

Research Article

Effects of multiple psychological distances on construal and consumer evaluation: A field study of online reviews

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Abstract

Through a large-scale field study of 166,215 online restaurant reviews, we found evidence of a distance boosting effect, whereby experiencing spatial distance (i.e., authoring a review about a geographically distant restaurant, rather than proximate one) and temporal distance (i.e., authoring a review after a lengthy delay, rather than immediately) jointly affect review positivity by amplifying consumers' high-level construals. Although past research has explored the relationship between psychological distance, construal and consumer evaluation, the effects of various dimensions of distance have only been considered in isolation. Our research contributes to past work by testing the effects of experiencing two dimensions of psychological distance simultaneously on construal and consumer evaluations. Moreover, because our data contain naturalistic observations, our research includes a wide range of temporal and spatial distances. We found that the effect of one distance increases the effect of the other. Metaphorically speaking, the effect of one distance is boosted by another.

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Introduction

Mark Twain is famous for saying, “distance lends enchantment to the view,” attesting, anecdotally, that faraway things will appear better than they are in reality. Broadly speaking, Mark Twain observed a pattern that has interested scholars in psychology and marketing for the last six decades — the effects of feeling something as closer or farther relative to the self (Lewin, 1951). In more recent times, research on feelings of (greater or lesser) closeness forms part of a large body of work known as construal

level theory (CLT), which has theorized and found that psychological distance changes people's mental representations of events (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Specifically, distant events (e.g., those taking place in the past, or in faraway places) are more likely to be represented in high-level terms of abstract and central features; whereas close events (e.g., events in places and at times that are here and now, respectively) are more likely to be represented in low-level terms of concrete and peripheral features (Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003).

Informed by theories of psychological distance and CLT, the present research examined whether the passing of time and space *jointly* affect online review positivity. Notably, our focus is on two dimensions of psychological distance (time and space), which addresses a broad, theoretical question: Does experiencing multiple dimensions of psychological distance of an event,

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simultaneously, lead to different event-appraisals compared to when only a single dimension of psychological distance is experienced? Research on psychological distance has identified four different dimensions of distance: temporal-, spatial-, social-, and certainty-distance, yet despite the extensive research on these dimensions' role in a varied range of outcomes (e.g., in decision making, persuasion, negotiation, creativity, metacognition, self-control, and memory; for a review see Liberman, Trope, & Wakslak, 2007), little research has examined the influence of experiencing more than one dimension of distance simultaneously.

By adopting a multiple-dimensions approach to distance, the current research extends the literatures on psychological distance and CLT in both theoretical and empirical terms. Research has shown that distant events generate high-level construals. However, what if an event will take place in the *future*, and also in a *faraway* place? Would this scenario generate even *more* high-level construals? As a specific example, does the level of construal that results when considering an event that will take place 5000 miles away grow even greater when a second distance is introduced, such as if the event were also to take place 5 years into the future (a case of two remote distances)?

It is this question that the current research helps address — what the effect is of experiencing multiple distances, at different levels on construal level and, subsequently, the evaluative judgments people generate of events. Our investigation enables us to examine the cross-dimensional effects of multiple distances (i.e., events that are close in time yet far in space; or far in time yet close in space) in a relatively nuanced and precise way: Owing to our novel dataset (containing a sample of 166,215 restaurant reviews) we are able to examine distance *continuously* (as opposed to categorically). By that we mean, in a departure from past research on psychological distance that typically compares one researcher-created discretionary, categorical level of distance with another level (e.g., comparing an event happening in “1 year” with an event happening “tomorrow”), we examined a wide range of naturalistic temporal and spatial distances, from 0 to 11 months and 0 to 11,910 miles respectively. Besides testing the separate effects of each distance across its range, our study design enables us to test our main focus: the effects of experiencing multiple distances in tandem — specifically, the interactive effect of different levels of temporal distance against a range of spatial distances, and vice versa.

We begin with a theoretical framework describing the effects of psychological distance on construal level, and argue that positive appraisals of past events are a result of generating high-level construals. Then, we shift our discussion from the effects of experiencing one dimension of distance to the effects of experiencing multiple dimensions, to advance our prediction that, compared with experiencing one distance, experiencing two distances fosters more high-level construals, and hence more positive event-appraisals.

Psychological distance, CLT, and positivity

CLT suggests that individuals process events at higher levels of construal when they perceive greater psychological distance

between themselves and those events, where psychological distance is defined as an “egocentric” perception of “the different ways in which an object might be removed” from “the reference point of self in here and now” (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440). Accordingly, theorizing on psychological distance has identified four means by which targets can drift in distance: in time, from now to earlier or later (Trope & Liberman, 2000); in space, from here to another place (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006); in social contexts, from the self to others (Polman, 2012); and in probability, from certain to uncertain (Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006). Built on the notion that abstraction is required for predicting and planning for what is not present, CLT proposes that psychological distance influences how individuals mentally construe events. Under high construal, individuals tend to think in an abstract, decontextualized manner; whereas under low construal, individuals tend to think concretely and focus on contextual details, which are often peripheral or incidental.

Several studies hint at the possibility of a positivity bias when evaluating under high-level construal. Research has found that the positive aspects of an experience are more salient with high-level construal, such that when led to think with a high-level construal mindset, people contemplate more pros in favor of an action than cons (Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004). Consistent with this view, research has also found that pros are easier to think of when considering temporally distant versus close events (Herzog, Hansen, & Wänke, 2007). Similarly, Williams, Stein, and Galguera (2014) found that past experiences felt more pleasant when they were described with a high-level construal, compared to a low-level construal. On the basis of these findings, we expect that psychologically distant (vs. closer) events foster more high-level construals (vs. low-level construals), which we predict makes appraisals of past events more positive. We test this hypothesis in the context of online restaurant reviews, and predict that (a) the more time between visiting a restaurant and reviewing it (temporal distance) and, separately, (b) the more space between the location of the restaurant and the location the reviewer (spatial distance), the higher the construal of the review, and hence the more positive the review.

Multiple distances

Moving beyond the standard focus on psychological distance and its effects on construal level, we turn to research on multiple dimensions of distance and argue that experiencing more than one dimension of distance simultaneously will induce higher-level construal, and thus transform the downstream consequences of distance on positivity. Though each distance has been found to have a separate similar effect on construal — where more distance leads to higher levels of construal (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002), no research has examined the level of construal that results under conditions of multiple distances. Research concerning multiple distances has thus far focused on two areas: (1) fit, which describes synchronizing levels of distance, such that when a remote (close) distance is aligned with another remote (close)

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