R U Close? Txt Me: Psychological Distance, Urgency, and Message Format

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Modern technology allows us to send messages across new and diverse distances, but little research has evaluated how different formats affect how we perceive these distances. This research suggests that when it comes to interpreting information, not all forms of communication are created equal. Communication using different formats is shown to alter recipients' perception of temporal (Study 1), spatial (Study 2), social (Study 3), and hypothetical distance (Study 4). There is a significant relationship between formatting and psychological distance, which is partially mediated by perceived sender urgency (Study 4) and for which the format-distance effects can be reversed by altering the perceived sender urgency within a format (Study 5).

In our first study, participants were asked to imagine that they had ordered food from their favorite restaurant and had just received a text message or email from the delivery service saying “Hey, sorry for the delay! Unexpected traffic. Will be there soon” and asked how long it would be before the food arrived (in minutes). We found that participants believed that the food would be delivered sooner when the message was received via text message than via email. This result indicates that the reception of a text message leads to lower estimates of temporal distance (decreased psychological distance) than the reception of an identically worded email.

In our second study, participants were told they had just received a text message (email) from their favorite food truck saying “Hey, our Food Truck will be near you at lunch today! Check out the exact location on our app to receive a 10% discount!” and asked how far away they believed the food truck would be from their location (in miles) at lunch that day. We found that participants believed that the food truck would be spatially closer to their location when the message was received via text message than via email. This result indicates that the reception of a text message leads to perceptions of decreased spatial distance (decreased psychological distance) between the sender and recipient compared to an identically worded email.

In our third study, we found that participants felt closer to the communicator who sent the message via text message than via email. These findings indicate that the reception of a text message leads to greater levels of felt social closeness (decreased psychological distance) with the sender than the reception of an identical email.

In our fourth study, we propose that text messages (relative to email messages) will decrease the perception of hypothetical distance (increased event-likelihood) of events related to the sender’s actions. We also examine the process through which message format affects psychological distance. Particularly, we wanted to see whether the perceived urgency of the sender would act as a temporal distance reference point (greater urgency approximating for shorter time) from which to make assimilative judgments about an unknown distance (closer in time leading to closer judgments of other distances) (Maglio, Trope, Liberman, 2013).

To examine this, participants were asked to imagine that they had decided to attend a new exercise or personal training session at their local gym or club. After their first session, the trainer told them that sometimes they are able to get discounts for new members who train with them. The trainer tells them that they will check whether they are eligible for the discount and let the participant know. Participants were asked to imagine that a few days later they looked down at their phones to see that they had received either a text message or email from the trainer. We then asked participants how likely they believed they were to get the discount as well as how urgently they believed the trainer wanted to convey his message.

We found that participants believed that they were more likely to receive the discount when the message was received via text message than via email. We also found that participants perceived higher levels of sender urgency when the trainer sent his message via text message) than via email. Perceived sender urgency was found to partially mediate the relationship between message format and hypothetical distance judgments using a bootstrap analysis (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) with five thousand resamples. This result provides evidence that the reception of a text message leads to higher estimation of event-likelihood or probability (decreased psychological distance) for sender-related events than the reception of an identically worded email and that this relationship is partially mediated by perceived sender urgency.

In our fifth study, we propose that by altering sender urgency we can alter perceptions of psychological distance regardless of the messaging format in which those messages are received. To examine this, participants were told they had just received an ostensibly non-urgent text message (or ostensibly urgent email) from their favorite food truck saying “Hey, our Food Truck will be near you this afternoon but we’re here all week (for one day only)! Check out the exact location on our app to receive a 15% discount, redeemable anytime (immediately)! See you there (soon)!” Participants were then asked how far away they believed the food truck would be from their location (in miles) at lunch time. We found that participants believed that the food truck would be spatially closer to their location when the message was received via urgent email than via non-urgent text. This result indicates that the perception of greater sender urgency, regardless of messaging format, leads to perceptions of decreased spatial distance (decreased psychological distance) between the sender and recipient.

Our investigation provides evidence that communication format can alter the perception of psychological distance through its effect on perceived sender urgency. When we perceive a message to have been sent more urgently we perceive the sender and message content to be closer in space, sooner in time, more socially connect and more likely. These findings are important for marketers and consumer psychologists as they provide a foundation from which to begin to understand how changing technology can impact our judgment, decision-making, and behaviour.