The Influence of Looking Down Versus Up As a Learned Distance Cue on Level of Construal

Anneleen Van Kerckhove, Ghent University, Belgium
Iris Vermeir, University College Ghent, Belgium
Maggie Geuens, Ghent University, Belgium

People generally look down (up) to perceive nearby (distant) objects. Five experiments show that because looking down (up) has come to serve as a proximity (distance) cue, looking down (up) evokes more concrete (abstract) processing. Two additional experiments delineate a link between level of construal and preference-decision consistency.

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Anneleen Van Kerckhove, Ghent University, Belgium*
Maggie Geuens, Ghent University, Belgium
Iris Vermeir, University College Ghent, Belgium

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Assume that one store displays the brands of your choice set on a high shelf and another store displays the same brands on a low shelf. Would this difference in shelf height affect which brand you ultimately choose from one store to the next? Or, would your purchases from an on-line retail store be influenced by the height at which your computer monitor is placed? We argue that this is indeed the case. People generally must look down to attend to nearby objects but raise their gaze to view distant objects. This association between looking down (up) and proximity (distance) is exhibited in numerous things. For instance, when standing in an open field, you need to look down to see a dandelion growing near your feet, whereas describing a tree in the distance requires raising your gaze. Consequently, due to their frequent co-occurrence, looking down (up) and distance (proximity) may be strongly associated. In addition, according to construal level theory (CLT), nearby stimuli tend to be represented by lower-level, concrete concepts, whereas distant stimuli appear represented by higher-level, abstract concepts ( Förster 2009; Trope and Liberman 2010).

According to embodied cognition theory (Barsalou, 1999) bodily movements like looking down and looking up may evoke those processing styles that normally accompany them; as such we propose that looking up leads to abstract-level thinking, whereas looking down leads to concrete-level thinking.

This proposition is based on the idea that vertical eye or head movements are used as valuable distance cues, in that looking down may cue that an object is near, whereas looking up may cue that an object is distant. Studies 1A and 1B demonstrate that looking down and looking up indeed have different distance associations. Specifically, using an interference paradigm study 1A shows that presenting panorama pictures in a higher position and presenting close-up pictures in a lower position leads people to categorize these pictures faster according to their distance than when panorama pictures are placed in a lower position or when close-up pictures are placed in a higher position. As such, we provide evidence for the idea that looking down (up) is consistently associated with proximity (distance). Study 1B shows that looking down (up) is not merely associated with proximity (distance), but that these bodily movements are also used as informative input in distance judgments. Specifically, study 1B shows that objects are imagined as being more distal (proximate) when looking up (down) while listening to and imagining a scene description.

To address our main proposition, study 2 registers the influence of looking up versus down on level of construal. Looking down indeed leads to more concrete-level processing compared to looking up. Moreover, as a multitude of movements (cf. eye, head, or back movements) may enable people to attend to lower versus higher placed information, this study distinguishes between these different movements and shows that they all affect level of construal in a similar manner, which in turn has an influence on product categorization. Specifically, looking down leads to lower levels of construal and narrower brand categorizations, in the sense that brands get categorized into a larger number of smaller categories.

Moreover, study 3 shows that the effect of looking down (up) on level of construal is moderated by the extent to which people associate looking down (up) with proximity (distance). Those with stronger distance associations exhibit a larger influence of looking down (up) on level of construal compared to those with weaker distance associations. Whereas the findings of study 3 already suggest that the effect of looking down versus up on level of construal can be traced back to differential distance associations, study 4 provides more direct evidence for this proposition by showing that the effect is mediated by spatial distance estimations. Specifically, participants estimated the distance to a cross taped on the wall in front of them. In the two conditions, the cross was equally distant, though in one condition it was taped in a low position (cf. 80 cm above floor-level), whereas in the other condition it was taped in a high position (250 cm above floor-level).

The final studies 5A and 5B demonstrate that the identification of a link between looking down (up) and proximity (distance) is relevant as we show that level of construal is not only linked to product categorization (cf. study 2), but also to preference–decision consistency. We show that looking down leads to more preference-consistent decision making compared to looking up and this effect is mediated by level of construal.

Taken together, our studies provide substantial evidence that consumer behavior differs markedly, depending on whether looking up or down. The reported studies consistently indicate that looking down concretizes processing, whereas looking up abstracts it, due to two deeply ingrained associations: between looking down (up) and proximity (distance), and between proximity (distance) and a concrete (abstracts) processing style.

Concrete processing then affects consumers’ categorization process: They assign brands to more differentiated, less inclusive product categories. We also show that more concrete conceptualization has consequences for brand choices and preference stability. Preference stability and preference–decision correspondence increases for people looking down rather than up. Therefore, the choice of products placed on a lower shelf will differ from the choice of the same products that appear on a higher shelf.

Whereas prior research addressing vertical position effects has focused mainly on the differential levels of attention paid to objects in different vertical positions (Goodrich 2010) or the inferences consumers draw from the relative vertical placement of products (Chandon et al. 2009; Raghurub and Valenzuela 2006), our results shed a different light. By focusing on the placement of all products, either in low or high vertical positions, we reveal that lower positions can be advantageous, in that brand choices are more in line with brand preferences. This finding has considerable practical importance, especially for small retailers that offer a limited number of brands within each product category, usually concentrated at one shelf.

REFERENCES


