aspects of brand engagement, rather than on the consumption or (co-)creation aspects of brand engagement (Khan, 2017; Muntinga et al., 2011). Thus, our conceptualization of the construct builds on the works of Schivinski et al. (2016), Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2020), Dhaoui and Webster (2020), and Malhotra et al. (2013) and defines brand engagement as the liking, commenting, and sharing of content posted by brands on social media.

On social media platforms, brands aim to stand out and capture the attention of consumers—often with the intent to generate brand engagement (Borah et al., 2020). At the same time, they are expected to meet and follow social norms (Colleoni, 2013). In their conceptual article, Malhotra et al. (2013) propose eight ways to increase brand engagement on social media. For example, they recommend that brands be topical, educational, or humorous. Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2020) find that consumers who tend to incorporate brands into their self-concept are more likely to engage with content, especially if that content is posted by other users rather than a brand or a social media influencer. Monfort et al. (2019) find that topics that are of shared interest by the brand and consumer, as well as coherent with the sector, may drive higher engagement. Lee et al. (2018) find that brand engagement increases if content relates to a brand's personality (e.g., humor), while informative content is generally associated with lower levels of engagement. Dolan et al. (2016) posit that social media content that is informative (e.g., guides), remunerative (e.g., sweepstakes), relational (e.g., community interaction), or entertaining (e.g., teasers or

humorous content) drives consumers to engage with brands. Dhaoui and Webster (2020) show that pictures, videos, and even brands' prompt replies drive engagement. In line with this, Stathopoulou et al. (2017) show that creative television ads may drive engagement on social media. Davis et al. (2019) find that readability of social media posts influences brand engagement. They also identify brand hedonism as a moderator of the effect. In addition, Borah et al. (2020) demonstrate that improvised content, characterized by humor, timeliness, or unanticipation, drives conversations around brands on social media. Moreover, Berger and Packard (2018) find that atypical and surprising content tends to be preferred and becomes more popular, especially if differentiation matters to consumers. Moreover, original and interesting products tend to generate higher levels of word of mouth (WOM) (Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Moldovan et al., 2011), as sharing unusual content may reflect positively on the sharer of such information (De Angelis et al., 2012). Thus, incongruent and curiosity-inducing content—such as the announcement of a less congruent new product—may be particularly engaging in the social media environment. However, the implications of brands posting about less congruent new products on social media for engagement levels remain to be understood. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

> **H1:** Consumers are more (less) willing to engage with social media content featuring new products of low (high) congruence.

*2.3. The mediating role of curiosity*

We argue that less congruent new products can stimulate and intrigue consumers, triggering their curiosity and unleashing their engagement. Curiosity is generally associated with the motivation to reduce a gap in knowledge by seeking information that "will diminish the amount of complexity, novelty, and incongruity" (Spielberger & Starr, 1994, p. 233). Similarly, Loewenstein (1994) notes that information deprivation that induces curiosity results in individuals' genuine and inherent desire to close the gap generated by incomplete

information. Nevertheless, the stimulus inducing curiosity must be interesting to the individual to trigger his or her arousal.

Curiosity can be either a stable trait (i.e., some individuals are dispositionally more curious than others) or a situational cue (i.e., certain stimuli trigger more curiosity than others). The marketing and advertising literature streams have focused mostly on the latter, in an effort to disentangle consumers' situational curiosity from different perspectives. Specifically, in evaluating relevant literature, Daume and Hüttl-Maack (2020) identify three main categories of triggers that scholars have used to investigate curiosity. The first category includes studies inducing curiosity through the presentation of incomplete information—for example, by concealing part of the information given to individuals (vs. providing full information; Hill et al., 2016) or by providing bits of information in a series of steps (Ruan et al., 2018). The second category encompasses curiosity induced by specific techniques, such as gamification (e.g., by a gaming simulation; Müller-Stewens et al., 2017), or by asking a provocative question and then providing an answer (e.g., curiosity-arousing questions in advertising; Gibson et al., 1994). The third category includes curiosity arising from the exposure to a norm deviation. In other words, individuals are curious and interested in knowing more when a stimulus does not meet their expectations or they perceive it as new. For example, Sääksjärvi et al. (2017) show that incremental versus radical new products generate curiosity based on the ambiguity of rumors related to the launch of new products. Similarly, Eelen et al. (2015) demonstrate that merely adding the label "New" to a product can contribute to boosting consumers' curiosity.

In this study, we test our predictions by building on the latter stream of curiosity research. We argue that the launch of a less congruent new product is perceived as a violation of the product category norms and therefore triggers consumers' curiosity significantly more than the launch of a highly congruent product. Thus:

**H2:** Consumers are more (less) curious when exposed to social media content

featuring new products of low (high) congruence.

Such a state of curiosity, in turn, can also generate an active search for or boost the share of information. Schneider et al. (2013), for example, show that members of online communities share posts/information to ask other users if they know more about certain topics. In this way, being curious about a certain topic becomes the mechanism that drives the sharing and discussion of information (i.e., engagement). In this study, we hypothesize that the state of curiosity activated by the exposure to a low congruent new product acts as a mechanism inducing individuals to be more willing to engage with the content. Thus:

**H3:** Curiosity mediates the effect between a new product's congruence and brand

engagement

*2.4. The moderating role of brand background*

Brands develop new products constantly to increase market share, keep up with competitors, and rejuvenate their product portfolios (Hill et al., 2005). However, the strategies used to introduce new products change depending on a brand's vision. Some brands decide to launch new products that are close to their established product range so as not to jeopardize the heritage or authenticity of their belongingness to a certain product category (Spiggle et al., 2012). For example, the brand Wrigley's focuses exclusively on chewing gum, establishing a clear connection with a product category.

Nevertheless, other brands have a track record of launching products that can appear less congruent with their respective product categories. The Virgin Group, for example, has a history of developing products in a plethora of categories, from colas to bridal dresses (i.e., Virgin Cola and Virgin Brides). Similarly, brands such as Lay's potato chips have explored the introduction of different—and sometimes less congruent—flavors, such as Lay's Cappuccino and Mango Salsa (Rao, 2014).

Research on both brand extensions (Loken & John, 1993; Swaminathan, 2003) and new product introductions in general (Heath et al., 2015) has demonstrated a positive effect on consumers' acceptance when more congruent products are introduced in the earlier stages of a brand's lifetime. Conversely, Parker et al.'s (2018) recent study shows a long-term positive effect of less congruent extensions introduced earlier in the process, as consumers have more time to integrate these new products into the overall brand concept. None of this work, however, takes into consideration the possible effect of a brand's background on the evaluation of new products. For this study, we define the term "brand background" as the history of a brand's product launches. Specifically, we regard a brand to be of a non-traditional background if it has a track record of introducing less congruent products (e.g., Jones Soda Co.). Conversely, we describe a brand with a traditional background as having a track record of introducing highly congruent products (e.g., Canada Dry).

Consumers' curiosity and brand engagement may be triggered by a traditional brand announcing a less congruent product (i.e., low category congruence), as this would go against the expectations of a traditional brand's background (i.e., low brand congruence). However, if a brand with a non-traditional background releases a product that is quite similar to those usually introduced by other brands in the industry (i.e., high category congruence and low brand congruence), consumers' curiosity and engagement levels may not be elevated, as a non-traditional brand's associative network already includes other unexpected, innovative, and less congruent items (Chun et al., 2015). Non-traditional brands are also broader, as they have an extensive set of products associated with them and therefore might be more extendable than traditional brands without raising curiosity, as their associations are more accessible (Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2004).

Thus, we hypothesize that low brand congruence generates higher levels of curiosity and engagement if a brand has a traditional background. However, we posit that this effect is reversed if brands have a non-traditional background.

**H4:** In the case of a traditional brand background, low brand congruence generates higher levels of engagement. For non-traditional brands, high brand congruence generates higher levels of engagement.

## 3. Overview of studies

To examine the role of curiosity in driving engagement with brand content on social media, we ran three experimental studies. In Study 1, we test the relationship of congruence with curiosity and brand engagement in a lab environment. In Study 2, we set out to check the robustness of the effect on a larger set of brands with a large online sample. Finally, in Study 3, we examine how a brand's product launch history (i.e., brand background) moderates the relationship among brand congruence, curiosity, and brand engagement.

While our research focuses on examining the positive effects of less congruent new products on consumers' curiosity and engagement levels, we also measure product attitudes and willingness to recommend a product to test the established positive effect of high congruence (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Boush & Loken, 1991; Park et al., 1991). We provide an overview of the relationships we examine in our conceptual model depicted in Fig. 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

## 4. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 is to pilot test our prediction that less congruent new products may elicit curiosity in consumers. This, in turn, will drive them to engage more with related content on social media.

*4.1. Method*

We invited 69 undergraduate students at a large university in the United Kingdom to participate in this lab-based pilot study (in line with Bettels & Wiedmann, 2019). The sample had an average age of 19.63 years ($SD = 0.85$) and consisted of 76.5% female participants and solely Twitter users. We randomly assigned the participants to one of two conditions (low vs. high congruence). To manipulate congruence, we exposed participants to a Twitter post by the brand Heinz. Each of the two versions of the tweet announced a new product by the brand. In the high congruence condition, the tweet announced "the new Heinz Organic Tomato Ketchup." In the low congruence condition, the tweet announced "the new Heinz Tomato Ketchup Caviar." For this study, we chose products that exist in real life to increase the ecological validity of the effect. However, to maintain the internal validity of the experiment, the Twitter posts did not differ in any aspects other than the products presented in them. We provide the full manipulations and questionnaire in the Web Appendix.

The participants then completed a questionnaire regarding their reactions to the Twitter post. First, participants indicated their willingness to engage with the brand's content on a two-item 7-point scale (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*; e.g., "How likely would it be for you to retweet (share) this post?"; $\alpha = .88$; adapted from De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). Second, the participants reported their attitudes toward the announced product on a two-item 7-point scale (e.g., *bad/good*; *unfavorable/favorable*; $\alpha = .95$; adapted from MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Third, they reported how curious they were about the product tweeted by Heinz on a four-item 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; e.g., "I am curious about this product"; $\alpha = .91$; adapted from the Melbourne Curiosity Inventory - State Form; Naylor, 1981). Fourth, they indicated their willingness to recommend the product (i.e., positive WOM) by completing a two-item 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; e.g., "I would say positive things about the product to others"; $\alpha = .90$; adapted from Zeithaml et al., 1996). Fifth, we measured the perceived brand

congruence of the new product on a three-item 7-point scale to check the congruence

manipulation (e.g., *not at all fitting/very fitting*; $\alpha = .98$; adapted from Keller & Aaker, 1992).

Sixth, we asked participants to indicate their familiarity with the Heinz brand on a one-item

7-point scale (*not at all familiar/very familiar*; adapted from Kent & Allen, 1994). Finally,

we collected participants' demographic information.

*4.2. Results*

As intended, participants perceived the Organic Heinz Ketchup (in the high

congruence condition) as more congruent ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.19$) than the Heinz Ketchup

Caviar (in the low congruence condition; $M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.74$; $F(1, 67) = 59.507$, $p < .01$).

Thus, we can assume that participants understood that Heinz Ketchup Caviar was a stronger

deviation from the norm than Organic Heinz Ketchup. Moreover, participants in both

experimental conditions did not differ in terms of their familiarity with the Heinz brand ($M_{low}$

$= 6.09$, $SD_{low} = 1.27$ vs. $M_{high} = 6.26$, $SD_{high} = 1.26$; $F(1, 67) = 0.559$, $p = .56$). Thus, we can

rule out brand familiarity as a potential alternative explanation of the effect.

After running the manipulation check, we performed a one-way analysis of variance

(ANOVA) with the manipulated factor *congruence* as the independent variable (IV) and the

four measures as the dependent variables (DV). As hypothesized in H2, participants were

indeed more curious about the product in the low congruence condition ($M = 5.04$, $SD =$

$1.34$) than about the product in the high congruence condition ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.71$; $F(1, 67)$

$= 8.739$, $p < .01$). Moreover, we found that consumers were more likely to engage with the

announcement of a less congruent product ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.37$) than the announcement of a

more congruent product, as hypothesized in H1 ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.33$; $F(1, 67) = 9.460$, $p <$

$.01$). However, in line with prior research, consumers do indeed have higher attitudes toward

highly congruent products ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.44$) than less congruent products ($M = 3.23$, $SD$

$= 1.95$; $F(1, 67) = 27.112$, $p < .01$). We found that consumers were more likely to recommend

a highly congruent product ($M$ = 4.29, $SD$ = 1.32) to friends and family than a less congruent

product ($M$ = 3.00, $SD$ = 1.41; $F$(1, 67) = 15.474, $p$ < .01). We provide an overview of the

findings in Fig. 2.

To test the mediating role of curiosity in explaining why consumers are more willing

to engage with less congruent products on social media, we ran PROCESS model 4 with

congruence as the IV, curiosity as the mediator (MED), and brand engagement as the DV

(95% CI; 5000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2017). As expected, we found that congruence was

negatively related to curiosity ($a$ path = –1.10, $t$(67) = –2.96, $p$ < .01). Moreover, curiosity

was positively associated with brand engagement ($b$ path = .42, $t$(66) = 4.48, $p$ < .01). As

hypothesized in H3, we found that curiosity fully mediated the relationship between

congruence and brand engagement on social media (*indirect effect* = –.46, 95% CI = –.93 to –

.11; *direct effect* = –.54, 95% CI = –1.14 to .07).

Insert Figure 2 about here

*4.3. Discussion*

As predicted, we find that announcements of less congruent products raise consumers'

curiosity, which in turn drives them to engage more with branded social media posts. While

consumers are more likely to retweet and talk about less congruent new products, we also

find that they have lower attitudes toward those products and are less likely to speak

positively about less congruent products with others. Thus, the findings of Study 1 provide

support for the notion that less congruent new products have positive effects on brand

engagement, as these products are shared and talked about more.

## 5. Study 2

Study 2 aims to test the findings of Study 1 with a larger set of brands. Specifically,

we investigate the robustness of curiosity as a mechanism that mediates the negative

relationship between congruence and brand engagement.

*5.1. Method*

Six hundred American Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) users participated in a low versus high congruence between-subjects design experiment. MTurk is an established and reliable channel for participant recruitment in consumer research (Goodman & Paolacci, 2017), which, given its diverse sample pools, suits experimental research (Mason & Suri, 2012). The sample had an average age of 40.72 years (*SD* = 11.84) and consisted solely of Twitter users. Participants' gender orientation was 49.1% male, 50.4% female, and 0.5% other.

First, participants had to pass an attention check following the recommendations of Oppenheimer et al. (2009). Second, to manipulate congruence, we randomly assigned the participants to one of 10 conditions. Specifically, we included pairs of less versus more congruent new product announcements on Twitter by five brands (i.e., Levi's Backpack vs. Car Seat Covers, Crest Mouthwash vs. Shaving Cream, Heinz Organic Ketchup vs. Ketchup Caviar, Samuel Adams Dark Lager vs. Donut Lager, and Duracell Flashlight vs. Smartphone). The brand extensions used for the stimuli were inspired partly by the examples listed in Aaker and Keller's (1990) article and partly by examples found in the marketplace. We provide example manipulations and the questionnaire in the Web Appendix.

As in Study 1, the participants then completed a questionnaire related to the product announcement tweet. First, participants indicated their willingness to engage with the post on Twitter on the same scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha$ = .91). Second, they indicated their attitudes toward the product on a longer four-item version of the 7-point scale from Study 1 (with additional items: *unpleasant/pleasant*; *negative/positive*; $\alpha$ = .98; adapted from MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Third, we used the same scales as in Study 1 to measure curiosity ($\alpha$ = .98), willingness to recommend the product (positive WOM; $\alpha$ = .94), brand congruence ($\alpha$ = .97), and brand familiarity. Fourth, we added a scale to measure the congruence of the product in

relation to other products on the market (i.e., category congruence; 1 = *very similar*, 7 = *very different*; "How different do you think this product is from other products of its category?").

Finally, we collected participants' demographic information.

*5.2. Results*

An initial analysis revealed that participants indeed perceived the new products in the high congruence conditions (*M* = 5.67, *SD* = 1.31) as more congruent with their parent brands (i.e., brand congruence) than the products in the low congruence condition (*M* = 3.61, *SD* = 1.79; *F*(1, 598) = 255.969, *p* < .01). Similarly, participants in the low congruence condition (*M* = 4.74, *SD* = 1.77) perceived the new product as less congruent with other products offered on the market (i.e., category congruence) than participants in the high congruence condition (*M* = 3.05, *SD* = 1.47; *F*(1, 598) = 163.991, *p* < .01). As in Study 1, participants in both the low and high congruence conditions did not differ in terms of their brand familiarity ($M_{low}$ = 6.09, $SD_{low}$ = 1.50 vs. $M_{high}$ = 6.03, $SD_{high}$ = 1.52; *F*(1, 598) = 0.265, *p* = .61).

Following the initial checks, we performed a one-way ANOVA with the manipulated factor *congruence* as the IV and the four focal measures (i.e., curiosity, brand engagement, product attitudes, and willingness to recommend) as the DVs. As hypothesized in H2, participants reported higher curiosity levels in the low congruence conditions (*M* = 4.21, *SD* = 1.93) than in the high congruence conditions (*M* = 3.88, *SD* = 1.90; *F*(1, 598) = 4.316, *p* < .05; see Fig. 3). Similarly, in further support of H1, we found that brand engagement was higher in the low congruence conditions (*M* = 2.79, *SD* = 1.74) than in the high congruence conditions (*M* = 2.31, *SD* = 1.58;  (1, 598) = 12.808, *p* < .01). In addition, we found that participants did indeed have higher attitudes toward highly congruent products (*M* = 4.97, *SD* = 1.37) than toward less congruent products (*M* = 4.22, *SD* = 1.70; *F*(1, 598) = 35.635, *p* < .01). Finally, we found that consumers were more likely to recommend a more congruent

product ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.51$) to friends and family than a less congruent product ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.57$; $F(1, 598) = 16.361$, $p < .01$).

As in Study 1, we analyzed the mediating role of curiosity in the relationship between congruence and brand engagement using PROCESS model 4 (95% CI; 5000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2017). The ANOVAs indicated a negative association between congruence and curiosity (*a* path $= -.33$, $t(598) = -2.08$, $p < .05$). Moreover, curiosity was positively associated with brand engagement (*b* path $= .59$, $t(597) = 22.89$, $p < .01$). Finally, in support of H3, we found that curiosity mediated the relationship between congruence and brand engagement on social media (*indirect effect* $= -.19$, 95% CI $= -.38$ to $-.01$; *direct effect* $= -.29$, 95% CI $= -.49$ to $-.10$).

Insert Figure 3 about here

*5.3. Discussion*

Overall, Study 2 provides further support for our predictions that consumers are more curious and therefore engage more with social media posts about less congruent new products. Across five brands, we find that while consumers do indeed evaluate highly congruent products more favorably, they are more curious about and engage more with less congruent product announcements.

**6. Study 3**

Study 3 aims to explore the role of a brand's background in terms of its product release history. Specifically, we examine whether an innovative non-traditional brand (with a track record of releasing less congruent products) or a traditional brand (with a track record of releasing highly congruent products) generates more or less curiosity and consequent brand engagement when releasing a less congruent new product.

*6.1. Method*

For this study, we randomly assigned 449 American MTurk users to one of the four conditions in a 2 (brand congruence: low vs. high) × 2 (brand background: non-traditional vs. traditional) between-subjects experiment after they passed the attention checks (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). The sample had an average age of 38.48 years (*SD* = 10.59) and consisted solely of Twitter users. Participants' gender orientation was 55.7% male, 43.9% female, and 0.4% other.

First, to manipulate the background of a brand, we asked participants to carefully read a background story about a fictitious brewery called "Gate Brewery." In the cover story, we described the beer brand as either a "producer with a track record of introducing beers with non-traditional styles" (i.e., non-traditional brand background) or a "producer with a track record of introducing beers with traditional styles" (i.e., traditional brand background).

Second, to manipulate brand congruence, we asked the participants to read a post by the Gate Brewery Twitter handle. In the low brand congruence conditions, the brewery announced a beer on Twitter that was incongruent with its brand background, while in the high brand congruence conditions the newly announced beer was congruent with the brand's background. For example, in the low brand congruence condition (of a traditional brand), the brewery announced: "Gate's Donut Infused Beer." By contrast, the tweet in the high brand congruence condition (of a traditional brand) informed participants about the launch of "Gate's Pilsner Lager." We provide a comprehensive overview of all manipulations and measures in the Web Appendix.

Afterward, we asked the participants to fill out a questionnaire related to the manipulations. Specifically, we measured participants' brand engagement ($\alpha$ = .92), product attitudes ($\alpha$ = .97), curiosity ($\alpha$ = .97), willingness to recommend a product ($\alpha$ = .94), brand congruence ($\alpha$ = .97), and category congruence on scales used in previous studies. We also included a check regarding the brand background manipulation on a 7-point scale (1 = *very*

*untraditional*, 7 = *very traditional*; "How would you describe the Gate Brewery's beers before the release of the new beer?"). Finally, we asked participants to indicate their demographics.

*6.2. Results*

An analysis of the manipulation check revealed that the cover story of the fictitious Gate Brewery brand indeed manipulated its background. As expected, participants' perceptions of tradition were lower in the non-traditional background condition ($M$ = 2.33, $SD$ = 1.57) than in the traditional background condition ($M$ = 5.52, $SD$ = 1.92; $F(1, 447)$ = 370.075, $p < .01$).

Similarly, in comparison with the Pilsner Lager ($M$ = 3.92, $SD$ = 1.67), participants evaluated the Donut Infused beer ($M$ = 5.95, $SD$ = 1.12) as more different than other beers on the market (i.e., category congruence; $F(1, 447)$ = 229.684, $p < .01$). In addition, they perceived the brand congruence as higher in the high brand congruence conditions ($M$ = 5.47, $SD$ = 1.49) than in the low brand congruence conditions ($M$ = 4.41, $SD$ = 1.85; $F(1, 447)$ = 45.087, $p < .01$).

Next, the results of a two-way ANOVA indicated a significant interaction effect of brand congruence and brand background on curiosity ($F(1, 445)$ = 13.375, $p < .01$; see Fig. 4). We found that in the case of a traditional brand, curiosity following a new product announcement was higher in the low brand congruence conditions ($M$ = 5.15, $SD$ = 1.66) than in the high brand congruence conditions ($M$ = 4.60, $SD$ = 1.82; $t(223)$ = 2.357, $p < .05$). By contrast, for cases of non-traditional brand background, we found that high brand congruence ($M$ = 5.10, $SD$ = 1.75) generated higher curiosity levels than low brand congruence ($M$ = 4.45, $SD$ = 1.72; $t(222)$ = –2.816, $p < .01$).

In support of H4, a two-way ANOVA showed that the interaction effect of brand congruence and brand background on brand engagement was significant ($F(1, 445)$ = 31.275,

$p < .01$). For brands with a traditional background, less congruent new products ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.69$) generated higher brand engagement than more congruent new products ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.76$; $t(223) = 3.108$, $p < .01$). By contrast, brands of non-traditional background generated higher engagement levels when announcing a more congruent new product ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.57$) than when announcing a less congruent new product ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.66$; $t(222) = -4.860$, $p < .01$).

A two-way ANOVA with product attitudes as the DV revealed only a marginally significant main effect of brand congruence ($F(1, 445) = 3.757$, $p = .05$). Moreover, we found a significant contrast between low and high brand congruence for traditional brands ($M_{low\ congruence} = 4.98$, $SD = 1.68$ vs. $M_{high\ congruence} = 5.42$, $SD = 1.25$; $t(223) = -3.678$, $p < .05$), while non-traditional brands' product attitudes did not differ by brand congruence ($M_{low\ congruence} = 5.11$, $SD = 1.24$ vs. $M_{high\ congruence} = 5.18$, $SD = 1.44$; $t(222) = -.412$, $p = .68$).

The two-way ANOVA model that included willingness to recommend a product as the DV did not generate any significant mean differences. Thus, positive WOM did not depend on brand congruence or brand background.

Insert Figure 4 about here

As a final step, we ran a moderated mediation using PROCESS model 7 (Hayes, 2017) with brand congruence as the IV, brand background as the moderator (MOD), curiosity as the MED, and brand engagement as the DV. The ANOVA results revealed a significant relationship between the IV × MOD interaction and the MED ($a_3$ path $= -1.20$, $t(445) = -3.66$, $p < .01$). Moreover, curiosity was positively associated with brand engagement ($b$ path $= .69$, $t(446) = 21.19$, $p < .01$). As predicted, we found a significant indirect effect of brand congruence on brand engagement in both the non-traditional and traditional brand background conditions (*indirect effect*$_{non\text{-}traditional}$ $= .45$, 95% CI $= .14$ to $.78$; *indirect effect*$_{traditional}$ $= -.38$, 95% CI $= -.70$ to $-.06$). A non-significant direct effect (*direct effect* $=$

.13, 95% CI = –.10 to .36) suggested that curiosity fully mediated the relationship between the IV × MOD interaction and the DV. Finally, the index of moderated mediation was significant, thus providing further support for H3 (*index mod med* = –.83, 95% CI = –1.30 to –.38). Fig. 5 provides an overview of the moderated mediation model.

Insert Figure 5 about here

*6.3. Discussion*

The results of Study 3 provide further evidence that curiosity mediates the link between brand congruence and brand engagement. Furthermore, the results show that while traditional brands generate higher curiosity and engagement levels by posting about new products that are incongruent with their brand (i.e., low brand congruence and low category congruence), non-traditional brands should tweet about products that are congruent with their brand (i.e., high brand congruence but low category congruence). Overall, the results of the three studies show that both traditional and non-traditional brands can generate curiosity and brand engagement on their social media feeds by tweeting about products that are different from other products in their category.

With regard to product attitudes, traditional brands seem to benefit most from brand congruence, while brand congruence does not affect product attitudes toward non-traditional brands. Thus, we expand current literature on the relationship between congruence and attitudes by introducing a new boundary condition.

**7. General discussion**

Brand managers' aim is to build brands with strong and unique brand associations (Keller, 1993). They often achieve this by extending brands into new product categories (Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2004). While some brands choose to release new products that are congruent with their existing set of brand associations, other brands attempt to release new products that are less congruent with what the brand is traditionally known for (e.g., Kühnl,

2020). Despite the increasing commonness of less congruent brand extensions, research has yet to fully understand this concept (Bambauer-Sachse et al., 2011; Chun et al., 2015; Gierl & Hüttl, 2011). As companies strive to gain legitimacy, they need to identify and meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Suchman, 1995). However, there are ways they can successfully introduce non-congruent products that deviate from such expectations. Thus, our research aimed to examine how consumers react to announcements of norm-deviating new products.

Our findings suggest that consumers are generally more curious about social media posts that feature less congruent new products. Furthermore, this incongruence-induced curiosity ultimately leads to higher engagement with the branded post (i.e., liking, sharing, and commenting). We demonstrate the robustness of this mediating relationship in lab and online experiments—with both real and fictitious brands. Moreover, we find that a brand's background (i.e., history of a brand's product launches) may determine how consumers react to announcements of less congruent new products.

## 7.1. Theoretical contributions

First, we identify conditions in which companies can deviate from the legitimate expectations of customers about product categories and brands by proposing incongruent new products. While, in general, companies operate in environments in which they must meet the expectations of different stakeholders (and therefore launch products that legitimate such expectations; Freeman, 1984; Suchman, 1995), this article contributes to the literature by unraveling a counterintuitive effect that shows how launching incongruent products can help brands gain visibility.

Second, we build on schema-congruity theory (Mandler, 1982) to explore the reactions of consumers to the announcements of less congruent new products—especially regarding brand engagement. Prior research consistently supports Mandler's (1982)

assumptions that incongruence levels determine consumers' affective responses (i.e., product

attitudes) (Campbell & Goodstein, 2001; Jhang et al., 2012; Maoz & Tybout, 2002; Meyers-

Levy & Tybout, 1989; Noseworthy et al., 2014; Noseworthy & Trudel, 2011; Peracchio &

Tybout, 1996; Stayman et al., 1992). Similarly, the branding literature suggests that low

brand congruence decreases attitudes toward new products using existing brand names (i.e.,

brand extension; Aaker & Keller, 1990; Boush & Loken, 1991; Park et al., 1991). Moreover,

Sääksjärvi et al. (2017) show that less congruent new products may drive curiosity in a

product rumor context. However, no prior research has examined the impact of congruence in

the context of social media. While social media research has identified original, interesting,

and improvised content as drivers of virality and engagement (Berger & Schwartz, 2011;

Borah et al., 2020; Moldovan et al. (2011), the effects of congruence on brand engagement

are not yet understood. Thus, our findings contribute to prior work on schema-congruity

theory by showing that announcements of less congruent new products may also drive brand

engagement on social media. Moreover, we shed more light on the congruence–curiosity

relationship (e.g., Daume & Hüttl-Maack, 2020; Noseworthy et al., 2014; Sääksjärvi et al.,

2017) by identifying curiosity as a mediator in the relationship between brand congruence

and brand engagement. In addition, our findings imply that low congruence might not only

generate negative outcomes for brands.

Third, prior research has proposed dogmatism (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), taste

(Stayman et al., 1992), prior knowledge (Peracchio & Tybout, 1996), perceived risk

(Campbell & Goodstein, 2001), involvement (Maoz & Tybout, 2002), experiential processing

(Noseworthy & Trudel, 2011), cognitive flexibility (Jhang et al., 2012), and arousal levels

(Noseworthy et al., 2014) as boundary conditions of the schema-congruity effect (Mandler,

1982). Moreover, brand extension literature has identified brand breadth (Meyvis &

Janiszewski, 2004), advertising elements (Bambauer-Sachse et al., 2011), and innovative

benefits (Chun et al., 2015) as potential boundary conditions of this effect. We contribute to the schema-congruity and brand extension literature by introducing brand background as a new boundary condition of this effect.

On the one hand, we confirm the findings of prior brand extension research (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Boush & Loken, 1991; Park et al., 1991) that consumers indeed have higher attitudes toward highly congruent brand extensions, especially if the brand has a history of releasing traditional products. On the other hand, we add to the existing literature by showing that the evaluations of new products by non-traditional brands (i.e., brands with a track record of releasing less congruent products) do not depend on brand congruence.

We also add to research on congruence and curiosity (Daume & Hüttl-Maack, 2020; Noseworthy et al., 2014; Sääksjärvi et al., 2017) by introducing the differential effect of brand background. Specifically, we show that traditional brands generate higher levels of curiosity and brand engagement if they release a new product of low brand congruence. By contrast, non-traditional brands generate higher levels of curiosity and brand engagement if they release a new product of high brand congruence.

*7.2. Managerial implications*

Our research also provides meaningful implications for brand managers. For brand managers of traditional brands, the introduction of a less congruent new product may be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, product attitudes may suffer from the lack of brand congruence, and on the other hand, consumers may be more curious about the new product and show higher levels of brand engagement. While in the short run low congruence-induced curiosity and engagement may help traditional brands generate higher levels of awareness on social media, generating positive product attitudes through high congruence may be more beneficial in the mid- to long run (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). However, the development of brand breadth may also benefit traditional brands in the long run (Chun et al., 2015; Keller,

2003; Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2004). Managers of non-traditional brands, however, would be well advised to stick to their brand's essence and continue to release products that are different from others in the product category. Not only would such an approach increase curiosity and brand engagement levels for a non-traditional brand, but it would also likely not harm consumers' attitudes toward the new products.

*7.3. Limitations and future research directions*

Our research focuses on the product domain, but similar patterns may exist in the services context. Future research might investigate the relationship between congruence and brand engagement in different contexts to provide further proof of the reliability, generalizability, and robustness of the relationships we found. Building on our research, future work could also explore the longitudinal effect of such approaches. While our findings provide evidence that especially non-traditional brands' engagement rates may benefit from the continuous release of incongruent new products, the curiosity-inducing effect of low congruence likely wears off over time for traditional brands. In addition, research might examine the long-term effects of introducing less congruent new products on product attitudes for traditional brands. For example, while such product introductions might harm attitudes in the short run, the brand would benefit from in the introduction of less congruent new products in the long run, as it would widen a brand's associative network and also increase positive attitudes from the mere exposure effect (Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2004; Parker et al., 2018). Moreover, while we demonstrate that consumers' intentions to engage with brand-related content on social media increase if the announced products are less congruent, future research might explore the short-term effects and valence of such brand engagement. While liking and sharing may increase brand awareness and mid- to long-term attitudes from mere exposure, comments' valence may—at least in the short run and for traditional brands—be more negative because of the reduction in product attitudes.

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**Figures**

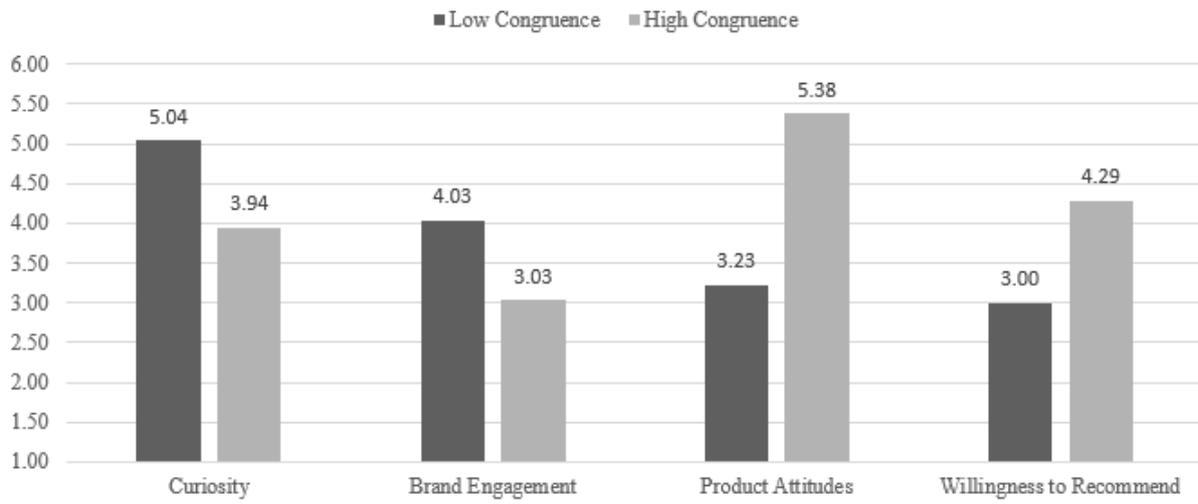Fig. 1. Conceptual model.
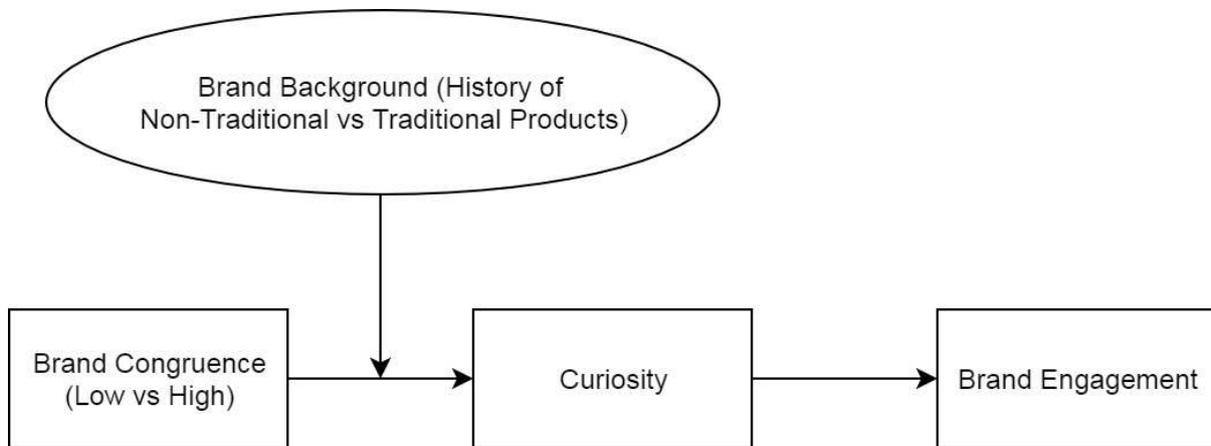
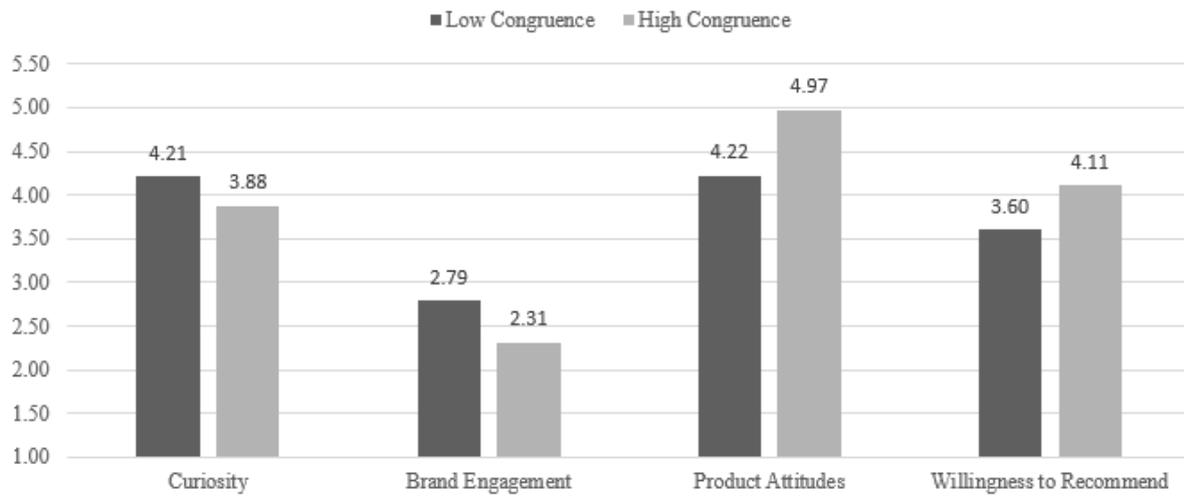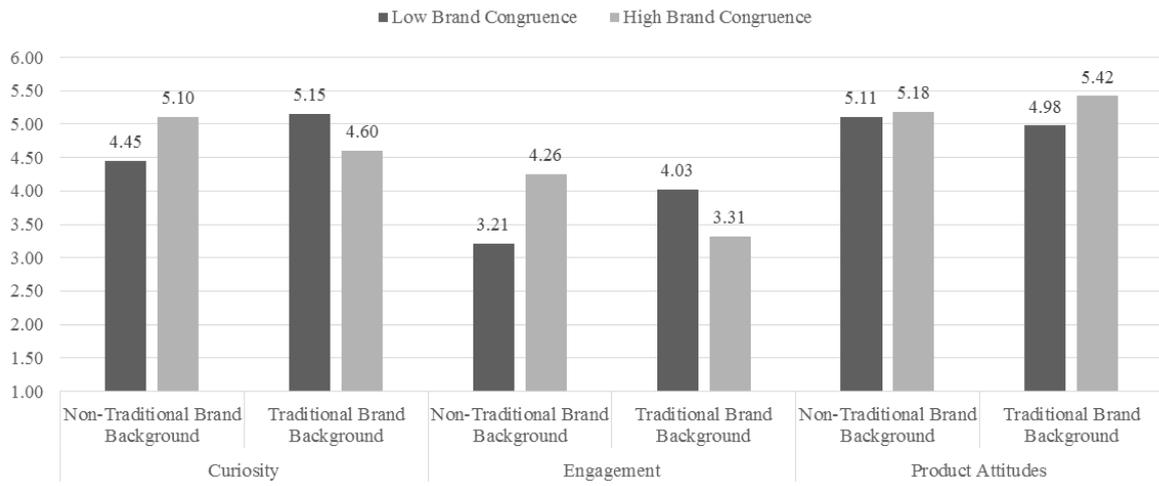Fig. 2. One-way ANOVAs of Study 1.

Fig. 3. One-way ANOVAs of Study 2.

Fig. 4. Two-way ANOVAs of Study 3.

Fig. 5. Moderated mediation model of Study 3.