

Exploring Psychological Distance and Construal Level in Word-of-Mouth Intention Literature

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Abstract

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication shapes consumer behaviour and decision-making processes. This research investigates the interplay of psychological distance and construal level theory within word-of-mouth intention, providing insights into how these psychological constructs influence individuals' intentions to engage in WOM communication. The study adopts a comprehensive approach, initiating an in-depth review of the existing literature on word-of-mouth intention. It highlights the relatively underexplored connections between psychological distance and construal level and identifies gaps in our understanding of these constructs in the context of WOM intention. Subsequently, the research undertakes a systematic analysis of studies to assess the integration of psychological distance and construal level theory within WOM intention research. It examines the impact of their inclusion on our comprehension of individuals' intentions to engage in WOM communication. The findings underscore the significant role of psychological distance and construal level in shaping word-of-mouth intentions. These constructs affect not only the motivation to engage in WOM but also the content and context in which WOM communication occurs. This research provides a nuanced understanding of the factors that drive or hinder WOM intention, shedding light on the cognitive and psychological processes that underlie consumer communication. In conclusion, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how psychological distance and construal level theory can enrich our insights into word-of-mouth intentions, a critical element in contemporary marketing and consumer behaviour. As WOM continues to exert a powerful influence on brand perceptions and purchasing decisions, this research offers valuable insights for academics and practitioners seeking to leverage the dynamics of consumer communication in the digital era.

Keywords: Word-of-mouth Intention, Psychological Distance, Construal Level, Marketing Research

Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication stands as a cornerstone of contemporary marketing and consumer behavior research. As individuals increasingly rely on peer recommendations and consumer-generated content to inform their purchase decisions, understanding the motivations and psychological underpinnings of word-of-mouth intention has become imperative. This study delves into the intricate relationship between two significant psychological constructs, namely psychological distance and construal level, in the context of word-of-mouth intention.

WOM communication is widely recognized as a potent influencer of consumer behavior, with studies showing its impact on product evaluations, purchase decisions, and brand perceptions. Consequently, scholars and practitioners alike have sought to unravel the underlying factors that drive individuals to engage in WOM. Yet, despite the abundant literature on word-of-mouth intention, the incorporation of psychological distance and construal level theory remains relatively unexplored.

Psychological distance, a concept rooted in construal level theory, refers to the perceived distance between the self and an object, event, or experience. It encompasses temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical dimensions. Construal level theory, on the other hand, posits that individuals mentally construe information and experiences either at a high level of abstraction, emphasizing the "big picture," or at a low level of abstraction, focusing on details and specifics. Together, these constructs offer a nuanced lens through which to explore the cognitive processes governing word-of-mouth intention.

Our research aims to bridge this gap by examining how psychological distance and construal level influence individuals' intentions to engage in WOM communication. By integrating these psychological constructs into the context of word-of-mouth intention, we seek to unravel the cognitive processes that underlie individuals' decisions to share information, experiences, and opinions about products, services, and brands.

In the following sections of this paper, we will first delve into the existing literature on word-of-mouth intention and the relevance of psychological distance and construal level theory. Subsequently, we will outline the research methodology and data analysis procedures. The findings of this study will shed light on the multifaceted dynamics of word-of-mouth intention, providing valuable insights for both academics and marketing practitioners aiming to understand and harness the power of consumer communication in the digital age.

Review of Literature*Psychological Distance*

Psychological distance, as defined by Trope and Liberman (2010), is a subjective perception of the proximity or remoteness of an object, event, or concept from one's immediate self, time, and place. It plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer psychology and behavior by influencing how individuals perceive and mentally represent various aspects of their experiences. Psychological distance encompasses four key dimensions, as elucidated by Trope et al. (2007): temporal, spatial, hypothetical, and social distance. Trope and Liberman (2010) suggest that these dimensions can exert similar effects on cognitive construal processes, while individual behaviors can likewise influence different levels of cognitive construal.

Temporal distance pertains to the perceived gap between events occurring in the near or distant future or in the past. In contrast, spatial distance relates to the perceived separation between events transpiring in physically proximate or remote locations, a concept supported by research (Castano *et al.*, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Zhao & Xie, 2011). Social distance,

another critical dimension, refers to the perceived similarity or dissimilarity between oneself and others, considering factors such as social groups or diverse cultural backgrounds (Lieberman *et al.*, 2002; Nussbaum *et al.*, 2003). Lastly, hypothetical distance encompasses the perceived likelihood or probability of a specific event occurring (Conner, 2012).

In the context of this study, the potential to reduce both temporal and social distances between consumers and content broadcasters has been explored. Therefore, the research takes into account both temporal and social distance dimensions as integral components of the broader construct of psychological distance. This investigation aims to illuminate the intricate interplay of these dimensions and their influence on consumer behavior.

Mental Construal

Construal Level Theory (CLT), as described by Trope and Liberman (2003) and Fujita *et al.* (2006), posits that events or objects can be represented at multiple levels of abstraction. High-level construals involve the creation of abstract conceptualizations of information related to specific objects and events. This process entails a selective focus on relevant features while excluding irrelevant ones, as observed in various studies (Fujita *et al.*, 2006; Liberman *et al.*, 2002; Trope & Liberman, 2003). Therefore, high-level construals can be seen as capturing the overarching and fundamental characteristics of an object or event, abstracting these high-level and unchanging attributes to convey the general meaning of the event (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

In contrast, low-level construals encompass dependent and incidental characteristics, presenting events and objects in a distinct and concrete manner (Lieberman *et al.*, 2007). It is important to note that in low-level construals, events and objects are perceived as more concrete and differentiated in their characteristics.

WOM intention

Word-of-mouth (WOM) intention is commonly defined as a customer's inclination to share their experiences with other customers concerning products or services (Kim & Park, 2013). Consumers often engage in WOM communication after completing their shopping process (Mikalef *et al.*, 2013). WOM serves as a pivotal component of the marketing communication toolkit, integrated into the promotional mix (Stephen, 2016; Wanasida, 2021). Unlike formal interactions with company personnel or businesses, WOM involves informal exchanges between private individuals, aimed at assessing the quality of goods and services (Anderson, 1998). WOM can encompass both favorable and unfavorable statements about a product or company, originating from potential, current, or past customers. Traditionally, WOM is disseminated to a wide audience, including individuals and institutions, often facilitated through online platforms (Hellier *et al.*, 2003).

Furthermore, WOM marketing extends to the sharing of enjoyable, memorable, and novel product experiences with others. Recommending a product to peers or acquaintances positively influences customer attraction (Anderson, 1998; Mikalef *et al.*, 2013). In the context of social commerce, WOM intention encompasses the act of sharing information about a website's products and services, along with recommending the platform's usage (Meilatinova, 2021).

Drawing on the frameworks introduced by Kim and Park (2013) and Meilatinova (2021), this study delineates WOM intention as the probability that customers will disseminate positive information regarding a social commerce website or live room and recommend such platforms to others through personal communications.

Psychological Distance and Construal Level in Word-of-mouth Intention Research

Consumers tend to exhibit varying WOM intentions that align with their activated construals. For instance, when it comes to e-Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), the congruence between temporal distance and message concreteness can have a significant impact on consumers' WOM intentions (Trope and Liberman, 2010), potentially increasing WOM intentions among individuals with strong ties (Choi *et al.*, 2017). In simpler terms, consumers may show a preference for durable goods when experiencing a distant psychological distance, leading to a high construal (Liberman & Trope, 1998). This inclination might steer them toward platforms like text-based blogs or microblogs (e.g., Twitter), which typically involve a longer decision-making process before purchase (Choi *et al.*, 2017).

Conversely, consumers may lean toward convenience goods when they perceive a closer psychological distance, resulting in a low construal (Liberman & Trope, 1998). In this scenario, they are more likely to choose platforms that are visually intensive, such as Instagram or Pinterest, where they can share pictures of their products and endorsements. These platforms typically involve a shorter period between product discovery and purchase (Choi *et al.*, 2017).

The connection between psychological distance and construal level theory has been extensively researched and well-documented. For instance, Trope and Liberman (2010) asserted that the greater the psychological distance, the higher the level of mental abstraction. Conversely, events perceived as psychologically close are characterized by a concrete low-level construal, emphasizing highly contextual and specific features (Bar-Anan *et al.*, 2006; Nussbaum *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, objects that are psychologically distant are typically represented in an abstract, high-level construal manner, relying on generalized schemas rather than specific details. On the other hand, objects that are psychologically close are represented in a concrete, low-level construal, with a greater focus on specific details rather than generalized abstractions (Yan, 2012).

Conclusion

This research delved into the intricate relationship between psychological distance and construal level theory within the context of word-of-mouth (WOM) intention, shedding light on how these psychological constructs significantly influence individuals' intentions to engage in WOM communication. As WOM continues to play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior and decision-making processes, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics underlying this phenomenon.

The association between psychological distance and construal level theory has been extensively demonstrated and well-documented. The research concurs with Trope and Liberman (2010) that greater psychological distance results in higher levels of mental abstraction. In contrast, events perceived as psychologically close are characterized by concrete, low-level construals, focusing on specific, context-dependent features (Bar-Anan *et al.*, 2006; Nussbaum *et al.*, 2003). Objects or events that are psychologically distant are typically represented with abstract, high-level construals, relying on generalized schemas rather than specific details. Conversely, psychologically close objects are represented with concrete, low-level construals, emphasizing specific details rather than generalized abstractions (Yan, 2012).

Our findings underscore the significance of these psychological constructs in shaping word-of-mouth intentions, influencing not only the motivation to engage in WOM but also the content and context in which WOM communication occurs. In the realm of WOM, the

influence of psychological distance and construal level is paramount, as they guide individuals in how they share information and experiences about products, services, and brands.

As we navigate the digital age, where consumer communication is increasingly shaped by peer recommendations and user-generated content, this research offers valuable insights for both academics and marketing practitioners. Understanding the cognitive and psychological processes that underlie WOM intention is critical, as it continues to exert a powerful influence on brand perceptions and purchasing decisions. This study encourages further exploration and application of psychological distance and construal level theory within the domain of marketing research, offering a nuanced perspective on consumer behavior in the contemporary marketing landscape.

In summary, this research not only advances existing theoretical frameworks but also provides practical implications for marketers operating in the digital era. The theoretical clarity of this study not only contributes to the broader field of psychology but also enhances the foundations of marketing research, providing scholars with a more sophisticated understanding of the cognitive and psychological processes influencing consumer behavior in the context of WOM. Contextually, our study furnishes practical insights for marketing practitioners, aiding their comprehension of how individuals share information and experiences related to products, services, and brands within the realm of WOM. Recognizing these dynamics is imperative for formulating effective marketing strategies that align with the preferences and cognitive processes of the contemporary consumer.

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