

# Seeing the Forest or the Trees: Implications of Construal Level Theory for Consumer Choice

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Like many important theories that were originally tested in one domain, construal level theory has broadened the notion of temporal distance to psychological distance and examined the wide ranging implications of this construct on evaluation and behavior. This commentary seeks to take a step back to admire the “forest” that has been created and suggest additional extensions and implications along the different stages of consumer decision making: goal pursuit, evaluation by way of consideration-set formation and receptivity, and finally choice influenced by context, comparability of options, and post-choice happiness and regret.

In the field of social psychology, dual processing theories have emerged as some of the most influential models in understanding and explaining the shift in people’s evaluation of objects and social situations. Many dual processing theories distinguish differences in processing along an intuitive, affective versus a deliberative, analytical dimension and hence the type of information that is emphasized (e.g., Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). More recently, however, construal level theory (CLT) with a purely cognitive orientation has risen to the forefront, focusing on the level of construals that receive greater attention or weight in evaluation. CLT states that people’s mental representations of stimuli that are psychologically near are low level and concrete while stimuli that are psychologically distant are high level and abstract. Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak (in press) outline the vast implications of CLT for research on the way individuals represent and evaluate objects and events. Like many important theories that were originally developed and tested in one domain, CLT has broadened the notion of temporal distance to other dimensions of psychological distance that has wide ranging implications.

This commentary seeks to take a step back to admire the “forest” that has been created from CLT’s different “trees” and suggests additional extensions and implications along each of the stages of the realm of consumer decision making (cf. Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, Drolet, & Nowlis, 2001): awareness in the form of goal pursuit, evaluation by way of consideration-set formation and receptivity, and finally choices as influenced by

context, comparability of options, and post-choice happiness and regret. We explore each stage in the following sections.

## CLT and Goal Pursuit

Although most research on consumers has focused on the moment of choice, recent research has attempted to integrate choices with the consideration of their underlying goals (Fishbach & Dhar, 2006). An emerging trend in this literature has been shifting from the consideration of single goal and isolated choice settings to scenarios where people pursue multiple goals through a sequence of choices. For example, Fishbach and Dhar (2005) found that when in the presence of multiple competing goals, people can either opt to behave in ways that are consistent with a goal or behave in ways that disengage from one goal in favor of an alternate goal. It depends on whether an initial action is interpreted in terms of goal commitment or goal progress. The relative focus on goal-commitment versus goal-progress has, in turn, opposite implications for the direction of self-regulation through subsequent choice. When a goal-related action or behavior signals commitment to a goal, it increases goal motivation and thus increases the likelihood that an individual will subsequently behave in goal-consistent ways. However, when a goal-related action or behavior signals progress, the partial goal attainment serves as a justification to disengage from the goal temporarily and choose actions that serve other, even inconsistent, goals (Fishbach & Dhar, 2006). An interesting question is regarding the set of factors that can determine whether a specific action is interpreted in terms of goal progress or goal commitment. The fact that CLT distinguishes between a high-level identification in which an activity is linked to its superordinate

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purpose and a low-level identification in which the activity is linked to its subordinate means suggests that the construal level would determine the interpretation of an action. This posits that an individual who interprets his past goal-related actions in terms of low-level construal (e.g., studying in the library) may see it in terms of having made goal progress and be more likely to disengage from this goal and move to satisfy other goals as opposed to an individual who interprets his action in terms of high-level construal (e.g., doing well academically). We describe such a study later.

Fishbach, Dhar, and Zhang (2006) also explored the implication of the above account by studying the effect of breaking up a goal into its subgoals—several goal-related actions—on subsequent behavior. They examined how individuals chose to engage in or disengage from subsequent goal-related actions after completing a subgoal, depending upon the relative focus on the specific subgoal attainment (presumably a low-level construal) relative to the higher order goal that initiated the action (presumably a high-level construal). In one study, they examined how individuals chose subgoals in various self-regulatory domains (e.g., preventing sun damage, succeeding academically, staying in shape). To vary the accessibility of the overall goal, participants were either primed with the superordinate goal or not. Next, participants rated their interest in pursuing a subgoal toward the overall instance, participants were asked to rate their interest in studying at night, after learning that they studied only in the morning. They found that in the absence of the goal prime, those who already pursued (vs. not pursued) an initial subgoal were subsequently less interested in similar, congruent subgoals which were seen as substitutable. However, in the presence of the goal prime, those who already pursued (vs. not pursued) an initial subgoal were subsequently more interested in other subgoals which were seen as complementary. Thus, those who studied during the day were subsequently less interested in studying at night when the focus was on the action by itself, and they were more motivated to study at night when the focus was on the overall goal.

An interesting implication is whether the goal priming manipulation placed participants in a higher construal that led to an action being seen in terms of a higher construal and hence strengthened goal commitment. In lieu of priming the superordinate goal, CLT suggests that an activity in the distant future will be more likely to be identified in high-level terms. Fishbach et al. (2006) further found that by manipulating temporal distance, people construe the attainment of a subgoal as commitment to a higher superordinate goal when the subgoal is temporally distant. But when the subgoal is temporally proximal, its attainment is construed as progress toward that subgoal. The findings of these studies indeed lend support to the notion that construal-level mindset affects whether a progress or commitment mindset is evoked in interpreting a goal-related behavior. And more broadly, when manipulated to be in an abstract

mindset or when primed to approach a goal abstractly, people may come to see beyond the imminent subgoal at hand and consider their actions as part of the broader superordinate goal.

### CLT and Evaluation: Consideration-set Formation

Once individuals have determined which goals to pursue, consideration sets are ways to narrow down an array of options and approach another step closer to the final choice and the goal. There has been some research looking at multistage screening and decision-making process to determine the relative importance of attributes. For example, Chakravarti, Janiszewski, and Ulkumen (2006) examined the use and neglect of various prescreening information in the creation of consideration sets and arrival at ultimate choice. They found that information or attributes that were used in the creation stage are neglected in the choice stage. However, there seems to be little research as to whether particular types of attributes may receive greater attention in the respective screening and choice stages. Past research points at a potential for CLT to explain the types of product attributes considered at each stage. CLT might posit that in the formation of consideration sets, the consumer mindset is at a greater psychological distance from the moment of purchase, and hence abstract attributes of the products are crucial (e.g., quality). Conversely, at the time of the final purchase decision, it is the low-level, concrete, or peripheral features (e.g., price) that might be emphasized. In a similar vein, the choice between two “menus of options” might be made using high-level construals whereas the choice within a menu of a final purchase may be made considering the low-level construals. The senior author often finds himself going to a fast food restaurant that also has healthier options (a high-level construal) but inevitably ends up ordering the less healthy item from the menu once at the restaurant.

### CLT and Evaluation: Receptivity

The third area of extension is the realm of preferences based on product features and distance. Thomas, Chadran, and Trope (2006) examined the effect of feature enhancement on purchase intent. In line with the results of Liberman and Trope (1998) that high-level construal corresponds with desirability while low-level construal corresponds with feasibility, Thomas et al. (2006) manipulated the salience of a product’s desirability (e.g., addition of features) or its feasibility (e.g., price) and showed its effect on purchase intent for near versus distant future. While purchase intent is certainly important, Kim, Dhar, and Novemsky (2007) posit that attention, persuasion, and recall of features of products are also crucial in consumer decision making and susceptible to construal effects. They introduce the concept of receptivity and its implications for advertising messages and subsequent evaluation and purchase intent of the target

product. Receptivity can be defined as consumers' conscious and unconscious readiness to accept, process, and respond to brand messaging. Receptivity is stimulated by a consumer's needs, interests, and values and will fluctuate over time. One important variable that might moderate consumer receptivity is the temporal or spatial distance between the message communication and the actual consumption or the purchase decision. This "distance" can be thought of as psychological distance; as this distance increases, the stimulus takes on an increasingly higher level abstract construal. So as to increase consumer attention to ads and product claims, Kim, Dhar et al. (2007) hypothesize that advertisements' claims should be congruent with the distance from which it will be viewed by consumers. Put differently, ads seen at some distance should accentuate the product's core central features (e.g., cleaning effectiveness, etc. for detergents), while those ads seen from a close distance such as in-store messages should emphasize the product's secondary peripheral features (e.g., on sale, easy to carry, etc.). In addition to featuring core central claims, the distant ad claims should emphasize the desirability of the product as opposed to its feasibility, while the reverse would be true for near ad claims (Liberman & Trope, 1998). As psychological distance increases, advertisements featuring higher level construal—core, central claims—will yield greater receptivity, while as psychological distance decreases, advertisements with low-level construal—peripheral claims—will produce greater receptivity.

Furthermore, Kim, Dhar et al. (2007) propose that the effects of heightened attention persist over time. As mentioned above, the notion of receptivity includes how well consumers encode the advertising claims and to what extent consumers believe those claims. The prediction here is that distance-congruent claims will result in more attention which leads to better recall and perhaps greater ad believability. The effect of construal level on receptivity has practical implications for advertisers who seek to enhance the persuasiveness and believability of their ads and in turn increase the market share of their products. Many marketers believe that repeated exposure to same advertising messages and claims is the best way to affect purchase intent. In contrast, Kim, Dhar et al. (2007) hypothesize that marketers should expose consumers to differential claims that are distance congruent to increase receptivity. As receptivity to advertising messages increases, choices and future purchase intent should increase as well.

### CLT and Choice

The implications of CLT for consumer choice are consistent with the viewpoint of behavioral decision theory (BDT) that has moved away from the notion of preformed stable preferences to a now widely accepted notion of constructed preferences leading to choices that are highly dependent on task or contextual factors (for a review, see Simonson et al.,

2001). As such, one area of BDT is the study of context effects in choice; the compromise effect and the attraction effect are examples of shifting preferences based on different considerations in a choice situation (cf. Dhar & Simonson, 2003). Dhar, Nowlis, and Sherman (2000) attribute these context-influenced shifts in choices to individuals' focus on local relational tradeoffs between the provided alternatives. An interesting question to examine then is whether the effects of the local tradeoff context would be attenuated when respondents are manipulated to take a higher level, abstract, and distant perspective. Within this framework, the shift in representation, evaluation, and behavior based on the psychological distance might enrich our understanding of the manner in which preferences are constructed, not only as a function of decision task or context but also based on the psychological distance from the decision.

While CLT researchers have already identified interesting effects on choice, it has not been extended to understanding consumer choice between noncomparable options. Most of the literature in consumer decision making focuses on choice between two or more options that are of the same product category and are therefore comparable on several product attributes (e.g., two microwaves or two coffee makers). Much less research, however, has examined choices between noncomparable options or options that are not in the same product category (e.g., a microwave and a coffee maker). A major finding in this area of decision making is that consumers employ certain effortful strategies when choosing between noncomparable options; consumers tend to look at the abstract features rather than the concrete features of color, number of cooking options on a microwave, and number of cups of coffee that can be made per brewing (Johnson, 1984, 1988). And since it requires much effort to create an overall evaluation, it is believed that noncomparable choices are often more difficult. However, relatively little is understood about the antecedents and consequences of such difficulty for consumer choice.

An important moderator of the difficulty of noncomparable choices can be the way in which the options are construed by the consumer. The difficulty of the choice task can be decreased or increased by manipulating consumers so that they are in an abstract or concrete mindset. In particular, a high-level construal should facilitate the combining of features into more abstract features and subsequently decrease the feeling of choice difficulty. A low-level construal, on the other hand, should inhibit such processes and lead to an increase in choice difficulty. Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak (2007) provide a review of the wide and numerous means through which construal level can be manipulated that has implications for choice among noncomparable options.

In an ongoing project, Kim, Khan, and Dhar (2007) manipulated the construal level of consumers and examined its effects on noncomparable choice options. They found that the manipulation of the construal level of the choice has an effect on the perceived difficulty of the decision. By

putting subjects in an abstract or concrete mindset using a how versus why task (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004), they were able to affect decision difficulty ratings. Specifically, participants were first asked either to answer the question “why one studies” or “how ones studies.” After completion of this task, participants made a choice between two unrelated, noncomparable choices—\$50 worth of video games and a \$50 box of chocolates—and indicated on a scale how difficult they found the choice to be. As expected, those participants who had been put in the abstract mindset by answering “why one studies” found the choice significantly less difficult than those who had been put in the concrete mindset. Construal thus affected the decision difficulty of noncomparable options.

An interesting extension would be to explore the potential consequences of the difficulty in noncomparable choices. In the real world, when individuals struggle with making a decision, they almost always have the option of not choosing and not purchasing either alternative, or of delaying the decision until a later time. Dhar (1997) has shown that when the decision is viewed as difficult, consumers’ preference for the no-choice or the deferral option increases even though the available options are viewed as being attractive. The prediction concerning no-choice or deferral option is that those consumers who are either in abstract mindsets or in choice situations presented in psychologically distant terms will experience less choice difficulty and will therefore exhibit less of a tendency to select the no-choice option than those consumers in concrete mindsets and psychologically proximal scenarios. In fact, Kim, Khan et al. (2007) found that construal levels affect not only decision difficulty ratings but also the degree of choice deferral in the above predicted pattern. They manipulated social distance as a means of inducing the high- and low-level construals. Following Eyal, Liberman, Trope, and Walther (2004, Study 4), participants were instructed to either make a choice for themselves or for an acquaintance. Those being asked to choose for an acquaintance were instructed to imagine an individual with whom they do not have a close relationship but see on a regular basis at work or in class, and write down his or her initials. Results show that those participants choosing among noncomparable options for themselves, and thus in a more concrete mindset, were more likely to defer the choice than those participants choosing for an acquaintance and in a more abstract mindset. Another potential consequence of the difficulty in noncomparable choices is the level of satisfaction with decisions. A construal manipulation should be able to affect the perceived ease as well as the ability to process abstractly or concretely, and in turn affect decision satisfaction.

### CLT and Post-choice

An interesting question to consider through the lens of CLT is what happens once individuals have made their decisions.

In other words, when do people make better decisions as reflected by their happiness with the chosen option? It is possible that immediate satisfaction may reflect the low-level construal of the choice option such as the details of the decision and the peripheral features of the product. But over time or when looking back on the decision, individuals might naturally take a more distant perspective looking at quality, central features of products, and other overall preferences. To the extent that the choice at the moment focused on lower level construals, individuals may feel less happy if they forgo options that were superior on higher level features and therefore be more inclined to reverse their decisions. Unhappiness or less happiness in turn inevitably leads to regret (for a related discussion see Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). It would be interesting to explore the idea that choice regret is moderated by the perspective, whether near or distant, that individuals take when reevaluating a past decision or selection.

A related question is the potential contribution of CLT in understanding the fundamental differences in people’s concurrent and retrospective (or prospective) reports of experiences. As Schwarz, Kahneman, and Xu (in press) summarize, retrospective reports as well as prediction of future feelings often converge but simultaneously and systematically diverge from concurrent report of their feelings (e.g., pleasure from their children). These differences have been explained in terms of an accessibility model such that concurrent ratings reflect the real time affective experience (e.g., crying or needy child) whereas the retrospective evaluations are often based on semantic knowledge or general beliefs as the episodic memory of the experience may no longer be available (e.g., enjoyment from having kids). Interestingly, a testable hypotheses based on CLT would be that people show a greater reliance on the general beliefs even when the episodic memory is available but the evaluation is psychologically distant.

## CONCLUSION

The strength of CLT theory is in its ability to provide a parsimonious understanding of how evaluations change on the basis of the psychological distance. The emphasis of the theory is on evaluation differences based on shifting cognitive representation, but clearly evaluations of objects that are psychologically distant might also differ due to motivational factors. Although CLT offers a cognitive account for many such phenomena, we think an integration of emotional and motivational considerations within the CLT framework will help us understand a wider variety of choices that are driven by multiple considerations. For example, motivational biases such as optimism are likely to enhance the importance of central aspects of goals that will be pursued in the distant future as opposed to the resource constraints. This is especially true with regard to goals that are difficult to regulate (e.g., studying, eating healthy) and whose

pursuit enhances one's self-perception. An interesting area for future consideration would be how these motivational considerations would impact evaluations when more than one dimension of psychological distance is manipulated simultaneously. For example, when evaluations involve both social and temporal distance (e.g., making a choice for self versus other for the near or the distant future), motivational considerations suggest that temporally distant choices for self might be seen as being different than temporally distant choices for others.

As we have outlined in this commentary, few recent theories have had the impact that CLT has on the field in explaining and understanding a wide range of evaluations and behaviors. For the reasons outlined here, we feel CLT will continue to contribute to the expanding research in social cognition and behavioral decision theory. And every once in a while, it is important and beneficial to step back and take stock of the ripple effects that each tree has on the vast beauty of the CLT forest.

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