

# Mind the Gap: Integrating Construal Level Theory and Self-Control Dilemmas into Strategic Business Communication

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## Abstract

Introducing patients to novel treatments and therapies can be difficult, especially when they are already following a consolidated set of therapies, consistently relying upon it. When championing innovation in medical care this reluctance can prove troublesome, due to cognitive and emotional sunk costs capable of confining patients – as well as physicians – to suboptimal treatments far beyond what would be necessary, even when faced with clearly superior alternatives. Although decisions regarding treatment and behavioural adherence can bring significant long-term benefits, they also face strong short-term resistance rooted in individual comfort zones and daily habits, giving rise to self-control dilemmas that are often resolved by focusing primarily on immediacy. Through a synthesis of recent literature and a preliminary qualitative investigation, this paper investigates how businesses can influence consumer decision-making in self-control dilemmas through Construal Level Theory (CLT), illustrating its relevance to marketing contexts and suggesting business applications to impact consumer choices.

*Keywords: Self-Control, CLT, Consumer Behaviour, Consumers' preferences.*

## 1. Introduzione

Every day, we encounter countless decisions and events that present a trade-off between experiencing feelings of instant yet short-lived gratification and delayed – but substantially enduring – satisfaction, obtained through commitment and daily efforts. These self-control dilemmas (Fishback et al., 2008) often arise from ordinary experiences: following a healthy diet, exercising regularly, or sticking to a sleep schedule. Yet, they can represent insurmountable challenges. Businesses that understand self-control dilemmas and tailor their marketing strategies accordingly can gain an advantage over competitors by communicating with their target consumers more effectively. This is particularly true in healthcare, where treatment and behavioural adherence decisions involve substantial long-term benefits but also face entrenched short-term resistance, due to patients' comfort zones and routine habits. This paper explores how businesses can influence consumer behaviour in self-control dilemmas using Construal Level Theory (CLT), synthesizing recent literature and suggesting business applications. Following a CLT Framework (Trope et al. 2008), self-control dilemmas are revealed as tensions between psychologically distant long-term benefits and tangible short-term rewards – seldom represented *ex aequo* in our minds. As consumer decisions

today are not made in isolation, consumer journeys are often dyadic (Mazzù & Costabile, 2023), especially in high-touch domains. Relational dynamics introduce new layers of interactivity in the customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2020), which in turn may influence an individual's construal level. In healthcare, psychological distance could thus be collaboratively constructed, influencing how self-control dilemmas are experienced. Several studies have applied the tenets of CLT to a variety of activities related to self-control, ranging from health-risk behavioural intentions (Carrera et al. 2014; Carrera et al., 2018) to time management (Yuan & Sun, 2025), advertising research (Saeed et al., 2024; Saeed et al., 2025), cause-related marketing (Yun et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025), consumer brand attitude (Li et al., 2025), and risk-related decision-making (Noh et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the development of exemplary business cases and managerial implications able to offer valuable insights for practitioners remain limited and largely context dependent. In this non-experimental paper, we synthesize recent literature and propose integrated managerial implications – with a focus on healthcare. By suggesting illustrative business cases, we aim to offer actionable insights, beneficial to both scholars and practitioners. Our research question is thus formulated as: How can businesses leverage CLT to influence consumer preference in self-control dilemmas?

## 2. Review of the literature

The construal level theory (CLT) (Trope & Liberman, 2003) is a psychological framework that explains how individuals form mental representations of objects or events depending on the psychological distance they attach to them. In other words, CLT argue that psychological distance systematically influences the way people mentally represent the world around them (Soderberg et al., 2015). Psychological distance can manifest in four ways: temporal distance, for events far in the future or in the past; spatial distance, for events taking place physically far away; social distance, when events are experienced by others; and hypothetical distance, dealing with events whom likeliness to happen is uncertain or low. The central assumption of CLT is that individuals represent events perceived as psychologically distant abstractly (high-level construals), while psychologically close events are represented concretely (low-level construals). This distinction bears important implications: while high-level construals are schematic and decontextualized, focusing on the core, essential characteristics of an event, low-level construals tend to represent events in an unstructured way, focusing on context-specific attributes, details, and incidental or non-essential features (Trope et al., 2008). Researchers generally highlight the dichotomy between low- and high-level construals, but these can be also understood as a continuum (Saeed et al., 2024). In the marketing literature, CLT has found solid grounding to confirm its practical applicability. A systematic literature review conducted by Saeed et al. (2024) mapped insights from advertising research, highlighting how CLT was investigated from multiple perspectives. The review focused on (1) the underpinning mechanisms determining ads efficacy (categorization and matching effects); (2) CLT relationship with ads appeal (such as hedonic vs utilitarian), ads framing (gain-framed vs lossframed), and imagery ad elements (e.g. photo vs illustrations); (3) CLT connection to audience attributes. In a later review, Saeed et al. (2025) categorized construal-level manipulations in advertising research by dimensions of (1) psychological distance; (2) psychological manipulations; and (3) marketing-related factors of focus. More recently, other studies have expanded the employment of the CLT framework in marketing research, exploring the role of psychological distance on consumer brand attitudes towards gamified marketing practices (Li et al., 2025), and to investigate the mediating role of consumers' perceived information credibility in shaping purchase intention when exposed to green marketing initiatives (Zhang et al., 2025). Similarly, Yun et al. (2025) focused on the influence of social norms and temporal framing, matched at similar construal levels, on consumers' engagement and purchase in CRM campaigns. Carrera et al. (2020) examined how abstract construal levels influence one's willingness to engage in desirable yet demanding actions,

showing that, when individuals adopt an abstract (high-construals) mindset, they tend to exhibit more motivation and willingness to perform challenging behaviours. Earlier works by Carrera et al. (2018) proved that abstract, outcome-focused messages can promote healthy behaviours more effectively, limiting perception of immediate execution challenges. Recently, Yuan et al. (2025) have shown how individuals with higher construal level invest more time in important, rather than urgent, tasks, while Zhang et al (2022) argued that aligning abstract construal level with intrinsic goals can result in increased commitment. In healthcare, Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al. (2019) have shown that the combination of positive emotions with abstractly framed messages can enhance adherence to demanding therapies, by emphasizing long-term benefits over immediate discomfort.

### **3. Business cases and managerial implications**

In terms of practical applications, considering the tenets of CLT when communicating with consumers can empower businesses to shape their preferences more effectively – especially in healthcare and pharma, where patients are sometimes prone to put an excessive focus on immediate inconveniences, side effects, and short-term preferences. The healthcare sector could leverage CLT strategically, incorporating abstract construal in health campaigns and choosing between affective or cognitive messaging based on target behaviours (Carrera et al., 2014). As health-risk behaviours are better predicted by affective attitudes under abstract construal conditions (Carrera et al., 2020), combining positive emotions (calm, hopeful) with abstractly framed messages can be effective in enhancing adherence to new or difficult therapies (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2019). Likewise, Pharma companies striving to increase new drugs' market penetration can resort to CLT to guide consumers through self-control dilemmas. In a preliminary qualitative study conducted in May-June 2025 with senior pharma managers, several pointed out patients' and physicians' difficulties in abandoning longstanding habits, despite clinical advantages. One manager noted, "some patients rely on their treatments as life-defining habits and are hesitant to abandon their routine, even when presented with solutions that would improve their quality of life". Another emphasized the short-term gratifications patients can extract from suboptimal treatments: "they get an immediate sense of fulfilment that is difficult to problematize, even though it ends up limiting their freedom and daily routines; in certain ways, it becomes a fully-fledged addiction". CLT-informed interventions can frame behaviour in ways that enhance desirability and emotional commitment, informing how health promotion campaigns are designed. These lessons learned are not limited to healthcare and pharma sectors. In the fashion industry, Lee et al. (2024) have employed CLT to investigate corporate communication on adherence to sustainability practices, analysing the construal level of both managers and stakeholders and delineating three main communication strategies. CLT has also been employed in the hospitality sector, investigating how psychological distance can increase consumers' willingness to pay upselling services (Guillet and Mohammed; 2024), and testing the influence of temporal distance on book now, pay later options for travellers (Jang and Cao; 2025).

### **4. Conclusions**

Self-control dilemmas are ever-present features of our daily life and analysing them using the right theoretical lens can be fundamental. By offering an updated snapshot of the academic discourse regarding CLT and self-control dilemmas, and presenting some business case applications to reflect on, this short paper aims at providing a starting point for further research through CLT, to stimulate a proficient scholarly discussion that could illuminate more applications where construal level and psychological distance might improve corporate communication and consumers' decision-making processes.

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