

Effects of Message Design in University Study Abroad Recruitment: An Application of
Construal Level Theory

By

Jordan C. Holiman

April 2021

A capstone submitted to Southern Utah University
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of:

Master of Arts in Professional Communication

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Lijie Zhou, Ph.D., Chair

Abstract

This study seeks to further the understanding and effectiveness of message design used in the realm of marketing and advertising. Construal Level Theory was used to design a 2 (temporal distance: near future vs. distance future) x 2 (social distance: close social relations vs. distant social relations) x 2 (construal level: abstract thought vs. detailed thought) study and distribute a survey to a sample of 162 university students. The students were divided into 8 separate groups and each group received a unique version of the survey showing them an Instagram post with a message designed for study abroad recruitment. The study found that social distance played the largest role in strengthening travel intention, source credibility, and attractiveness, while temporal distance had no influence in the message. The research also showed that when combined, social distance, temporal distance, and construal level created significant influence in the attractiveness of the message.

Keywords: Message design, study abroad, Construal Level Theory, marketing.

Acknowledgements

Throughout my time at Southern Utah University, I have received a tremendous amount of support and inspiration. I would like to thank the professors of SUU's Department of Communication for opening my mind to learning and teaching me how to be a learner. I've come to realize that knowing how to learn is one of the greatest skills one can possess for a successful life and career.

I would also like to specifically thank Dr. Lijie Zhou, my capstone chair, for his continual support in this thesis. He is a skilled researcher and I have learned more about quantitative research from him than from anywhere else. He was so excited to chair my thesis and spent hours with me in his office when I had questions about how to use SPSS, or why I had to do things a certain way.

Lastly, I want to say thank you to my parents, Jonathan and Stephanie Holiman, for the amazing support, inspiration, and the countless hours spent discussing communication principles and proofing the many research papers I have written throughout this degree. They mean the world to me and I wouldn't be at this point without them.

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Abstract	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Signature Page	4
Table of Contents	5
Introduction.....	6
Literature Review.....	8
Method.	16
Results.....	19
Discussion.	21
Limitations and Future Research	26
Reference List	27
Appendix.....	31

Introduction

It would not be a stretch to look at the trends of today's society and come to the conclusion that traveling to other parts of the world has become much more popular than it has been in the past. "In 2019, the average millennial (ages 21 to 37) plans on taking roughly five trips throughout the year, three of which are expected to be international, according to AARP's 2019 Travel Trends report. That's more international trips than Gen X (ages 38 to 53) and more overall trips than Baby Boomers (ages 54 to 72)" (Leonhardt, 2019, p. 2). As an employee of a university, it is the researcher's observation that despite this trend, it would seem that the opportunity to take an international trip and gain educational credit at the same time is a much less popular idea.

This comes amid reports that choosing to attend a study abroad program could have many benefits one may not think of immediately. Shulsinger (2017), explains that there are several ways that a study abroad can benefit an individual's education and career. These include effective communication skills, an enhanced global network, and developing confidence, to name a few (Shulsinger, 2017). Yet even with reports praising the benefits of the study abroad, and the trend of traveling in general, the researcher's experience at a regional university is that schools often struggle to find participants to join their programs. This could be due to several reasons: the cost of the program, misunderstanding of the programs, or the focus of this study, poor message design being used in the recruitment of those programs. This is where the intent of this research comes into play. The research will attempt to find an answer to the lack of participation by assuming that the message design of recruitment efforts could be what is holding back the participation in study abroad programs.

One Southwestern regional university has long offered study abroad opportunities to its students. However, in recent years the school's Office of Learning Abroad has struggled to fill all of their trips with students, and this is not for lack of trying. The university holds several study abroad fairs throughout the year, and the Office of Learning Abroad is often recruiting in front of their office by talking to students about the opportunities and handing out flyers. Furthermore, the Office of Learning Abroad even offers scholarships for study abroad students up to five hundred dollars. Still, most trips do not reach capacity.

By looking into the message design of the university's promotional message about the study abroad programs, the researcher hopes to find if the message plays an important role in encouraging students to join by looking at four specific areas. These are the intent to apply, the attitude toward the trip, the attitude toward the Instagram post, and the source's credibility. If it is found that message design does play an important role, the research can then be used to benefit the university's Office of Learning Abroad, the students, as well as the research community focused around message design.

Dywer and Peters (2004) claim studies show that participating in a study abroad will further the student's intercultural development, personal growth, and education and career attainment. If this is the case, it is in the best interest of the student to understand why study abroad opportunities are going unnoticed rather than having waitlists.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that message design (specifically within the scope of construal level theory) can have in recruitment efforts to study abroad programs. Construal Level Theory examines distance on multiple dimensions including temporal, spatial, social, and psychological. The theory also uses different levels of detailed information to have messages construed on a low or high level. This research aims to find what

combination of temporal distance, social distance, and construal level is most persuasive in study abroad recruitment efforts.

Literature Review

Construal Level Theory

The Construal Level Theory of Psychological Distance states that the distance between present and future events, people, ideas, and etc. can determine whether that event or idea is thought of on a high or low level (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Vallacher & Wegner (1987) describe high level of thought as a more abstract and big-picture type of processing, while describing the low level as a more detail-oriented, concrete type of processing. Liberman and Trope (1998) first introduced the theory in a study which proposed that temporal distance (distance in time) played a role in whether the event was construed on a high or low level. The inaugural study found people construed events in the near future on a low level, while events in the distant future were construed on a high level (Liberman & Trope, 1998).

From there, Liberman and Trope (2003, 2007) added to the theory by inserting three more types of psychological distance, specifically, spatial distance (the physical distance of something taking place), social distance (how groups or individuals relate to other groups or individuals), and hypothetical distance (the likelihood of an event occurring). In fact, Liberman and Trope (2010) go on to explain that while there are several different types of distances, the further the distance of any type, the higher the event is construed. This means that in the case of social distance, two groups that are separated by a greater distance socially will think of the other in more abstract and general terms. An event that takes place in another state would cause high level construal versus the same event taking place down the street from one's home (Liberman & Trope, 2010).

As mentioned above, temporal distance equates to distance in time. An event that is temporally near would be happening much closer to the present, while an event that is temporally distant would be happening further into the future. For example, a person planning to attend an event within the next week would conceptualize the details of that event on a low construal level (more detail oriented), while a person planning to attend an event in 6 months would likely conceptualize the event on a high construal level (more abstract) (O'Sullivan & Owen, 2015). O'Sullivan and Owen (2015) also found that this difference in construal level based on temporal distance can produce some potential risks and dangers due to the abstract, high level causing a disconnect in thinking about unintended eventualities. Within CLT, temporal distance has been studied more than any of the other three types of distance, and therefore is the most common and understood distance associated with construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope, 2012).

Spatial distance refers to the physical distance from the person in which events are taking place. Similarly to temporal distance, a person thinking about attending a party happening on the next street will conceptualize the event on a low level. The same person will conceptualize an event happening in a city several hours away on a high level (Henderson, et al., 2006). In one study, Henderson et al. (2006) found that participants in an imaginary event of helping a friend move three-thousand miles away or helping a friend move a couple blocks away described the former in more abstract terms (securing an apartment) while describing the latter in detailed concrete terms ('putting the key in the lock') (Henderson, et al., 2006).

Social distance refers to how open, secure, similar, etc. one group feels toward another. In this case, social distance is unique because determining its distance is based on the perception and the feeling of the group/groups involved (Trope, 2012; Liviatan et al., 2008). For example, a

group that feels comfortable and open with another group would have minimal social distance with that group. In contrast, a group that feels they cannot relate to the other, or feels closed off, would be considered socially distant (Matthews & Matlock, 2011).

Additionally, social distance functions on an individual level as well. Studies have shown that a person who is perceived to be similar to oneself would be socially near, while a dissimilar person would be socially distant (Liviatan, et al., 2008; Trope, 2012). Furthermore, Trope (2012) explains that an action from a person similar to oneself will be thought of on a low construal level as the social closeness is understandable to the individual. On the other hand, an action from a person perceived to be socially distant will be thought of on a high construal level as the individual understands less of where the action came from.

Hypothetical distance is the fourth and final type of distance introduced under CLT. The term 'hypothetically' refers to the likelihood of something happening in reality, therefore, hypothetical distance is measured by this likelihood (Armor & Sackett, 2006). According to Wakslak, et al. (2006), and similarly to the other types of distances, an event that is unlikely to take place or involve the individual will be construed on a high level, while events likely to occur or involve the individual will be construed on a low level. For example, the situation, 'If I get nominated for an Oscar, I should wear something nice' is highly unlikely to occur. Due to this, what to wear is thought of in the abstract terms 'something nice'. The situation, 'I'll wear a grey suit if I get this job interview' is much more likely to occur, therefore, the more specific and concrete terms 'grey suit' are used.

Extended Applications of CLT in Marketing

CLT has been extended to several areas of study with perhaps the most notable specialized area being marketing consumer behavior (Chang, et al., 2015; Fielder, 2008).

Change, Zhang, and Xie (2015) found that, in a marketing context, construal level can certainly influence the consumers attitude toward the product and brand, as well as influence the purchase intention of the consumer. The messages created in this study used gain and loss frames as well as construal level to determine how consumers responded to the ads. Chang, et al. (2015) found that low construal messages worked better when a loss frame was present in the message, while high construal level messages worked better when a gain frame message was present in the message.

When looked at through the lens of consumer behavior, marketers can use CLT to reach their customers with the style of message for where their customers are at distance-wise. Take temporal distance with a vacation for example. If a travel agency is marketing a vacation package, research shows that the messages about the beauty of the country, the attractions, the culture one will experience, and etc., will be more persuasive if the consumer is looking for a vacation in the distant future (Fiedler, 2008). Feidler (2008) also explains that the low-level type of messages such as cost of flights, scheduling, and language issues would be much more effective when the customer is ready to go on the trip in the near future.

Kim, et al., (2016) further extended the theory to specifically study travelers' choices of hotels and accommodations based on different levels of abstractness in the promotional messaging they received. According to Kim, et al., the purpose of the study was to find "whether customizing promotional content and format matters for a particular target audience in terms of psychological distance (Kim et al., 2016, p. 340)." Furthermore, the study (Kim et al., 2016) compared high construal and low construal thought processes in the form of pictorial versus textual hotel advertisements. Results showed that consumers preferred pictorial advertisements when planning for a stay at the accommodation in the distant future (high

construal), and preferred the textual advertisements when planning a stay in the near future (low construal) (Kim et al. 2016). The study was concluded with the finding that while the consumer does rely on different levels of abstractness at different stages of the planning phase, most travel magazines and agencies don't take into account psychological distance or high and low-level construal (Kim et al., 2016).

Instagram and Travel Planning

With social media becoming the giant that it is, the travel industry is becoming increasingly influenced by social media. One study found that social media housed a substantial portion of the online travel domain and played a strategic role in trip planning (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) also found that the introduction of the travel industry to social media has introduced a new travel information provider—online consumers. Traditionally, the tourism industry and travel agencies have been the primary source for travel information and planning. Social media lets the people who have experience share where to go, what to do, where to stay, etc.

Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides (2012), found that in contrast to some studies (Cox et al., 2009, Kang & Schuett, 2013) that show travelers only used social media for the planning and information stages, many travelers actually used social media in every stage of their trip. These stages included planning, staying connected while traveling, sharing the experience post-trip, etc. Furthermore, Fotis et al. (2012) found that “six out of ten (65%) respondents stated that they indeed made some sort of changes to their original plans because of exposure to user-generated content in social media websites... (Fotis et al., 2012, p. 21).” The study concluded that the user-generated content from social media is becoming more influential in deciding where to go,

stay, and what to do, as this content is starting to become more credible than official travel agencies.

When it comes to travel, one social platform has become synonymous with the activity. Instagram has become a massive leader in travel inspiration, so much so that “one survey (Gilliland, 2019) recently found that 40% of consumers under 30 are prioritizing ‘Instagrammability’ of potential destinations when making purchasing decisions” (Dickson, 2019, p. 1). Much of this is due largely to the spike in popularity of influencer travel accounts and posts, as many users want to travel simply for the ‘likes’, or to become an influencer. Dickson (2019) goes on to explain that “the digital landscape is filled with visual allure. From discovering a destination before it becomes too popular to booking a trip based on how Instagrammable it is — Instagram is reigning supreme in the travel planning process and with this transformative power come changes to the way that we travel” (Dickson, 2019, p. 2).

However, motivations aside, Terttunen (2017) also found that user generated content has become more trustworthy than the content produced by the tourism industry. The study focused on Instagram because of its highly visual nature, its ability to geotag specific locations, and search for posts by specific location. Terttunen (2017) found that almost half of Instagram users (48%) use Instagram to find new travel destinations. She goes on to explain that users like to see other’s photos that are associated with locations they want to visit. These photos, posted by individuals specifically, hold more credibility to media users as the common belief is that marketing companies often over-exaggerate the experience, natural beauty, etc. (Terttunen, 2017).

Instagram also presents the unique blend of professional photography, and average iPhone snapshots from people who have traveled to the location, rather than marketing photos

from a travel agency. This only serves to widen the audience that uses Instagram for travel purposes. Outdoor photographers or videographers looking for stunning landscapes can find locations on Instagram, while families looking for a fun vacation experience can also find locations on the platform. The reasons why people use Instagram as a discovery tool have almost become endless as the community has grown to more than 1 billion active monthly users posting more than 100k photos per day (Dickson, 2019).

Study Abroad in Higher Education

Many universities around the world offer their students the opportunity to travel to another country to study while simultaneously completing their degree. These programs are typically completed through partner universities and can be done in varying lengths of time ranging from a year to two weeks.

Study abroad programs are certainly nothing new, in fact, records show that the first student to study abroad in the way we know it moved from Holland to Oxford in 1190 (Lee, 2015). That man's name was Emo of Friesland, and with that move, he began to lay the groundwork for study abroad through the next several centuries. Lee (2015) goes on to explain that in the 1700's study abroad programs pushed for exchange of the professors as well as students, in an effort for nations to be diplomatic and ensure peace and security in the world through the exchange and beliefs and principles in the classroom. This idea took a large leap forward in 1876 when representatives from the United States, England, France, and Germany met in London to establish a permanent organization for international education (Lee, 2015). Lee (2015) continues stating that in the 1940's President Roosevelt gave the study abroad industry a push by introducing the responsibility of a global citizen, and challenging Americans to learn more about the world. In the 1990's after the fall of the USSR, the modern study abroad

industry as we know it began to flourish. While students no longer study abroad for diplomatic reasons, many still study for the same reasons as Roosevelt's challenge, to get to know the world around them (Lee, 2015).

According to Homden (2019) there are a variety of reasons that students might choose to participate in a study abroad program, including learning a new language, experiencing a different culture, or simply the excitement and experience of traveling outside their home country. With as popular as college and travel have become, one would think this sounds like an appealing package; however it seems that a vast majority of students never participate in a study abroad program. In fact, as of 2015, only 2% of US students participate in these programs per year; to make matters worse, this percentage is up from only 1% just three years prior in 2012 (Saltagi, 2015). Saltagi (2015) gives several reasons why this may be the case but proposes that one large reason the numbers are so low is due to many universities simply not advertising the opportunities.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

By examining Construal Level Theory through a message design lens, multiple hypotheses were formed. Each hypothesis seeks to gain understanding as to which variables will work together best in order to create the most attractive/persuasive message.

H1a: The message including close temporal distance will generate more positive attitude than the message including temporal distance.

H1b: The message including close temporal distance will generate more travel intention than the message including social distance.

H1c: The message including close temporal distance will generate stronger source credibility than the message including social distance.

H2a: The message including close social distance will generate more positive attitude than the message including social distance.

H2b: The message including close social distance will generate stronger travel intention than the message including social distance.

H2c: The message including close social distance will generate stronger source credibility than the message including social distance.

H3a: The message including low construal level will generate more positive attitude than the message including high construal level.

H3b: The message including low construal level will generate stronger travel intention than the message including high construal level.

H3c: The message including low construal level will generate stronger source credibility than the message including high construal level.

Method

Sample

The study used a sample of 162 students from a southwest regional university's Introduction to Communication classes. The target of 162 was chosen because of a lower student population at the regional university. The sample was made up of 8 separate classes at the university with group 1 consisting of 18 students, group 2 consisting of 22 students, group 3 consisting of 18 students, group 4 consisting of 18 students, group 5 consisting of 23 students, group 6 consisting of 19 students, group 7 consisting of 25 students, and group 8 consisting of 19 students. Of these 162, 96 were female and 66 were male. The student's class level ranged from freshmen to seniors, although the majority of the participants were freshmen and sophomores.

Procedure

A 2 (temporal distance: near future vs. distant future) x 2 (social distance: close social relations vs. distant social relations) x 2 (construal level: abstract thought vs. detailed thought) factorial design was used to create 8 different versions of the same message. The independent variables that make up the factorial design included two of the constructs from CLT, temporal distance (both near and distant future) and social distance (both close and distant social relations). In addition, construal level (both high and low) was also used as the final set of independent variables. This 2x2x2 factorial produced the message that the university saw in the form of one of 8 Instagram posts. The posts were styled in the same way the university uses their own Instagram to promote and recruit for their study abroad programs. The study, as well as survey questions were approved by the institution's IRB and it was made known to the students that they could opt out of participating at any time without penalty.

Each group of participants were only shown one version of the message and did not know that there were other groups or other versions of the message. After seeing the Instagram post, participants completed a short survey asking about how attractive they found the post, their attitude toward the program and the message, how credible they considered the source, the expertise of the source, and their intentions to act upon the message and participate in the study abroad.

In order to gain a more accurate final result, a few screening measures were also put in place. Results from participants who complete the survey in under 90 seconds were removed from the data. A reading check was also placed in the survey as the second to last question. Students were asked to answer 'yes,' 'no,' or 'maybe' to the statement, 'I'm paying attention to this survey.' Any data coming from participants who answer 'no' or 'maybe' was removed.

Survey Design

For the sake of simplicity, each message was numbered after the group that saw the message. Group 1 read message 1, group 2 read message 2, etc. These numbers were designated to the messages to keep track of each message and have nothing to do with the message itself. The breakdown of which group received which message is as follows:

Group 1 read the message consisting of a close social distance, near temporal distance, and low construal level. Group 2 read the message consisting of a close social distance, near temporal distance, and high construal level. Group 3 read the message consisting of a close social distance, temporal distance, and low construal level. Group 4 read the message consisting of a close social distance, temporal distance, and high construal level. Group 5 read the message consisting of social distance, near temporal distance, and low construal level. Group 6 read the message consisting of social distance, near temporal distance, and high construal level. Group 7 read the message consisting of social distance, temporal distance, and low construal level. Group 8 read the message consisting of social distance, temporal distance, and high construal level.

Measures

The participants were asked to respond to statements indicating the level to which they agreed or disagreed on a 7-point Likert scale. For example, to measure source credibility, five statements such as *This Instagram post is honest* and *This Instagram post is trustworthy* were used. Five statements related to the dependent variable were also used to measure attitude, perceived expertise, and attractiveness. To measure travel intention, the students were simply asked if they would consider participating in the study abroad program after seeing the post and were given an optional space to explain why or why not.

The five dependent variables of attitude, credibility, expertise, attractiveness, and intention were measured under each combination of independent variables. In order to find which IV combination produced the most favorable responses of attitude, attraction, intent, etc., the statements remained consistent across each survey, while the only section that differed was the Instagram post they saw.

Results

The results from the surveys indicated that social distance had significant influences on travel intention ($F(1, 154)=6.46, p<.05$), source credibility ($F(1, 154)=18.39, p<.05$), perceived expertise ($F(1, 154)=13.8, p<.05$), and on the attractiveness of the Instagram post ($F(1, 154)=5.83, p<.05$). It was found that students who saw the message showing a closer social distance ($M=5.73; SD=1.36$) had more travel intention than students who saw the message containing a greater social distance ($M=5.1; SD=1.67$). Furthermore, the message showing a closer social distance ($M=5.54; SD=1.26$) showed more perceived credibility in the source compared to the message containing a greater social distance ($M=4.64; SD=1.37$). The message showing a closer social distance ($M=5.08; SD=1.31$) proved to have more perceived expertise among the students compared to the message containing a greater social distance ($M=4.26; SD=1.45$). Finally, the same post with the message containing a closer social distance ($M=5.27; SD=1.10$) was shown to be more attractive to the students compared to the message containing a greater social distance ($M=4.80; SD=1.27$). The social distance messaging showed no significant difference in the question of attitude toward the post, or the poster ($F(1, 154)=2.27, p>.05$).

The survey results also found that construal level had significant influence on source credibility ($F(1, 154)=9.01, p<.05$) and perceived expertise ($F(1, 154)=4.19, p<.05$). It was

found that the message designed with a low construal level ($M=5.37$; $SD=1.39$) also showed more perceived credibility of the source compared to the message designed with a high construal level ($M=4.75$; $SD=1.32$). Finally, the message containing a low construal level ($M=4.86$; $SD=5.51$) resulted in a higher perceived expertise compared to the message containing a high construal level ($M=4.42$; $SD=1.36$). The construal level message on its own did not have any significant influence on the attitude toward the post ($F(1, 154)=0.79$, $p>.05$), attractiveness of the post ($F(1, 154)=0.36$, $p>.05$), or travel intentions of the students ($F(1, 154)=1.41$, $p>.05$).

The independent variable of temporal distance had no significant influences on the factors of travel intention ($F(1, 154)=0.33$, $p>.05$), attitude toward the post ($F(1, 154)=1.88$, $p>.05$), perceived source credibility ($F(1, 154)=1.31$, $p>.05$), perceived expertise ($F(1, 154)=0.03$, $p>.05$), or the attractiveness of the Instagram post ($F(1, 154)=0.03$, $p>.05$).

A three-way interaction effect was also found in how attractive ($F(1, 154)=4.36$, $p<.05$) the student found the Instagram post. Specifically, the combination of short temporal distance, low construal level, and a close social distance proved to create the most attractive message ($M=5.79$; $SD=1.13$), while the combination of short temporal distance, low construal level, and social distance created the least attractive message ($M=4.59$; $SD=1.24$).

These results do confirm a few of the hypotheses, specifically H2b, H2c, and H3. H2 proposed that social distance would be a key factor in influencing the message and while the attitude was never a significant factor, the results show that social distance did influence the travel intention and source credibility. H3 proposed that the key influencer would be construal level. In this case, construal level showed to be effective only in creating stronger source credibility in the audience.

Discussion

The results show that social distance was the largest influencing variable to the students in the survey. To start, social distance on its own revealed a significant influence on the travel intention of the students ($F(1, 154)=6.46, p<.05$). The variable of social distance was revealed in the message to the students in a visual way rather than in written form. The students that saw the Instagram post with university students in the photo participating in study abroad, much expressed more interest in actually signing up to participate in the trip. This implies that the students were able to relate to the other students in the photo even though they did not know them. Social distance can be measured on a relational level, through shared hobbies or interests, through organizations in which one participates, and any other reason one may feel close or connected to another. In this case, the student participants saw other students having fun on the study abroad trip. This factor turned out to be a major indicator that the participants were more willing to travel and participate with the study abroad.

There is one large implication here for message specialists and marketers. When the goal is to have an audience accept and act on a message that will require a large investment of time and money, a message designed to show a close social distance to the targeted audience will perform better than simple persuasive messages. The close social distance message likely also expressed to the students that other students before them thought that the study abroad experience was valuable enough for them to invest their time and money.

This leads to the next significant influence that social distance had in the results, source credibility ($F(1, 154)=18.39, p<.05$). The same message also had the effect of increased trust in the source when compared to the message that showed no students in the photo, creating a longer social distance. The results showed that a message using close social distance can lend to the

credibility of the product or company (study abroad in this case) by showing the audience that their peers or otherwise close social groups also use the product. While social distance influenced both source credibility and travel intention, it is likely that the level to which those variables rely on social distance will differ. For example, trusting that a company's product is worth buying carries less weight than trusting a study abroad program enough to add travel intention to it. When it comes to travel intention, source credibility will likely need to already have been established in the audience.

Interestingly, the messages showing a close social distance also had a significant influence on the attractiveness of the Instagram post ($F(1, 154)=5.83, p<.05$). This implies that the students who saw the post with their fellow students in the photo found it to be more attractive than the students who saw the landscape photo with no students in the photo. This came as a surprise to the researcher as the hypothesis was that the scenic landscape photo of the blue ocean and palm trees would score higher on attractiveness with all students regardless of other variables. Clearly, social distance plays a very powerful role in influencing buyer behavior as well as purchase intention.

There is one more factor to consider while discussing how social distance influenced how the students responded to the Instagram post. This research was conducted during the Covid-19 epidemic, a time when most of the United States was asked to stay 'socially distant' from one another for the better part of one year. To be clear, 'socially distant' was the term used by health officials and state governments while what they actually meant was spatially distance. Regardless of the terminology, the impact of many people not being able to spend time with others could have made them long for experiences with other people. The Instagram post

showing a relatable group out having fun could very well be much more attractive because so many people have been removed from social life for so long.

Though not to the same extent as Social Distance, Construal Level also had significant influence on the dependent variables. Similarly to the social distance messaging, the construal level message also displayed influence on source credibility ($F(1, 154)=9.01, p<.05$). This construal level message was shown to the students in written form, using phrases such as “trip cost is \$2000 plus airfare,” and “earn up to 7 college credits” for low level construal, while using phrases such as “come study with us in the sun and sand of the south pacific” for high level construal. The students who saw the low-level, detail-oriented message showed greater trust in the source than the students who saw the high level, big picture message. This does not come at much of a surprise. Marketing tactics are often known to oversell the big picture, while hiding some of the fine print detail that might scare the audience away. It could certainly be that the students who saw the high-level message thought, “that sounds awesome but it probably costs a lot of money.” By giving the students the details such as price at the beginning, trust that the source is not hiding any fine print can be instilled much easier. This of course relates more to situations that require large investments of time and/or money, such as taking a trip, buying a car, etc.

The second and final variable where the construal level message showed a significant influence was perceived expertise ($F(1, 154)=4.19, p<.05$). The students who saw the low-level message believed the source to be more of an expert than the students who saw the high-level message, even though it was the same source. This means that not only does giving detail-oriented, low-level information add credibility to the source, it also suggests that the source knows what they are talking about.

Interestingly, while construal level did have significant influence over source credibility and perceived expertise, it showed no influence over travel intention ($F(1, 154)=1.41, p>.05$). This finding does come as a surprise because it means that while students liked having the detail-oriented information in order to decide how they thought about the source, they did not need it to decide if they would go on the trip. As is the case with social distance, it was thought by the researcher that having credibility and expertise established would cause the students to show more travel intention; however, this was not the case.

Finally, the three-way interaction of social distance, construal level, and temporal distance in the messaging shows a significant influence in the attractiveness of the post ($F(1, 154)=4.36, p<.05$). Students who saw the message consisting of the combination of a short temporal distance, a low construal level, and a close social distance indicated this to be the most attractive version of the message. Students who saw the combination of a short temporal distance, a low construal level, and socially distant message indicated that this was the least attractive message. This means that as far as attractiveness goes, social distance is by far the largest influencer out of the three independent variables studied.

Overall, social distance proved to have the most influence on how the message was perceived. When isolated, social distance had significant influence over more of the dependent variables than any of the other independent variables, and in the three-way interaction it was social distance that showed up again. There could be many reasons that explain why social distance is so vital to messaging, specifically, the social side effects of Covid-19, and that people currently use social media to plan for travel.

As mentioned previously, there is a very real possibility that Covid-19 could have an effect on the way a person perceives a message in 2020/21. Even though the focus of slowing

the spread of virus has been on spatial distance, it is the belief of the researcher that there is a distinct correlation between spatial distance and social distance in this case. The physical isolation of most of the United States, is likely causing people to feel isolated on a social level as well. As a result, a message with a heavy use of social closeness is likely to be perceived positively.

Social distance could have also had the impact it did because of the way people currently use social media to plan for travel. In some areas, Instagram has become sort of a visual review board for travel destinations. When looking for a new place to take a trip, or when looking for places to check out on an existing trip, people will go to Instagram to see what others are posting about those locations. This is due to user content being seen as more accurate and real compared to marketing content which is often viewed as exaggerated or ‘photo shopped.’ With this in mind, it would make sense that the students found the Instagram post with the close social message to be the most effective message. While professional, clean photos should certainly not be abandoned by marketers, the industry could benefit by showing more user generated content so their target audience can see what their peers are seeing. This transparency can also add to the credibility and trust that the audience holds for the source. In the end, social distance is a factor that should be taken into account, especially when designing messages for the travel industry.

One of the goals of this study is to add theoretical contributions to Construal Level Theory in a form that has not been extensively studied before—specifically in the area of using CLT to study marketing/consumer behavior. The results of this study can add insight to marketing and advertising practices in the area of message design and when marketing to a travel friendly demographic. Finally, in the most specific case, the study could provide insight to

universities who are struggling to recruit students to their study abroad programs due to weak brand identity, or lack of interest in the programs.

Limitations and Future Research

While the goal of this research was to achieve objective accurate results, there are a couple limitations that could have had some influence over the results. As mentioned previously in the discussion, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic had potential to influence the results of the study. The issue created by the COVID-19 pandemic is not the introduction of a new coronavirus, rather, the reaction that the public had to the virus. Borders, restaurants and shops, schools, etc., were closed for the better part of a year. Americans were told not to leave their houses and that their jobs were not essential. This nation-wide reaction to the virus certainly could have caused some unique psychological effects in the public. Specifically, because travel was shut down, the desire to travel abroad, whether for school or other reasons, may have been heightened.

This presents a great opportunity for research in study abroad recruitment within the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, future research should focus on recruitment messaging combined with the effects of social isolation and/or times of crisis.

Another limitation is that this study was conducted at a small regional university. Due to this, the sample is limited in size and scope. While the researcher does not expect any major differences in the results by sampling a larger pool, there could certainly be more discovered by gaining a sample from multiple universities across the country.

Table 1: MANOVA results for the effects of the message design on study abroad recruitment in higher education.

Factor	Measures	<i>df</i>	F	η^2	<i>p</i>
Temporal Distance	Attitude	1	1.88	.01	.17
	Source Credibility	1	1.31	.01	.25
	Expertise	1	0.03	.00	.86
	Intention	1	0.33	.00	.57
	Attractiveness	1	0.03	.00	.86
Social Distance	Attitude	1	2.27	.01	.13
	Source Credibility	1	18.39	.11	.000***
	Expertise	1	13.80	.08	.000***
	Intention	1	6.46	.04	.012*
	Attractiveness	1	5.83	.04	.017*
Construal Level	Attitude	1	0.79	.01	.38
	Source Credibility	1	9.01	.06	.003**
	Expertise	1	4.19	.03	.042*
	Intention	1	1.41	.01	.24
	Attractiveness	1	0.36	.00	.55
TD x SD x CL	Attitude	1	0.31	.00	.58
	Source Credibility	1	0.03	.00	.86
	Expertise	1	0.14	.00	.71
	Intention	1	0.17	.00	.68
	Attractiveness	1	4.36	.03	.039*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

References

- Armor, D., & Sackett, A. (2006). Accuracy, error, and bias in predictions for real versus hypothetical events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*(4), 583–600.
- Chang, H., Zhang, L., & Xie, G. (2015). Message framing in green advertising: the effect of construal level and consumer environmental concern. *International Journal of Advertising, 34*(1), 158-176.
- Dickson, A. (2019). Insta-worthy: The impact of instagram in travel marketing. Retrieved from <https://www.travelmindset.com/insta-worthy-the-impact-of-instagram-in-travel-marketing/>
- Dwyer, M., & Peters, C. (2004). The benefits of study abroad: New study confirms significant gains. Retrieved from <http://www2.clarku.edu/offices/studyabroad/pdfs/IES%20Study.pdf>
- Fiedler, K. (2008). Construal level theory as an integrative framework for behavioral decision making research and consumer psychology. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 17*(2), 101-106.
- Fotis, J., Buhalis, D., & Rossides, N. (2012). Social media use and impact during the holiday travel planning process. In: Fuchs, M., Ricci, F., & Cantoni, L., eds. *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism*. Vienna, Austria: Springer-Verlag, 13-24.
- Gilliland, G. (2019). The insta effect: How the ‘gram is impacting travel marketing & commerce. Retrieved from <https://econsultancy.com/instagram-effect-travel-ecommerce-marketing-airbnb-easyjet/>

- Henderson, M., Fujita, K., Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2006). Transcending the 'here': The effect of spatial distance on social judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *91*(5), 845–856.
- Homden, B. (2019). The top 8 reasons why you should study abroad. Retrived from <https://www.kaplanpathways.com/about/news/top-8-reasons-to-study-abroad/>
- Kim, J., Kim, P., Kim, J., & Magnini, V. (2016). Application of construal-level theory to promotional strategies in the hotel industry. *Journal of Travel Research*, *55*(3), 340–352.
- Lee, M. (2015). The complete history of study abroad. Retrieved from <https://www.gooverseas.com/blog/history-study-abroad>
- Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (1998). The role of feasibility and desirability considerations in near and distant future decisions: A test of temporal construal theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*(1), 5–18.
- Liviatan, I., Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2008). Interpersonal similarity as a social distance dimension: Implications for perceptions of others' actions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *44*(5), 1256–1269.
- Myunghwa, K., & Michael, A. (2013). Determinants of sharing travel experiences in social media. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *30*(1), 93-107.
- Leonhardt, M. (2019). Millennials are making travel a priority more than previous generations- that's not a bad thing. Retrieved September 12, 2020, from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/30/millennials-making-travel-a-priority-more-than-previous-generations.html>
- O'Sullivan, O. (2015). The neural basis of always looking on the bright side. *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences*, *8*(1), 11–15.

- Saltagi, L. (2015). Why don't more students study abroad? Retrieved from <https://www.gooverseas.com/blog/why-dont-more-students-study-abroad>
- Shulsinger, T. (2017). The unexpected ways studying abroad benefits your education and career. Retrieved from <https://www.northeastern.edu/graduate/blog/study-abroad-benefits/>
- Terttunen, A. (2017). The influence of instagram on consumers' travel planning and destination choice
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological review*, *117*(2), 440–463.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2003). Temporal construal. *Psychological Review*, *110*, 403–421.
- Trope, Y., Liberman, N., & Wakslak, C. (2007). Construal levels and psychological distance: Effects on representation, prediction, evaluation, and behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *17*, 83–95.
- Trope, Y. (2012). Construal Level Theory. In P. K. Van Lange, *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology* (pp. 118-134). Washington DC: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Vallacher, R., & Wegner, D. (1987). What do people think they're doing? Action identification and human behavior. *Psychological Review*, *94*, 3-15.
- Wakslak, J., Trope, Y., Liberman, N., & Alony, R. (2006). Seeing the forest when entry is unlikely: Probability and the mental representation of events. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *135*(4), 641–653.
- Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, *31*(2), 179-188.

Appendix

1. IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board
351 W. University Blvd., GC 308
Cedar City, UT 84720

(435) 586-7864
Institutional Review Board

To: Jordan Holiman (PI) and Lijie Zhou (Faculty Supervisor)

From: Bryan Koenig, SUU IRB Chair

Date: 6 December 2020

RE: IRB Application: *Message Design and Study Abroad: A Theoretical Look at Recruitment*

The SUU Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research under Exemption Category 3, Benign Behavioral Interventions with anonymous data.

From the SUU IRB perspective, you can begin your study.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Notify me immediately if any unexpected risks to the participants become evident.

 A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Bryan Koenig".

Full Approval

6 December 2020

Date

IRB APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: not applicable to "exempt" approval

IRB APPROVAL #06-122020b