



Healthy menu promotions: A match between dining value and temporal distance

EunHa Jeong^a, SooCheong (Shawn) Jang^{b,*}

^a School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University, Marriott Hall, 900 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2115, USA

^b School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University, Room 245, Marriott Hall, 900 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2115, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study intended to identify a persuasive communication strategy in the context of healthy menu promotions in restaurants by adopting construal level theory (CLT) and considering temporal distance. The study proposed that customers' psychological states, in terms of hedonic versus utilitarian dining values, can qualitatively evoke different types of thinking (abstract versus concrete) with respect to the level of construal. The study demonstrated that a focus on hedonic value tends to lead people to think at a more abstract level of construal and have greater positive attitudes and purchasing intentions toward a healthy menu when the advertising message is framed in terms of the long-term benefits of a healthy diet. Conversely, a focus on utilitarian value tends to lead people to think at a more concrete level of construal and have greater positive attitudes and purchasing intentions toward a healthy menu when the advertising message is framed in terms of the immediate benefits of a healthy diet. Finally, the study also determined that gender plays a moderating role in the relationship between dining values and temporal frames. The results enhance the existing literature by identifying an antecedent influencing CLT and provide practical implications for effective marketing communication in the context of healthy menu item promotion in restaurants.

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1. Introduction

Healthy eating has recently come to play an essential role in the promotion and maintenance of good health throughout the entire course of an individual's life. As a result, the number of people who try to eat healthy foods when they dine out is increasing (NRA, 2013). To meet increased demands for healthy menus, restaurants—regardless of the segment—are adding more healthful options to their menus (Mariani, 2011; Strom, 2013). Even fast-food restaurants that often serve relatively less healthy food compared to other restaurant segments are working to add healthy options. In order to promote healthy menu options to customers, effective communication strategies are essential. This study was conducted with the aim of discovering effective marketing strategies to promote healthy menus in a restaurant setting by adopting CLT and temporal distance. Previous CLT studies have indicated that matching the representation of an event in abstract terms as occurring in the distant future or in concrete terms in the proximal future has important consequences for cognition and motivation (Lieberman

et al., 2002; Spassova and Lee, 2013; Wakslak et al., 2008; Wan and Rucker, 2013). Thus, this study proposed that the temporal construal of the promotional health message, whether the health benefits are described as occurring in the distant or proximal future, are interpreted differently based on the customer's dining values focus (hedonic versus utilitarian).

A customer's dining values are the desired end goals in a specific consumption situation (Ha and Jang, 2013). They are the actual goals a customer pursues from a particular dining experience. These values might also differ based on the type of restaurant (Ha and Jang, 2013). Due to the variety of service offerings across different types of restaurants, the values that customers expect differ from restaurant to restaurant. For example, a fine-dining restaurant experience offers specific, dedicated meal courses and a luxurious atmosphere with a high quality of service, which will make a customer's focus on hedonic dining value, such as pleasure or emotional value, more salient. In contrast, through the dining experience provided by fast-food restaurants, such as fast service at low prices with limited service, customers' desires to pursue pragmatic utilitarian dining values, such as convenience and efficiency, become more salient (Batra and Ahtola, 1991).

According to previous studies in psychology, customers focus on pleasure, which is an emotional value. A positive mood

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 765 496 3610.

E-mail addresses: ejeong@purdue.edu (E. Jeong), jang12@purdue.edu (S. Jang).

and idealistic values enhance efforts to attain future well-being, increase openness to information, and encourage more flexible and abstract thinking whereas a focus on pragmatic value would encourage more cognitive, realistic, and concrete thinking (Aspinwall, 1998; Kivetz and Tyler, 2007; Labroo and Patrick, 2009). In other words, customers' psychological states while they are focusing on either hedonic or utilitarian dining values might evoke qualitatively different types of thinking—namely, abstract or concrete—with respect to the level of construal.

Focusing on hedonic dining values could lead people to think at a more abstract level of construal, while focusing on utilitarian dining values could lead people to think at a more concrete level of construal. In addition, differences in construal naturally direct customers to focus on different types of information (Lieberman and Trope, 1998). A hedonic value focus would lead people to view a message framed in an abstract manner as more relevant. Thus, customers would have greater positive attitudes and purchasing intentions toward a healthy menu item when the message of the advertisement is framed in terms of health benefits that occur in the distant future. Along the same lines, a focus on utilitarian dining values would lead people to view an advertising message framed in a concrete manner as more relevant. Furthermore, they would express greater positive attitudes and purchasing intentions toward a healthy menu item when the advertising message is framed in terms of immediate health benefits.

Studies in psychology have also indicated that a gender difference exists in information processing. Broverman et al.'s (1968) study showed that males process information more logically and analytically than females. Meanwhile, compared to males, females are more responsive to emotional and subjective impressions of intangible aspects of products (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Based on this understanding, the current study proposed that different dining value focuses (hedonic versus utilitarian) can activate information-processing tendencies linked to gender (male versus female), which would then lead them to adopt different types of thinking (concrete versus abstract). Furthermore, this would influence their perception of temporally framed advertising messages. For example, for females, hedonic dining values are more salient and can be enhanced by fine-dining experiences that activate their emotional, subjective information-processing tendencies, which leads to more abstract and high-level thinking (Meyers-Levy, 1989; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Putrevu, 2001). Therefore, females might have greater positive attitudes and purchase intentions toward a healthy menu item when the advertising message is framed in terms of the benefits of a healthy diet in the distant future.

By examining the consequences of matching customers' dining value focuses with the appropriate temporally framed advertising message, this study provides important practical implications for effective marketing communication regarding customers' information processing in the context of restaurants' healthy menu promotions. Furthermore, by identifying customers' dining values as an antecedent of temporal construal, the current study might contribute to the theoretical enhancement of the CLT literature.

Accordingly, the research objectives of the current study are (1) to examine whether a focus on hedonic (utilitarian) value leads people to think at a more abstract (concrete) level of construal, (2) to investigate whether this focus on hedonic (utilitarian) value leads restaurant customers to have greater positive attitudes and purchasing intentions toward a healthy menu item when the advertising message is framed in terms of the long-term (immediate) benefits of a healthy diet, and (3) to access whether the differential effect of restaurant customers' dining value focused on attitudes toward a healthy menu item and purchasing intentions under different temporal message frames (long-term versus immediate) significantly differs by gender.

2. Literature review

2.1. Construal level theory and temporal distance

In order to understand how individuals evaluate an object or event, Liberman and Trope (1998) proposed construal level theory (CLT) in social psychology. CLT describes the relationship between psychological distance and the degree to which an individual's thinking toward an object or event is abstract or concrete. More specifically, the theory postulates that individuals are more likely to construe objects and events situated in the distant future in abstract, decontextualized, and high-level terms. They also tend to have a greater focus on *why* people do things. Conversely, individuals are more likely to construe objects and events situated in the proximal future in concrete, contextualized, and low-level terms, with a greater focus on *how* people do things (Lieberman and Trope, 1998; Liberman et al., 2002; Liberman, Trope, and Wakslak, 2007).

A great deal of evidence supports this relationship between temporal distance and construal level (Förster et al., 2004; Liberman et al., 2002; Spassova and Lee, 2013; Wakslak et al., 2008; Wan and Rucker, 2013). By measuring the structure and breadth of categorization, Liberman et al. (2002) examined how people perceive events that occur at different distances in time in terms of their level of construal. Using the scenario method, the researchers asked participants to imagine that they were going on a trip occurring in either the distant or proximal future. They then gave participants a set of objects they might need for the trip and asked them to categorize the objects into as many groups as they thought appropriate. Their results showed that, when the event was in the distant future, participants thought about the objects in more abstract terms than when the event was in the proximal future. Furthermore, participants under the distant future condition generated fewer categories of objects than participants in the near future condition. Wakslak et al. (2008) used structural measures to examine differences in construal, focusing on temporal shifts in the structure of self-representation. Using a variety of self-structure measures, they found that self-representations envisioned in the distant future were simpler and more integrated than near-future self-representations.

A reciprocal relationship between construal level and temporal distance was also suggested by researchers in that individuals perceive events described in abstract terms as occurring in the more distant future and events described in specific terms as occurring in the proximal future. Recently, researchers in consumer psychology and behavior found antecedents that might influence the relationship between construal level and temporal distance (Spassova and Lee, 2013; Wan and Rucker, 2013). Based on empirical evidence from cross-cultural studies and personality differences between people with interdependent and independent self-views, Spassova and Lee (2013) suggested that individuals with a more accessible independent view of themselves tend to construe upcoming events and behaviors as taking place in the more distance future whereas those with a more accessible interdependent view of themselves tend to construe future events and behaviors as taking place in the more proximal future. Wan and Rucker (2013) proposed that the general degree of confidence that people experience affects their level of construal. High confidence represents a feeling of certainty, signaling a benign situation that requires little need to engage in a detailed understanding of information. On the other hand, low confidence leads people to feel uncertain and focus more on details and contextualized information. In summary, these researchers postulated that low confidence leads individuals to focus on concrete construal whereas high confidence leads people to focus on abstract construal.

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