Self-Construal and Temporal Distance

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Three experiments explore the relationship between self-view and temporal construal and its implications for consumer research. Studies 1 and 2 provide evidence that an independent self-view is associated with high-level abstract representations that are more distant in time, and an interdependent self-view is associated with low-level specific representations that are temporally proximal. Study 3 explores the implications of these findings for consumer research by demonstrating that a fit between one’s self-view and the temporal framing of a marketing message leads to systematic changes in message effectiveness and product appeal. The psychological processes driving these persuasion effects are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Different research streams have examined how the temporal distance to an event influences responses to this event by changing the way people represent it in the mind. Temporal construal theory (Liberman and Trope 1998) posits that the further away into the future an event is, the more likely it is represented in abstract, high-level terms rather than specific, low-level terms. The inverse of this relationship is less clear. Does elaborating on the low-level contextual features of a future event make it appear closer to the present? And does abstracting from the contextual details shift the event further in mental time?

This research identifies a possible antecedent of temporal construal and explores the implications for persuasion in a consumer context. We suggest that the view people hold about themselves as individuals and in relation to others influences the extent to which they represent future events in abstract or in specific terms and the perceived temporal distance to these events. Research on cross-cultural differences in information processing suggests that individuals with an interdependent self-view form representations of the self in relation to others that are concrete and often embedded in specific social contexts. In contrast, those with an independent self-view tend to ignore the specific situation and focus more on global, context-invariant features (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Masuda and Kitayama 2004; Morris and Peng 1994). Based on these findings, it is plausible that individuals with a more accessible interdependent self-view form more elaborate context-dependent representations of future events and hence perceive these events as more proximal. In contrast, those with a more accessible independent self-view form more abstract context-invariant representations of future events, and therefore perceive the events as more distant in time.

A different line of support for the proposed relationship between self-view and temporal construal comes from the regulatory focus literature which suggests that promotion goals are perceived as more temporally removed from the present compared to prevention goals (Pennington and Roese 2003). Similarly, the “pros” of an action are more salient in decision making for the more distant future whereas “cons” are more salient in decision making for the near future (Eyal et al. 2004). Previous research has shown that individuals with an independent self-view are likely to be promotion focused and sensitive to gains and non-gains, and individuals with an interdependent self-view are more likely to be prevention focused and sensitive to losses and non-losses (Lee et al. 2000). Thus, we propose that an independent self-view, relative to an interdependent self-view, should induce a distant temporal perspective when construing future events; we further explore the implications of the proposed relationship for persuasion and for consumer behavior by examining the effect of a fit between one’s self-view and the temporal framing of a marketing message on the message effectiveness and the attractiveness of the advertised product. We demonstrate that when the temporal framing of an advertising message is compatible with the self-view of the recipient, the message is more persuasive and the target product receives more favorable evaluations. We explore the mechanisms underlying these persuasion effects and show that they are driven by greater attention to information compatible with the recipient’s self-view.

In experiment 1, we tested whether situationally activating an independent or an interdependent self-view resulted in varying degrees of mental abstraction. We first prompted participants to think either of themselves or of close others and then examined their performance on a task involving the classification of objects into categories. According to construal level theory, high-level abstract categories are more inclusive than low-level specific categories (Liberman, Sagristano, and Trope 2002). Therefore, if an independent self-view, relative to an interdependent self-view, leads people to construe objects at a more abstract level, independent individuals should use fewer and broader categories to classify objects. Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the independent-prime condition formed significantly fewer groups in the categorization task than participants in the interdependent-prime condition.

In experiment 2, we tested if thinking about goals related to the self vs. goals related to close others resulted in temporally extended estimates of goal initiation and completion times. Results indicated that when the self (vs. close others) was central in the motivation for working towards a goal, the goal was perceived as requiring a more substantial investment of time, hence the event was construed as occurring further into the future.

Finally, in experiment 3 we explored the persuasive implications of the relationship between self-view and temporal construal in a consumer context and showed that a match between one’s self-view and the temporal framing of an advertising message resulted in more favorable evaluations of the message. We further demonstrated that these persuasion effects were driven by differential attention paid to a message that was compatible vs. incompatible with the participant’s self-view, as manifested in greater interest and enhanced ability to assess the quality of the message arguments under conditions of compatibility.

In summary, this research suggests that the way people represent events in time may in part be a function of the view they hold of themselves in relation to others. The proposed relationship between self-view and temporal construal has implications for consumer research as it suggests strategies to enhance advertisement effectiveness and product appeal. The findings also contribute to the literatures on self and on temporal construal theory.

References


