

Distancing Appearance Threats: How Advertising Message Framing Shapes Self-control Under Appearance Threats

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Physical appearance functions as a form of social capital, and perceived discrepancies between actual and ideal appearance can threaten self-control. This research investigates how consumers maintain or restore self-control under appearance threat by varying the compensation type (within-domain vs. across-domain) and message framing (concrete vs. abstract), and elucidates the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of these effects. Study 1 demonstrates that across-domain compensation preserves self-control more effectively than within-domain compensation. Within the appearance-relevant domain, abstract (vs. concrete) message framing increases self-control by promoting higher-level construal. Study 2 introduces regulatory focus as a boundary condition and psychological distance as the mediating mechanism. Abstract (vs. concrete) framing increases perceived distance and enhances self-control under promotion focus, whereas individuals under prevention focus show no framing differences. These findings reveal how compensation strategies and message design interact to regulate self-control under self-threat, offering an integrative framework that links compensatory consumption, construal level, and motivational orientation in advertising contexts.

Key words : *compensatory consumption; appearance threat; self-control; compensation type; message framing; regulatory focus; psychological distance; construal level theory*

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Introduction

Physical appearance functions as a salient form of social capital that shapes consumers' self-views and behavior. Media representations of beauty and social comparison amplify the perceived gap between actual and idealized appearance, creating appearance threats that deplete self-regulatory resources (Higgins, 1987; Park et al., 2010). Efforts to reconcile these discrepancies impose cognitive load, weakening the capacity to prioritize long-term goals over immediate impulses (Tangney et al., 2004), and heightening susceptibility to short-term relief at the expense of well-being (Baumeister et al., 2007; Lisjak et al., 2015). Understanding when and how consumers maintain self-control under appearance threat is essential for explaining how appearance-related pressures influence consumer decision-making and for developing strategies that promote healthier and more sustainable consumption behaviors.

When faced with appearance threats, consumers often engage in compensatory consumption to symbolically restore self-worth (Steele, 1988; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). A central distinction is compensation type: within-domain strategies directly address the threatened appearance identity (e.g., appearance-related products such as cosmetics or skincare), whereas cross-domain strategies redirect attention to unrelated identity resources (e.g., learning, achievement; Gao et al., 2009; Rustagi &

Shrum, 2019). Prior research indicates that within-domain compensation maintains threat salience, elevates threat-related rumination, and impairs subsequent self-control, whereas cross-domain compensation regulates ruminative processing and better preserves self-regulation (Jo, 2025; Rustagi & Shrum, 2019).

However, the effectiveness of such compensatory strategies may depend not only on *what* consumers choose but also on *how* those options are psychologically represented. Prior studies show that rumination—the repetitive self-focused processing that sustains threat salience—operates as a key psychological mechanism linking appearance threat to diminished self-control (Jo, 2025; Rustagi & Shrum, 2019), suggesting that self-regulation failures arise when the threat remains cognitively proximate. This insight highlights a critical, yet understudied, question: can the framing of compensatory strategies influence how psychologically close or distant the threat feels? Building on this premise, the present research examines whether message framing can alter perceived psychological distance from appearance threats and, in turn, enhance self-control. Drawing on Construal Level Theory (CLT), we propose that abstract (high-level) framing broadens psychological distance and facilitates self-regulation, whereas concrete (low-level) framing sustains proximity to the threat and undermines self-control (Fujita et al., 2006; Trope & Liberman, 2003,

2010).

Although message framing can influence self-control by altering perceived psychological distance, this effect may vary depending on individual motivational tendencies. Drawing on Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT; Higgins, 1997, 2002), individuals differ in their motivational orientation toward goals: Under promotion focus, individuals pursue ideals and aspirations, whereas under prevention focus, they emphasize duties and responsibilities. These orientations influence how they interpret and respond to persuasive messages. In particular, regulatory focus offers a theoretically meaningful boundary condition for understanding how consumers manage themselves under appearance threat. Because individuals under promotion focus attend to ideals, growth, and accomplishment, they should benefit more from abstract framing that emphasizes higher-order goals and broad psychological distance.

To evaluate these propositions, two experiments were conducted using advertising messages promoting compensatory products under appearance threat. Study 1 examines how compensation type (within vs. across domain) and message framing (concrete vs. abstract) interact to influence self-control under appearance threat, establishing message framing as a means of expanding psychological distance alongside compensation type. It is predicted that abstractly framed messages will help preserve self-control, particularly when

the compensatory option remains closely tied to the threat (i.e., within-domain). Study 2 investigates both the underlying mechanism and boundary condition of framing effects by examining how message framing (concrete vs. abstract) and regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) interact to influence self-control. It tests whether abstract framing enhances psychological distance, leading to greater self-control-effects expected to be more pronounced under promotion focus.

This research advances understanding of self-regulation under appearance threat by identifying message design as a communication-based strategy that enhances self-control. Integrating CLT, it offers an integrative perspective in which compensation type establishes the basic level of psychological proximity to the threat, whereas message framing further adjusts this perceived distance. Moreover, incorporating RFT clarifies when framing effects are amplified or constrained, thereby specifying the motivational conditions under which consumers can better maintain self-regulatory capacity. Practically, the findings suggest that advertising messages framed abstractly can help consumers to engage with appearance ideals in healthier and more adaptive ways, supporting both individual well-being and socially responsible marketing communication.

Appearance Threat and Compensatory Strategies

Consumers' appearance concerns are not merely aesthetic; they are intimately connected to social value and identity. When individuals perceive a gap between their actual appearance and internalized beauty ideals, they experience a form of self-discrepancy that threatens self-integrity. Such appearance threats evoke negative affect and heightened self-focus (Higgins, 1987; Park et al., 2010), which deplete regulatory resources and impair self-control-the capacity to resist impulses and pursue long-term goals (Baumeister et al., 2007; Tangney et al., 2004). Although classic self-awareness research shows that self-focused attention can sometimes facilitate self-regulation when standards are clear, attainable, and accompanied by effective coping strategies (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), appearance ideals are often extreme and difficult to change in the short term. In this context, self-focus is more likely to take a ruminative, negatively valenced form, characterized by repetitive attention to one's perceived shortcomings rather than constructive planning. Such ruminative self-focus occupies working-memory resources and increases the need for emotional regulation, thereby narrowing attentional capacity and making it harder to override tempting responses. As a result, threatened consumers often seek immediate psychological relief rather than sustained goal

alignment, displaying greater susceptibility to impulsive or compensatory actions that symbolically alleviate the discomfort of self-discrepancy (Lisjak et al., 2015).

Building on this understanding, symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) suggests that individuals restore a threatened identity by acquiring symbols associated with the desired self. In appearance-related contexts, this process often manifests through consumption-purchasing or using products that convey beauty, confidence, or social approval (Steele, 1988). However, compensatory strategies differ markedly in their regulatory consequences because they differentially reactivate or defuse the underlying threat. Within-domain strategies, such as buying appearance-enhancing products, keep attention tightly focused on the very attribute that is threatened. These options are highly identity-diagnostic yet typically offer only incremental, uncertain change, so each exposure to them reminds consumers of the discrepancy between their current and ideal appearance. This repeated activation of the threat schema fosters ruminative thought-mentally rehearsing how one looks now, how one "should" look, and whether the product will close the gap-which further taxes working memory and intensifies negative affect. Through this cognitive and emotional load, within-domain compensation is likely to deplete self-control and increase vulnerability to short-sighted decisions (Gao et al., 2009; Rustagi

& Shrum, 2019). By contrast, across-domain strategies, such as engaging in learning or prosocial behavior, redirect self-restoration efforts toward alternative identity domains that are less tightly coupled to appearance. Redirecting attention in this way diffuses the threat, broadens the basis of self-worth, and conserves regulatory resources (Heine et al., 1999; Lisjak et al., 2015; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008).

Although appearance threat does not invariably lead to ruminative processing, when individuals perceive high self-efficacy and controllability-believing that concrete actions can realistically improve their appearance-threat may elicit more problem-focused coping and constructive behavior change rather than repetitive self-focus. Our theorizing centers on situations in which appearance ideals are salient yet perceived as difficult to attain, making ruminative self-focus a likely response. In such contexts, maintaining self-control under appearance threat depends on where consumers direct their compensatory efforts. Acting outside the threatened domain creates distance that supports regulatory recovery, whereas remaining within it sustains threat salience and undermines self-control.

In this research, we conceptualize self-control as a momentary behavioral regulation capacity: the ability to override immediate impulses and align one's responses with longer-term standards and goals (Baumeister et al., 2007; Tangney et al., 2004). Accordingly, self-control in our

framework does not refer to a broad personality trait or a purely cognitive evaluation, but to a situational capacity to regulate thoughts and behaviors in the face of temptation or threat. Our hypotheses therefore focus on how appearance threat and advertising messages influence this state-like regulatory capacity in the consumption context. Thus, we predict:

H1: *Under appearance threat, across-domain (vs. within-domain) compensation will increase self-control.*

Message Framing and Psychological Distance

While prior research has identified how compensatory strategies differ in their regulatory effectiveness, little attention has been paid to how the framing of these strategies shapes their psychological representation. Because rumination links appearance threat to reduced self-control (Jo, 2025; Rustagi & Shrum, 2019), regulatory failure is more likely when the threat is represented as psychologically close. Recent findings show that even delaying within-domain choices can restore self-control by increasing psychological distance (Jo, 2025), suggesting that subtle shifts in how compensatory options are presented can influence regulation. Extending this logic, we propose that message framing—particularly in advertising contexts—can similarly shape perceived proximity to the threat and

affect self-control.

Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) provides a valuable framework for understanding this process. CLT posits that people form mental representations of events at varying levels of abstraction: concrete representations evoke near, detail-oriented processing focused on feasibility and immediacy, whereas abstract representations evoke distant, goal-oriented processing centered on desirability and meaning. By broadening psychological distance and shifting focus to higher-order goals (Fujita et al., 2006), abstract construal can help sustain self-regulation. Importantly, in our framework, compensation domain and message framing play complementary roles. Domain (within vs. across) determines where self-restoration efforts are directed and how identity-diagnostic the action is, whereas message framing (abstract vs. concrete) determines how that action is mentally construed.

Message framing and psychological distance are conceptually distinct but functionally linked. Message framing (abstract vs. concrete) refers to a structural property of the advertising message—whether the content is presented in generalized, high-level terms or in specific, detail-oriented terms. Psychological distance, in contrast, is defined as a subjective cognitive experience that reflects how near or far the threat feels to the self in time, space, or likelihood. Thus, framing operates at the level of the stimulus format, whereas psychological

distance captures the internal representation that arises as consumers interpret that stimulus. We propose that abstract (vs. concrete) framing tends to induce greater psychological distance from appearance threats, which in turn supports self-control.

Within-domain products inherently activate appearance-related concerns and are highly diagnostic of success or failure in the threatened domain. For these products, concrete framing (e.g., “Achieve clear skin in one week”) emphasizes short-term feasibility and keeps attention anchored on immediate appearance outcomes, thereby maintaining threat salience and reinforcing ruminative focus. Abstract framing (e.g., “Feel confident in your natural beauty”), by contrast, highlights long-term meaning and higher-order goals, fostering psychological distance and restoring regulatory capacity. For across-domain products, which already provide greater identity distance by redirecting self-restoration to alternative domains (e.g., learning, prosocial behavior), concrete framing may instead enhance perceived feasibility and goal efficacy by clarifying how the product helps consumers improve or contribute (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1997). Abstract framing offers relatively less incremental distance in such contexts. Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses:

H2a: *For within-domain products, abstract (vs. concrete) message framing will enhance self-control.*

H2b: : *For across-domain products, concrete (vs. abstract) message framing will enhance self-control.* information.

Study 1 Method

Study Design, Sample, and Procedure

The study employed a 2 (compensation type: within-domain vs. across-domain) \times 2 (message framing: concrete vs. abstract) between-subjects design to examine how advertising cues influence self-control under appearance threat. A total of 126 U.S. participants (58.7% male; 82% White; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.0$, $SD = 11.0$) were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions.

All participants first completed an appearance-threat induction task adapted from prior research (Park et al., 2010; Trampe et al., 2010). They were asked to recall and describe a personal experience in which they had received a negative comment about their physical appearance; they then listed aspects of their appearance they found dissatisfying, thereby reinforcing the self-threat. Participants were subsequently exposed to an advertisement featuring a compensatory product that varied by compensation type and message framing according to their assigned condition. After viewing the stimulus, participants completed the self-control measures and provided demographic

Manipulations

Appearance threat was conceptualized as an identity threat arising from perceived discrepancies between one's actual appearance and internalized beauty standards. Accordingly, participants first completed an appearance-threat induction in which they recalled and briefly described a past experience of dissatisfaction or negative feedback about how they look (e.g., comments about body shape or weight). This task was intended to activate misalignment between participants' current appearance and beauty ideals rather than merely induce a transient negative mood.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two compensation conditions (within-domain vs. across-domain) adapted from prior research to simulate compensatory consumption (Gao et al., 2009; Lisjak et al., 2015). We defined compensation domain at the level of global appearance rather than at the level of specific body parts or attributes. In the within-domain condition, the advertised product directly addressed appearance concerns: participants viewed "BeautyUp," a skincare drink positioned to enhance visible appearance through improved facial skin quality and collagen. In the across-domain condition, they viewed "BrainBoost," a curated book collection emphasizing intellectual growth, which served as

a non-appearance-related compensatory option.

Message framing was manipulated as concrete versus abstract (Liberian et al., 2007). Concrete messages highlighted specific, tangible benefits (e.g., ingredient details and discrete cognitive gains), whereas abstract messages emphasized higher-order, enduring benefits (e.g., personal growth and self-improvement). A four-item manipulation check assessed how specific, detailed, and clearly appearance-related participants perceived the message to be, using 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The advertisement stimuli are provided in the Appendix A.

Pretests

Two pretests were conducted via Amazon MTurk to confirm the effectiveness of manipulations. The first pretest ($n = 79$; 39% male; $M_{age} = 33.2$, $SD = 10.5$) verified the compensation-type manipulation. Participants in the within-domain condition rated the advertised product as significantly more appearance-related ($M = 5.66$, $SD = .41$) than those in the across-domain condition ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(77) = 2.31$, $p < .05$.

The second pretest ($n = 93$; 45% male; $M_{age} = 34.8$, $SD = 10.9$) confirmed the message-framing manipulation. Across both compensation type conditions, concrete messages were perceived as significantly more specific than abstract messages (within-domain: $M_{concrete} =$

5.39 , $SD = 1.06$ vs. $M_{abstract} = 2.31$, $SD = .48$, $t(41) = 17.15$, $p < .001$; across-domain: $M_{concrete} = 5.57$, $SD = .99$ vs. $M_{abstract} = 2.33$, $SD = .64$, $t(48) = 13.37$, $p < .001$). Perceived message concreteness did not differ by product type ($p > .05$).

Measures

Self-control was measured as a behavioral regulation capacity using four items adapted from Tangney et al.'s (2004) self-control scale, which assesses individuals' ability to override immediate impulses and align their behavior with longer-term goals. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater self-control ($\alpha = .88$). Example items included: "I can resist purchasing unnecessary or indulgent items".

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants in the within-domain condition perceived the advertised product as significantly more appearance-related ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.06$) than those in the across-domain condition ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(124) = 13.39$, $p < .001$, confirming the effectiveness of the compensation-type manipulation. Concrete messages were also rated as significantly more specific than abstract messages in both the

within-domain condition ($M_{concrete} = 5.51, SD = .79$ vs. $M_{abstract} = 3.05, SD = 1.17$), $t(60) = 9.70, p < .001$, and the across-domain condition ($M_{concrete} = 5.53, SD = 1.11$ vs. $M_{abstract} = 3.33, SD = 1.49$), $t(62) = 6.53, p < .001$. Perceived message concreteness did not differ by product type ($p > .05$), indicating that the message-framing manipulation was effective across both compensation conditions.

Hypotheses Testing

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) examined the effects of compensation type and message framing on self-control under appearance threat. Results showed a main effect of compensation type, $F(1, 122) = 28.42, p < .001$. As shown in Figure 1, participants in

the across-domain condition reported higher self-control than those in the within-domain condition ($M_{across-domain} = 5.16, SD = 1.30$ vs. $M_{within-domain} = 4.07, SD = 1.61$), $t(124) = 4.20, p < .001$, supporting H1.

A significant interaction between compensation type and message framing also emerged, $F(1, 122) = 33.76, p < .001$. Within the within-domain condition, abstract messages elicited greater self-control than concrete messages ($M_{abstract} = 5.10, SD = 1.12$ vs. $M_{concrete} = 2.90, SD = 1.23$), $t(60) = 7.33, p < .001$, supporting H2a. In the across-domain condition, however, self-control was higher under concrete than under abstract framing ($M_{concrete} = 5.36, SD = 1.12$; $M_{abstract} = 4.99, SD = 1.43$), $t(62) = 4.48, p < .001$, supporting H2b.

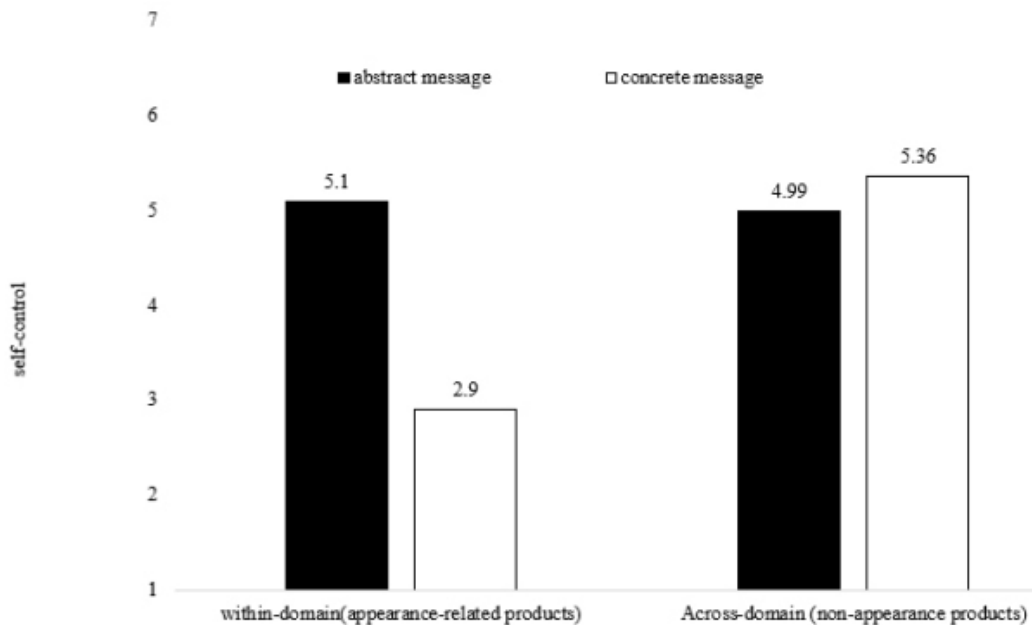


Figure 1. Interaction of compensation type and message framing on self-control (Study 1)

Overall, these findings support H1 as well as H2a and H2b, demonstrating that across-domain compensation preserves self-control more effectively than within-domain compensation, and that abstract message framing enhances self-control in appearance-relevant (i.e., within-domain) contexts.

Discussion of Study 1

Study 1 examined how compensation strategy and message framing interact to influence self-control under appearance threat in an advertising context, where compensatory cues are frequently conveyed through persuasive messages. In this framework, compensation strategy (i.e., compensation domain) served as a baseline level of self-control, while message framing further shaped self-regulatory outcomes. Consistent with symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981), across-domain compensation yielded greater self-control than within-domain compensation, confirming that directing restorative efforts away from the threatened domain helps conserve regulatory resources and provides a more adaptive route for coping with appearance-related threats.

Moreover, within the appearance-relevant (i.e., within-domain) context, abstract framing enhanced self-control, suggesting that higher-level message construal can help attenuate threat-related focus and foster goal-consistent regulation. A modest reversal emerged in the

across-domain condition, where concrete framing slightly outperformed abstract framing, suggesting that once attention has shifted away from the appearance threat, concreteness may enhance goal efficacy without reactivating the threat schema (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1997; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Together, these findings highlight that message framing can fine-tune compensatory strategies to support adaptive self-regulation across different consumption contexts. This insight is particularly meaningful given that most appearance-related advertising occurs within this domain; by framing such messages more abstractly, marketers can buffer the negative impact of appearance-focused appeals and encourage healthier, more adaptive consumer responses.

Study 1 demonstrated that abstract (vs. concrete) message framing preserved self-control under appearance threat, particularly when compensation occurred within the threatened domain. This finding aligns with CLT, which posits that abstraction broadens psychological distance and promotes higher-level processing. In our context, such abstraction may have increased psychological distance from the appearance threat and thereby supported self-regulation, as reflected in higher self-control. However, Study 1 did not directly test this underlying process. To clarify whether the benefit of abstract messages indeed arises from increased psychological distance, Study 2 examines psychological distance as a

mediating mechanism linking message framing to self-control in a within-domain context.

Beyond identifying this mechanism, Study 2 also investigates regulatory focus as a boundary condition to determine when abstract message effectively promotes self-control. Drawing on RFT, We expect that individuals under promotion focus, motivated by ideals and advancement, will benefit more from abstract framing, whereas individuals under prevention focus, concerned with security and obligations, will be less responsive to framing differences. While holding the compensation domain constant (i.e., within-domain), Study 2 manipulates message framing (abstract vs. concrete) and regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) to test these predictions. Together, these efforts extend theoretical understanding of how and when abstract message framing facilitates self-regulation, offering practical implications for designing persuasive messages that foster adaptive consumer responses.

The Role of Psychological Distance and Regulatory Focus

CLT proposes that perceived psychological distance-temporal, social, spatial, and hypothetical-shapes how individuals mentally construe and evaluate events (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). Specifically, the level of construal determines the perceived distance of an event:

concrete framing, emphasizing specific and immediate details, induces a sense of proximity, whereas abstract framing, conveying general and higher-order meaning, evokes a greater sense of distance.

Consistent with CLT, attending to specific features and short-term outcomes sustains proximity to an appearance threat. By contrast, abstract framing is expected to expand psychological distance by shifting attention from immediate, self-diagnostic cues to broader, goal-consistent perspectives (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Such distancing facilitates self-regulation, as supported by research showing that adopting a more detached, self-distanced perspective reduces rumination and enhances self-control (Fujita et al., 2006). Therefore, psychological distance serves as a key mechanism through which message framing influences self-control under appearance threat.

However, the benefits of abstract messages may depend on individuals' motivational orientation. Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT; Higgins, 1997, 2002) distinguishes two motivational orientations: Promotion, organized around ideals, aspirations, and advancement, and prevention, centered on duties and vigilance. Promotion heightens sensitivity to gains and encourages approach-oriented, eager strategies, whereas prevention heightens sensitivity to losses and fosters cautious, avoidance-oriented strategies (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Higgins, 2002). RFT further proposes that persuasion improves when

the message structure matches the recipient's focus—a principle known as regulatory fit (Avnet & Higgins, 2006; Cesario et al., 2004; Förster et al., 1998). When such fit occurs, individuals experience a sense of “rightness” that enhances engagement and strengthens message effectiveness (Cesario et al., 2004).

In the context of appearance threat, consumers' regulatory focus should determine how they process advertising messages to regulate themselves. Abstractly framed advertising aligns with the advancement orientation of individuals under promotion focus, facilitating psychological distancing from appearance-related threats and supporting goal-consistent regulation. By contrast, concrete appeals highlight specific, feasibility-oriented details that keep promotion-focused individuals' attention anchored to the immediate threat, making concrete framing less effective for sustaining self-control. For individuals under prevention focus, however, the influence of message framing is expected to be weaker. Because prevention inherently prioritizes vigilance and risk avoidance, their attention tends to remain grounded in concrete, proximal cues regardless of framing. As a result, abstract messages, which expand psychological distance, do not meaningfully enhance their self-regulation relative to concrete messages. Thus, we expect that the framing effect (abstract vs. concrete) will emerge primarily among individuals under promotion focus, while remaining attenuated among those under

prevention focus. Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis:

H3: *Under appearance threat, abstract (vs. concrete) message framing will enhance self-control among individuals under promotion focus. By contrast, for individuals under prevention focus, the difference between abstract and concrete messages will be attenuated.*

Furthermore, psychological distance is expected to account for this interaction. Under promotion focus, abstract framing broadens perceived distance by redirecting attention from immediate, appearance-proximal cues toward long-term goals, thereby enhancing self-control. Thus, we predict:

H4: *Psychological distance mediates the interaction effect of message framing and regulatory focus on self-control: Specifically, for individuals under promotion focus, abstract (vs. concrete) messages will increase psychological distance, which in turn enhances self-control.*

Study 2 Method

Study Design, Sample, and Procedure

The study employed a 2 (message framing: concrete vs. abstract) × 2 (regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects design to examine how message framing in advertising

and regulatory focus shape self-control under appearance threat through psychological distance. A total of 214 U.S. participants (43.5% male; 98.6% White; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.6$, $SD = 5.57$) were recruited via Amazon MTurk and randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions.

All participants first completed an appearance-threat induction identical to that used in Study 1. Next, regulatory focus was manipulated through a brief writing task, followed by exposure to an advertisement that varied in message framing. Study 2 held the compensation domain constant by using a within-domain, appearance-related product to isolate the effects of message framing and regulatory focus. After viewing the stimulus, participants completed measures of psychological distance and self-control, followed by demographic questions.

Manipulations

Regulatory focus was then manipulated using a brief writing task adapted from Liberman et al. (1999) and Lockwood et al. (2002). In the promotion-focus condition, participants wrote about their hopes and aspirations and the actions they were taking to achieve them; in the prevention-focus condition, they described mistakes or negative outcomes they sought to avoid and what they were doing to prevent them.

Next, participants viewed an advertisement for a facial-care product “Lumière White Essence” that manipulated message framing. In the concrete condition, the ad emphasized specific and near-term benefits (e.g., “Clinically proven whitening effects in 7 days”), whereas in the abstract condition, it highlighted aspirational, ideal-focused appeals (e.g., “Uncover your true beauty”). Participants were asked to imagine using the advertised product before completing the dependent measures. The advertising stimuli are presented in the Appendix B.

Pretests

A pretest with 49 U.S. participants recruited via Amazon MTurk verified the effectiveness of the regulatory-focus manipulation. Participants in the promotion condition scored significantly higher on the promotion check item ($M = 6.20$, $SD = .55$) than those in the prevention-focus condition ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(47) = 15.48$, $p < .001$, whereas the opposite pattern emerged for the prevention check item ($M_{\text{promotion-focus}} = 2.30$, $SD = 1.30$ vs. $M_{\text{prevention-focus}} = 6.05$, $SD = .65$), $t(47) = 12.69$, $p < .001$.

Measures

Psychological distance was assessed as a subjective cognitive experience of how psychologically close or distant the ad message

and its appearance-related concerns felt after viewing the ad. Participants responded to four CLT-based items adapted for advertising contexts (Liviatan et al., 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010; White et al., 2011; $\alpha = .89$). An example item was, “The message in the advertisement felt psychologically close to me and relevant to my own life” (reverse-coded). Self-control was measured using the same scale as in Study 1 (Tangney et al., 2004; $\alpha = .80$).

higher on the promotion check ($M = 6.46$ vs. 1.88), $t(212) = 38.68, p < .001$, whereas those in the prevention condition scored higher on the prevention check ($M = 6.32$ vs. 1.96), $t(212) = -31.40, p < .001$. The message-framing manipulation was also effective, with concrete messages rated as significantly more concrete than abstract ones ($M = 5.61, SD = .62$ vs. $M = 2.41, SD = .60$), $t(212) = -38.49, p < .001$.

Results

Manipulation Check

The regulatory-focus induction was successful: participants in the promotion condition scored

Hypotheses Testing

A two-way ANOVA examined the effects of message framing and regulatory focus on self-control under appearance threat. Results showed a significant interaction between the two

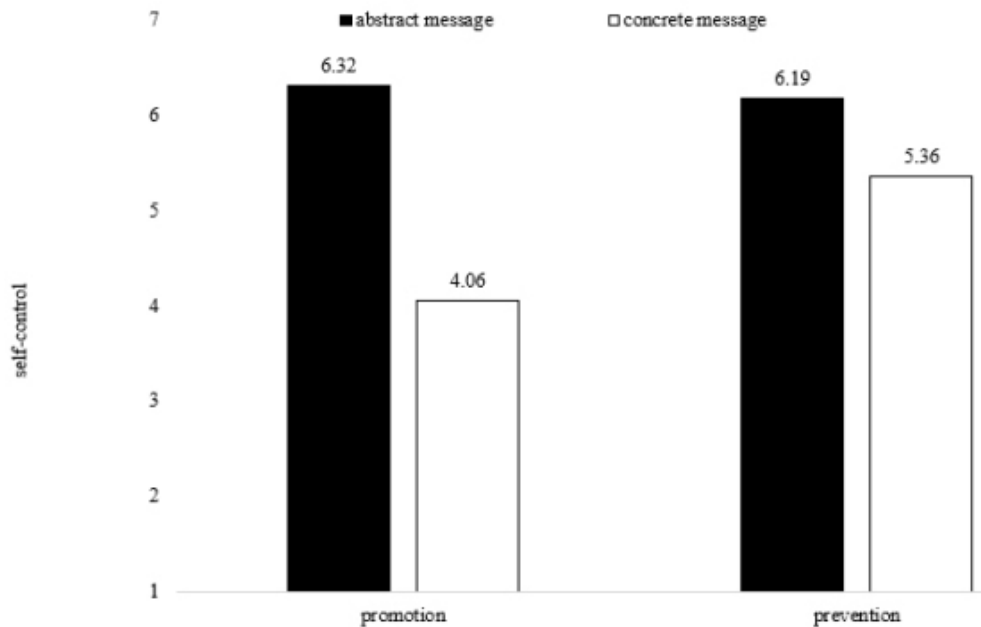


Figure 2. Interaction of message framing and regulatory focus on self-control (Study 2; within-domain context)

factors, $F(1, 210) = 276.28, p < .001$. As shown in Figure 2, under promotion focus, abstract messages elicited greater self-control than concrete messages ($M_{abstract} = 6.32, SD = .62$ vs. $M_{concrete} = 4.06, SD = .24$), $t(70.17) = 25.30, p < .001$, supporting H3. In contrast, self-control did not differ across framing conditions under prevention focus ($M_{abstract} = 6.19, SD = .63$ vs. $M_{concrete} = 6.27, SD = .48$), $t(86.44) = -.72, p = .47$.

To test H4, a moderated mediation model (PROCESS Model 8; Hayes, 2013) with 5000 bootstrap samples was conducted to examine whether the interaction between message framing and regulatory focus influenced self-control via psychological distance. Results showed that regulatory focus significantly moderated the relationship between message framing and psychological distance, $B = 4.73, SE = .15, p < .001, 95\% CI [4.43, 5.02]$. Under promotion

Table 1. Results of the moderated-mediation model analysis (Study 2)

Outcomes	IV	B	S.E	t	p	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
Psychological distance	(constant)	6.32	.07	86.36	<.001	6.18	6.47
	Message framing	-4.67	.10	-44.85	<.001	-4.87	-4.46
	Regulatory focus	-.02	.11	-.14	.89	-.23	.20
	Message framing X Regulatory focus	4.73	.15	31.77	<.001	4.43	5.02
$R^2 = .93, F(3, 210) = 998.60, p < .001$							
Self-control	(constant)	4.26	.39	10.84	<.001	3.48	5.03
	Message framing	-.73	.30	-2.44	.02	-1.33	-.14
	Psychological distance	.33	.06	5.32	<.001	.20	.45
	Regulatory focus	-.13	.10	-1.32	.19	-.31	.06
	Message framing X Regulatory focus	.79	.32	2.49	.01	.17	1.42
$R^2 = .81, F(4, 209) = 217.08, p < .001$							
<i>Conditional effects of message framing on psychological distance</i>							
Promotion		-4.67	.10	-44.85	<.001	-4.87	-4.46
Prevention		.06	.11	.57	.57	-.15	.27
<i>Conditional indirect effects of message framing on self-control via psychological distance</i>							
Promotion		-1.52	.87	-	-	-3.49	-.50
Prevention		.02	.04	-	-	-.04	.14
Index of moderated mediation		1.54	.89	-	-	.50	3.57

focus, abstract messages increased psychological distance, $B = 4.67$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI [4.46, 4.87]$, whereas no difference emerged under prevention focus.

Conditional indirect effect showed that abstract framing indirectly enhanced self-control through psychological distance under promotion focus ($B = 1.52$, $BootSE = .87$, 95% $CI [.50, 3.49]$), while the indirect effect was nonsignificant under prevention focus. Psychological distance also positively predicted self-control overall, $B = .33$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI [.20, .45]$. A significant conditional direct effect further showed that abstract framing directly increased self-control under promotion focus, $B = .73$, $SE = .30$, $p = .02$, 95% $CI [.14, 1.33]$, but not under prevention focus (See Table 1 for results).

Overall, these findings indicate that abstract framing increases psychological distance and consequently self-control under promotion focus, whereas framing has little impact under prevention focus.

Discussion of Study 2

Conducted in an advertising context, Study 2 examined how abstract message framing influences self-control within the appearance-related (within-domain) context and identified the underlying mechanism and boundary conditions of this effect. In doing so, we treated message framing as an experimentally

manipulated structural feature of the ad message (abstract vs. concrete), whereas psychological distance was modeled as a measured subjective state that reflects how close or distant the appearance threat feels after message exposure.

Individuals under promotion focus showed significantly higher self-control in response to abstract (vs. concrete) messages, whereas individuals under prevention focus exhibited no significant framing difference. Importantly, the mediating effect of psychological distance emerged only under promotion focus. Because individuals under promotion focus are oriented toward ideals and long-term advancement, abstract messages broaden psychological distance away from appearance-proximal cues and therefore exert a strong influence on their self-regulation. In contrast, individuals under prevention focus prioritize vigilance and feasibility, which keeps their attention anchored to proximal concerns regardless of how abstract or concrete the message is. As a result, psychological distance does not function as an effective mechanism for them, and their self-control remains relatively stable across framing conditions. Together, these results indicate that abstract messages promote self-regulation under appearance threat through increased psychological distance, but this process is contingent on consumers' motivational orientation, emerging primarily under promotion focus.

Building on Study 1, which demonstrated that

abstract framing preserved self-control particularly when compensation occurred within the threatened domain, Study 2 reveals that this benefit operates through psychological distancing and arises selectively under promotion focus. These findings highlight conditions under which message design can mitigate threat-induced self-regulatory failure in appearance-sensitive contexts. Given that many advertising messages directly address appearance-related products, framing appeals at a more abstract level may enhance psychological distance and thus self-regulatory stability especially for consumers guided by promotion-focused goals.

General Discussion

While prior work on compensatory consumption has primarily examined how consumers use products or choices to restore threatened self-views, the present research extends this perspective to the advertising domain, showing how message framing can actively shape consumers' self-regulatory responses. Across two studies, this research demonstrates how consumers maintain or restore self-control under appearance threat by coordinating what they compensate with (within- vs. across-domain), how advertising messages are framed (concrete vs. abstract), and for whom they are tailored (promotion vs. prevention).

Study 1 revealed that across-domain

compensation preserved self-control more effectively than within-domain compensation. While shifting compensation to an alternative domain inherently buffers against threat-induced depletion, within-domain contexts required additional regulatory support through message framing. In these settings, abstract framing mitigated the decline in self-control by helping consumers redirect attention toward higher-order goals. This mechanism resonates with recent evidence suggesting that the effectiveness of compensatory strategies depends on how individuals manage post-threat rumination (Jo, 2025).

Study 2 introduced regulatory focus as a boundary condition and psychological distance as the mechanism explaining when and why abstract messages in advertising supports self-control. Abstract framing enhanced self-control only under promotion focus, and this effect did not emerge under prevention focus. Mediation analyses further revealed that psychological distance accounted for this effect only among individuals under promotion focus, indicating that abstract messages increase psychological distance and thereby elevate self-control specifically for consumers guided by advancement-oriented goals.

Together, the present study clarify when and why compensatory strategies and message framing mitigate threat-induced self-regulatory failure. Consumers can restore regulatory resources by choosing across-domain options that

distance behavior from appearance-related cues and by relying on abstract message framing within appearance-relevant domains, particularly when they are operating under promotion focus.

Theoretical Implications

This research advances an integrative account in which advertising message framing and consumers' motivational orientation interact to regulate self-control under appearance threat through psychological distance. By incorporating RFT with CLT, the findings specify the motivational boundaries of framing effects and demonstrate that abstract framing promotes self-control primarily when consumers adopt a promotion focus, with little framing impact under prevention focus. The study contributes to consumer psychology and advertising research by illustrating how message design can align with consumers' regulatory states to foster adaptive self-regulation under threat.

Beyond this motivational mechanism, the studies identify two distinct yet complementary self-regulatory processes. Across-domain compensation reduces identity-threat salience by directing restorative efforts away from the threatened self-domain, thereby conserving regulatory resources (symbolic self-completion theory; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Within that alternative domain, concrete framing enhances goal implementability by activating proximal, feasibility-oriented goals rather than

reactivating the original threat, thereby helping consumers sustain self-control over compensatory behaviors (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1997). In contrast, within-domain compensation benefits from abstract framing, which expands psychological distance from appearance-proximal cues, enabling consumers to regulate threat-induced rumination and restore self-control (Fujita et al., 2006; Jo, 2025). Together, these processes clarify how the effects of message framing depend on compensatory domain and extend existing theories of compensatory consumption and self-regulation by specifying the underlying psychological mechanisms that govern threat recovery.

Practical Implications

When consumers experience discrepancy in appearance-related domains, advertisers can mitigate threat salience through domain-level positioning that shifts the perceived focus of consumption away from physical appearance and toward broader self-relevant dimensions such as confidence, wellness, or achievement. This strategic positioning functions as an across-domain cue, reducing the activation of appearance-proximal schemas and preserving self-control. Within such reframed or inherently non-appearance domains, concrete, action-oriented copy may enhance consumers' sense of efficacy and control without reactivating threat-related thoughts. In contrast, when the message must

remain within the appearance domain, abstract framing should be used to expand psychological distance and buffer self-regulatory resources.

Furthermore, message design should consider motivational fit. For consumers under promotion focus, abstract, goal-oriented messages are most effective. For consumers under prevention focus, message framing exerts minimal influence on self-control, as their vigilance-oriented goals make them less responsive to distance-based cues. Future communication strategies might therefore explore message formats to better align with prevention motivation.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the present research offers meaningful contributions, several limitations suggest avenues for future inquiry. First, the studies examined appearance-based threat exclusively, limiting generalizability to other forms of identity-relevant threat (e.g., competence, morality, social rejection). Future research should test whether similar mechanisms emerge across alternative threat domains and broader product or behavioral contexts.

Second, we did not include a direct manipulation check of perceived appearance threat following the induction. Although the appearance-threat task was adapted from prior research (Park et al., 2010; Trampe et al., 2010), individual differences in susceptibility to appearance-related threat may have introduced

unobserved variance in the strength of the manipulation. Incorporating measures of perceived threat intensity would help identify individual differences in threat sensitivity.

Third, evidence for the compensation domain's influence on psychological distance is indirect. Because compensation domain was manipulated only in Study 1 and psychological distance was assessed solely within a within-domain context in Study 2, our claims regarding a unified distance-based mechanism should be interpreted cautiously. Future research should manipulate compensation domain and measure psychological distance within the same study and incorporate multiple operationalizations of psychological distance.

Fourth, reliance on self-reported measures of psychological distance and self-control limits interpretive precision. Incorporating behavioral outcomes (e.g., snack choice, effort expenditure), implicit or physiological metrics, and less face-valid distance indicators would strengthen causal inference and provide a more comprehensive account of regulatory processes.

Additionally, the pattern observed under prevention focus in Study 2 allows for an alternative interpretation. Across both framing conditions, participants in the prevention-focus condition reported relatively high levels of self-control, with self-control in the prevention-concrete condition substantially higher than in the promotion-concrete condition. Because appearance threats are typically linked

to ideal-actual discrepancies and thus align more naturally with promotion concerns, the prevention prime may have reduced the subjective salience of the appearance threat itself rather than solely moderating message processing. Future research should assess threat salience after regulatory-focus induction to disentangle these alternative pathways.

Finally, the composition of our samples places important constraints on the generalizability of the findings. Both studies relied on predominantly White U.S. participants, which limits the extent to which these results can be generalized to other cultural contexts in which beauty ideals and compensatory strategies may differ. Future research should replicate and extend the present findings using more culturally diverse samples and broader demographic variation, including gender. Beyond these limitations, future research should explore additional CLT-based cues (e.g., temporal framing, visual abstraction) and motivational orientations beyond promotion and prevention to broaden understanding of how message construal shapes consumer self-regulation.

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외모 위협 상황에서 광고 메시지 소구가 자기통제에 미치는 영향: 심리적 거리의 매개

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신체적 외모는 사회적 자본으로 역할을 하며, 실제-이상 간 외모 불일치는 자기통제를 위협할 수 있다. 본 연구는 외모 위협 상황에서 소비자가 보상 유형(영역내 vs. 영역간)과 메시지 소구 전략(구체적 vs. 추상적)을 통해 자기통제를 유지·회복하는 방식을 규명하고, 그 작동 기제와 조절 요인을 제시한다. 연구 1은 영역간 보상이 영역내 보상에 비해 자기통제를 유의하게 유지함을 확인했다. 또한 외모 관련 영역내에서는 추상적 메시지 소구가 구체적 메시지 소구 대비 고수준 해석을 유도하여 자기통제를 증진했다. 연구 2는 조절초점(향상 vs. 예방)을 조절 요인으로, 심리적 거리를 매개 기제로 검증했다. 그 결과, 향상초점 사람에게서 추상적 메시지 소구는 지각된 심리적 거리를 확대하여 자기통제를 향상시킨 반면, 예방초점 사람에게서는 소구 간 유의한 차이가 나타나지 않았다. 종합하면, 본 연구는 보상 전략과 메시지 설계가 자기 위협 하의 자기통제를 조절하는 상호작용 메커니즘을 밝히며, 광고 커뮤니케이션 맥락에서 보상적 소비, 해석수준이론(CLT), 조절초점이론(RFT)을 연결하는 통합적 모형을 제시한다.

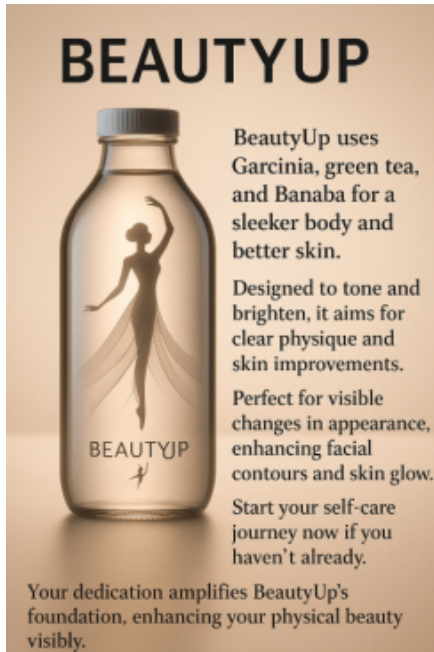
주요어 : 보상적 소비, 외모 위협, 자기통제, 메시지 소구, 조절초점, 심리적 거리, 해석수준이론

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Appendix A. Advertising Stimuli (Study 1)

<Within-domain × Concrete framing condition>



BEAUTYUP

BeautyUp uses Garcinia, green tea, and Banaba for a sleeker body and better skin.


Designed to tone and brighten, it aims for clear physique and skin improvements.

Perfect for visible changes in appearance, enhancing facial contours and skin glow.

Start your self-care journey now if you haven't already.

Your dedication amplifies BeautyUp's foundation, enhancing your physical beauty visibly.

<Within-domain × Abstract framing condition>



BeautyUp

BeautyUp goes beyond transformation, enhancing happiness and well-being.

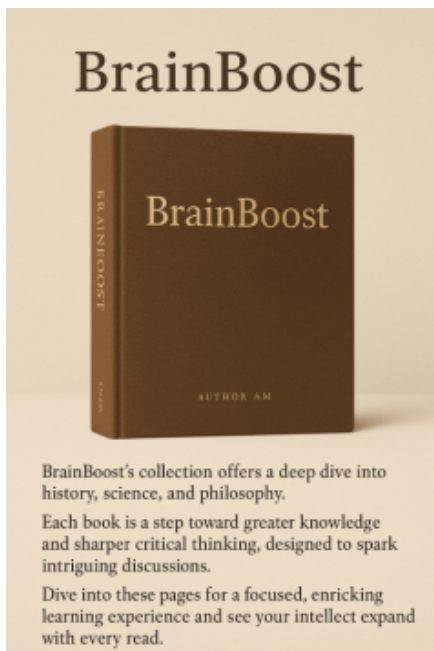
Every sip brings you closer to contentment.

It uplifts confidence, protecting against negativity in social situations.

With no sugars, colors, or preservatives, it boosts wellness and glow.

BeautyUp starts the journey, but your self-care commitment brings true joy.

<Across-domain × Concrete framing condition>



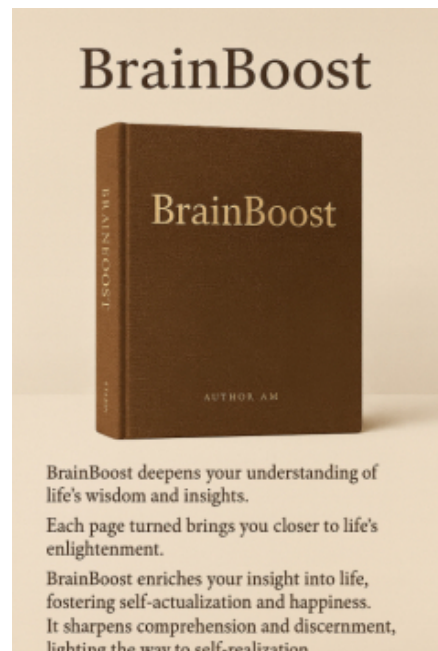
BrainBoost

BrainBoost's collection offers a deep dive into history, science, and philosophy.

Each book is a step toward greater knowledge and sharper critical thinking, designed to spark intriguing discussions.

Dive into these pages for a focused, enriching learning experience and see your intellect expand with every read.

<Across-domain × abstract framing condition>



BrainBoost

BrainBoost deepens your understanding of life's wisdom and insights.

Each page turned brings you closer to life's enlightenment.

BrainBoost enriches your insight into life, fostering self-actualization and happiness.

It sharpens comprehension and discernment, lighting the way to self-realization.

Appendix B. Advertising Stimuli (Study 2)

<Concrete framing condition>

**See noticeable changes
in your skin—starting now!**



Lumière White Essence inhibits melanin production and visibly brightens your skin within just 7 days.

- Clinically proven whitening effects in 7 days
- 200% boost in hydration right after use
- Dermatologist-tested and gentle on sensitive skin.

Apply twice daily, morning and night, and you'll notice smoother texture and a healthier-looking appearance.

<Abstract framing condition>

Uncover your true beauty.



Lumière White Essence is more than just a whitening product—it helps guide you toward the ideal version of yourself.

Skincare is a reflection of the life you strive for, and your beauty is a symbol of confidence, self-care, and aspiration.

If you're dreaming of a better version of yourself, take the first step with Lumière.