Executive Summary

Construal-Level Perspective on Consumers’ Donation Preferences in Relation to the Environment and Health

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To date, it is unknown whether different representations of psychological distance are linked to environmental and health issues (potentially even outside people’s conscious control), and whether they have an influence on donation preferences in relation to environmental vs. health issues. We build on Construal Level Theory and assess the interrelationship between psychological distance (and closeness) and environmental (and health) concepts as well as the influence of consumers’ psychological distance (vs. closeness) mindsets on a social marketing-relevant downstream variable: consumers’ preference to donate for social causes.

We conducted two experimental laboratory studies to test our assumptions, referring four dimensions of psychological distance (vs. closeness): (1) temporal (i.e., how much time separates the perceiver and the target), (2) spatial (i.e., how close is the target from the perceiver geographically), (3) social (i.e., how different is a social object as the target from the perceiver’s self), and (4) hypothetical (i.e., how likely is the target to happen or how close is it to the perceiver’s reality). Study 1 showed that the dimensions of psychological distance (vs. closeness) are automatically related to the environment (vs. health) and vice versa. Study 2 showed that consumers’ willingness to donate for environmental (health) causes is relatively higher for consumers in a psychological distance (closeness) mindset. The results of both studies do not change depending on the type of dimension of psychological distance.

The findings have implications for designing social marketing campaigns. Charities should be more successful at getting donations from consumers when there is a match (distant-environment and close-health) vs. when there is a mismatch (distant-health and close-environment) of concepts. In particular, campaigns directed at increasing health-related donations should use psychological close frames that focus on subordinate and concrete goals. In contrast, when aiming at increasing pro-environmental donations, messages should focus on communicating psychologically distant frames and abstract, superordinate goals. Marketing environments may highlight the immediateness of consumer actions (temporal), the local effects of consumer actions (spatial), the relevance of the self or in-groups (social), and the certainty of cause-effect relationship (hypothesetical) when health charities or the support for health-related institutions are promoted, such as for the prevention of chronic diseases. Vice versa, environments may highlight the long-term effects of consumer actions (temporal), the global effects of consumer actions (spatial), the relevance of important others or out-groups (social), and the uncertainty of cause-effect relationship (hypothesetical) when charities or initiatives are promoted for environmental purposes, such as for the category of waste disposal and recycling.