Using Construal-Level Theory to Deter Social Desirability Responding

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Socially sensitive issues have a tendency to elicit social desirability responding (SDR). Across three studies, we apply construal level-theory to attenuate SDR. In sum, we find that increasing construal-levels successfully attenuates SDR within surveys and consumer choices and that impression management mediates this effect.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Social desirability responding (SDR) is the tendency of respondents to adjust their responses or behavior in such a way as to present themselves in socially acceptable terms (Maccoby and Maccoby 1954). The systematic bias introduced by SDR threatens the legitimacy of empirical research by confounding a phenomenon of interest with impression management behavior, thus obscuring research results and potentially triggering false conclusions (see Fisher 1993; Ganster, Hennessey, and Luthans 1983). When SDR is a concern (e.g., when asking socially sensitive, embarrassing, or private questions), researchers commonly use techniques such as indirect questioning to avoid the bias introduced by SDR. By asking respondents how most or the typical person would respond (i.e., referring to a third party target) the respondent transcends from an egocentric focus on his or her own unflattering attitudes or behavior onto that of an ambiguous target. Given the target’s indistinctness, respondents project their own feelings, attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs when responding while remaining psychologically distanced from the true, yet socially undesirable response (Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Grubb and Stern 1971; Haire 1950).

According to construal-level theory (CLT) this process of “transcendence” is made possible because individuals are able to form abstract mental construals (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2003; Trope and Liberman 2010). This mental construal process is essential to recalling the past, empathizing with others, imagining what could have been, and visualizing future events. As mental construals increase, individuals re-focus from detailed, incidental features to central, fundamental characteristics (Trope and Liberman 2010). Consequently, we propose that indirect questioning prompts respondents to de-emphasize the contextual demand to engage in impression management behavior through an increase in construal-levels.

In our project, we apply CLT to develop and explain novel techniques deterring SDR. To test the effectiveness of our techniques, we chose two contexts known to exhibit SDR (consumer surveys and consumer choices). In study 1 we demonstrate that increasing construal-levels through psychological distances decreases SDR within a survey context. To gain deeper insights into the cognitive mechanism, we directly manipulated construal-levels in study 2, and found that increasing construal-levels directly decreased SDR on a subsequent choice task. In study 3, we examined a mediational model establishing relationships between psychological distance, impression management, and choice.

STUDY 1
To investigate whether increasing construal-levels through psychological distances might attenuate SDR within a survey we had 453 participants complete seven marketing scales shown or suspect to elicit SDR: Materialism (Richins 2004), Impulsive Buying Tendency (Martin, Weun, and Beatty 1994), CSR (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001), Green Orientation (Dunlop and Van Liere 1978), Frequency of Healthy Preventative Behaviors (Jayanti and Burns 1998), Television Viewing Frequency, and Regulation of Alcohol Consumption, while manipulating the questioning format according to the dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., temporal, spatial, or social distance). Participants also completed a measure of SDR using Paulhus’ (1991) BIRD scale.

To detect the presence of SDR, we implemented Steenkamp et al.’s (2010) substance versus style approach and regressed the two dimensions of SDR onto each marketing scale. In support of our hypotheses, when using direct questioning, five of the seven constructs exhibited a non-negligible relationship with one of SDRs two factors. We hypothesized that indirect questioning increasing social or spatial distance would attenuate SDR, while temporal distance would enhance SDR given research on the future optimism effect (see Regan, Snyder, and Kassin 1995; Weinstein 1980). Results indicate that whereas indirect questioning increasing social or spatial distance reduced the number of scales demonstrating a non-negligible relationship with SDR (compared to direct measures), indirect questioning increasing temporal distance increased this number, thus lending preliminary support to our hypotheses.

STUDY 2
Previous research demonstrates a bidirectional relationship between the psychological distance dimensions and construal-level, such as that construal-levels increase, inferred psychological distances increase, and vice versa (Trope and Liberman 2010). In study 2 we explored the mediational role of construal-levels and extended our findings to a consumer choice context. Consumers construe sustainable actions, products, and attitudes as pro-social in nature (i.e., beneficial to society), as a result, there exists a social pressure to display behaviors endorsing sustainability (see Luchs et al. 2010). Consistent with our hypothesis that increasing construal-levels will decrease SDR we found that when we increased construal-levels through an ostensibly unrelated mind-set task (Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004), the share of choice for a non-sustainable (vs. sustainable) laundry detergent increased from 10% to 27% in a subsequent choice task ($\chi^2(1,97) = 4.48, p < .05$).

STUDY 3
To provide additional clarity into the underlying mechanism, in study 3, we manipulated self-presentation demand and the psychological distance of the choice task while incorporating a measure of SDR (N=406). Self-presentation demand was manipulated by asking participants to present themselves as favorably as possible during the experiment (see Paulhus 2002). To test the generalizability of our results we incorporated two choice tasks each between a sustainable and non-sustainable option. The results provide evidence of an indirect-only moderated mediation model (see figure 1). When the demand to engage in impression management behavior was high, increasing the psychological distance of the choice task successfully deterred respondents from engaging in deliberate SDR. We also report a significant relationship between the impression management dimension of SDR and choice, whereby the impression management tendency increased the likelihood of selecting the sustainable (vs. non-sustainable) laundry detergent ($\beta = .37$, Wald $\chi^2 = 8.63, p < .004$) and hand sanitizer ($\beta = .34$, Wald $\chi^2 = 5.67, p < .02$). A significant indirect effect between our interaction term and choice through impression management provided evidence of the mediational process and identified the distortion as deliberate for both laundry detergents ($\beta = .18, p < .05$) and hand sanitizers ($\beta = .16, p < .05$).
The results support our hypothesis that increasing construal-levels directly or through psychological distances deters SDR by deemphasizing contextual demands to engage in impression management behavior, thus, encouraging respondents to report accurate responses. This research has important methodological and substantive implications for marketers, researchers, and consumer psychologists.

REFERENCES


