Effects of Two Dimensions of Psychological Distance on Consumer Judgments

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The present research investigated how two different dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., temporal distance and social distance) can affect individuals’ evaluations of products or events. In experiment 1 and 2, social distance was induced first, followed by temporal distance, whereas in experiment 3, the order was reversed. However, regardless of the order in which temporal and social dimensions were induced, results from three experiments consistently indicated that the effects of one psychological distance dimension were moderated by the other dimension. Specifically, the well-documented effects of psychological distance on construal levels only held on one dimension when the other dimension was psychologically proximal, but such effects were wiped out when the other dimension was psychologically distal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Imagine that you are planning a trip to Las Vegas for the coming weekend and are reading some reviews on a particular hotel written by other travelers on an online forum. Will the identity of the reviewer (e.g., someone with the same occupation as you or someone from a different walk of life) influence your judgments of the hotel? How would your reactions be different if you are planning a trip in six months from now instead? Prior research on construal level theory (CLT) suggests that an individual’s judgment of an event (e.g., hotel) is contingent on the psychological distance from the event (e.g., whether it is temporally near or distant; Liberman, Sagristano, and Trope 2002; Trope and Liberman 2003). According to CLT, individuals represent psychologically proximal events in low-level construals, whereas they represent psychologically distal events in high-level construals. These differences in the construals of events lead to differences in individuals’ evaluations of the events. However, the prior research on construal level theory has focused only on a single dimension of psychological distance; little, if any, has examined how multiple dimensions interact to influence individuals’ evaluations. In the present paper, we extend the CLT literature by investigating how these two dimensions of psychological distance, namely, temporal and social distance will influence consumers’ evaluations of events and products.

We examined three possible alternative accounts concerning the effect of two dimensions of psychological distance (representation account, anchoring account, and mental distance account) and tested these accounts in three experiments. Specifically, in experiment 1, we manipulated social distance of an event (i.e., an event occurs to self vs. to an unknown person) first and temporal distance (event for tomorrow vs. one year later) second, and investigated the effects on a variety of decision making situations. In experiment 2, we adopted a different manipulation of social distance (i.e., in-group vs. out-group) and examined the effects of two dimensions on consumers’ evaluations of a new product. In experiment 3, we changed the order in which the two psychological distance dimensions were induced. We manipulated the temporal distance first, followed by the social distance. Converging evidence, which strongly supported the mental account distance account, emerged across the three experiments, with different manipulation methods, different orders of manipulations, and different stimuli.

The mental distance account posits that when two dimensions of psychological distance (e.g., temporal and social distance) are involved in a decision situation, these two dimensions would interactively affect the perceived distance of an event along an individual’s mental distance horizon, which in turn will influence construals and evaluations of the event. Specifically, when both of the two dimensions are proximal, the event will be perceived as proximal and construed at low-level construals, resulting in evaluations more consistent with the value associated with low-level construals. However, when either one of the dimensions is psychologically distal, the event will be perceived as distal and construed at high-level construals, resulting in evaluations more consistent with the value associated with high-level construals. Therefore, the well-documented effects of a single psychological distance dimension on event construals will only hold when the other dimension is psychologically proximal.

References


