

Construal level theory in advertising research: A systematic review and directions for future research

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ABSTRACT

Construal level theory, originally rooted in psychology to study human behaviour, is a popular and influential theory in social-cognition research. Within the marketing domain, recent applications of the theory have mostly focused on explaining the effectiveness of advertising-based stimuli. This systematic literature review synthesises studies that apply construal level theory in advertising research. Starting from 1,553 articles in quality journals, a final list of 111 articles was identified as relevant to this review. A thematic analysis revealed three main themes: underlying theoretical mechanisms, ad appeals, and audience attributes. Key theoretical and practical implications of our review are discussed, and future research avenues are offered to extend and improve research in this important area.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, construal level theory (CLT) has become one of the most influential social-cognitive theories (Calderon et al., 2020). CLT posits that people view objects or events at different construal levels (Trope & Liberman, 2010) which refers to a mental representation of information at varying levels of abstractness (Williams et al., 2014). While the construal level may exist on a continuum, research often dichotomises CLT as simply high-level construal versus low-level construal. High-level construals are “schematic, decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information” (Trope et al., 2007, p. 83). In contrast, low-level construals are “relatively unstructured, contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features” (Trope et al., 2007, p. 83). CLT suggests that how individuals perceive the construal levels of objects influences their judgment of the objects.

CLT was originally applied to research into psychological behaviours, such as risk-taking (Sun et al., 2017), self-control (Fujita & Han, 2009), and self-confidence (Wan & Rucker, 2013). Later CLT was extended to marketing domains, including consumer emotions (Labroo

& Patrick, 2009; Williams et al., 2014), sustainable consumption (Reczek et al., 2018; White et al., 2011), and shopping orientation (Scarpi, 2021a). Pertinent to this review, CLT has increasingly been used to predict advertising effectiveness (e.g., He et al., 2021; Hernandez et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2009; Sunaga, 2018; Tok et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). A recent bibliometric analysis reveals advertising as one of the most prominent research domains that applies CLT (Adler & Sarstedt, 2021). The role of CLT in advertising research stems from the idea that suitably developed advertising stimuli can represent the appropriate construal-level to consumers to positively bias their judgement of the advertised product, and subsequently their choice.

Despite the extensive use of CLT in advertising research, an integrative review of the extant construal-level advertising literature is missing. Studies that have applied CLT to advertising research typically focus on particular advertising stimuli or attributes. The current literature that applies CLT to advertising is scattered and without a classification of themes that would help researchers better understand the breadth and depth of coverage in this research stream. This present study conducts a systematic review and thematic analysis to

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methodically synthesise the body of advertising literature that applies CLT. Conducting this systematic review seems appropriate as construal-level advertising research has reached sufficient maturity, and yet no systematic review has attempted to offer a consolidated state of this research stream (Paul et al., 2021). There is a lack of reviews about theories (Paul & Criado, 2020), which impedes not just comprehension of the theories, but also their application across domains (Lim et al., 2021; Paul & Barari, 2022). The most recent CLT literature reviews have reported on bibliometrics, such as authors and keywords (Adler & Sarstedt, 2021), or CLT and message effects in communication research generally, as opposed to advertising specifically (Lee, 2019). We conducted a theory-based systematic review to synthesise extant studies that apply CLT in advertising research and identify themes. This paper aims to:

1. Conduct a systematic literature review to identify the key themes in the CLT-related advertising literature.
2. Identify the key mediators and moderators or boundary conditions of the tenet(s) of CLT revealed in advertising research.
3. Document how research on advertising has contributed developments to construal level theory.
4. Identify gaps in the current literature and provide future directions for CLT-related advertising research.

The next section of this paper provides a comprehensive overview of construal level theory. After that, this paper details the systematic literature review methods used to identify CLT-related advertising research studies. A brief descriptive analysis of the relevant articles is provided, followed by a comprehensive description of the themes and sub-themes identified from these articles. Then the results of this review are discussed, including gaps and their implications for future research. Finally, practical implications are identified for advertisers, based on CLT-related advertising tactics with proven effects on real sales in the field.

2. Construal level theory

CLT posits that people view objects or events at various construal levels (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The high-level construal representation of an object or event is abstract, whereas its low-level construal representation is concrete (Schuetz et al., 2020). CLT suggests psychological distance, defined as the perceived proximity or distance from the self, situated here and now, is a key determinant of construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010). CLT proposes that a far psychological distance leads to high-level construal while near psychological distance results in low-level construal. CLT argues that the association between an event’s psychological distance (far vs. near) and knowledge about it (high construal vs. low construal) underlies its effect (Liberman et al., 2007; Liviatan et al., 2008; Trope et al., 2007).

CLT considers four dimensions of psychological distance: temporal (distance from now in time), spatial (remote from here in place), social (experienced by others rather than by the self) and hypothetical (less likely to happen than what is happening) (Amit et al., 2009; Trope et al., 2007). These dimensions of psychological distance are positively correlated (Fiedler et al., 2015; Wakslak & Trope, 2008), because the four dimensions have the same origin (i.e. here, now, self) and similarly affect the construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010). This interconnection among dimensions of psychological distance suggests the possibility of interchangeability of psychological distance dimensions in construal level research.

CLT has been increasingly applied in advertising studies to predict the effectiveness of advertising. Most of these studies build on the argument that various ad-, brand/product-, or audience-related factors are associated with or evoke a particular construal level. For example, some studies (e.g. Septianto & Lee, 2020; White et al., 2011) argued that gain-framed (loss-framed) ads are associated with high-level (low-level) construal. Septianto et al. (2019) demonstrated that illustrations (photographs) evoke high-level (low-level) construal. Web Appendix B

provides a tabular overview of various ad-, product/brand-, endorser-, audience-, and situation-related factors that are associated with or evoke different construal levels.

3. Methodology

A systematic review is a “process for assembling, arranging, and assessing existing literature in a research domain” (Paul & Barari, 2022, p. 2). In this study, we followed the methodological guidelines in the SPAR-4-SLR protocols (Paul et al., 2021), similar to other well-crafted systematic reviews (e.g., Hassan et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Following the protocols, the source type was restricted to academic journals only. Other sources, such as books and book chapters, were excluded as they would contribute only marginally to scholarly advancement (Lim et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021). Likewise, grey literature (e.g., conference and working papers) was not included for possible lack of rigor during review.

First, we identified electronic academic databases that are likely to comprehensively contain studies that apply CLT in advertising research. Specifically, we selected seven databases (i.e., Emerald, Elsevier (Science Direct), Wiley Online Library, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Sage, and Springer) for locating relevant articles. These databases are deemed appropriate for this review as they include leading advertising (e.g., Journal of Advertising, International Journal of Advertising), marketing (e.g., Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research), consumer behaviour (e.g., Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology), and business journals (e.g., Journal of Business Research) that publish advertising and construal level studies. These databases are also frequently used in systematic reviews in marketing and consumer domains (e.g., J. Kim et al., 2019; Saeed et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Next, we developed suitable key terms to search for relevant articles in these databases. Following detailed deliberation among the authors, and in concurrence with their common and repeated use across selected literature, we identified two key search terms: ‘construal level’ and ‘advertising’. In line with the SPAR-4-SLR protocols, we applied a Boolean operator and truncation to search relevant articles using these key terms. Specifically, we used the search query “construal level” AND “advert*” (the word ‘advertising’ was used for ScienceDirect as it does not allow wildcards in search terms) in all fields or full text of articles to retrieve relevant articles from selected databases. By not restricting key search terms to the title, abstract, or keywords of the article, we attempted to ensure all relevant articles were retrieved and to get a sufficiently large sample (Paul & Criado, 2020). The search, performed in mid-May 2023, yielded 1,553 articles from the seven databases. In our review, we included advertising articles that applied CLT in at least one study. We did not apply any other inclusion/exclusion criteria (e.g., study design: quantitative or qualitative). Table 1 shows the number of articles retrieved from each database.

All identified articles were imported to Covidence™ software, which automatically removed all duplicated articles (n = 105). The remaining articles (n = 1,448) were then screened for relevance separately by two authors, with any conflicts resolved by discussion. This initial screening excluded 1,257 articles that were deemed irrelevant, yielding a sample of 191. Similar to other systematic reviews (e.g., Dhaliwal et al., 2020;

Table 1
Number of articles retrieved from seven identified databases.

| | Database | No. of articles |
|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Emerald | 375 |
| 2 | Elsevier | 277 |
| 3 | Sage | 174 |
| 4 | Wiley Online | 237 |
| 5 | JSTOR | 192 |
| 6 | Springer | 114 |
| 7 | Taylor & Francis | 184 |
| Total articles | | 1,553 |

Lim et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2020), we applied a quality filter to only include articles published in journals ranked as A or A* in the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) based on the ABDC 2022 journal quality list, a widely-used benchmark for high-quality research in business journals (Francke & Carrete, 2023; Hao et al., 2021; McKee et al., 2023). According to Paul et al. (2021), the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) journal quality list is a good approach for screening due to the largely stable nature of its rankings where alternatives such as Scopus and Web of Science have more volatility. Francke and Carrete (2023) further point out that this journal quality list is the only one that uses both qualitative and quantitative criteria for quality evaluation. This filtering excluded 43 articles, resulting in a sample of 148 full-text articles that were independently reviewed by two authors. The full review led to a further 37 articles being identified as irrelevant, yielding a final sample of 111 articles (Web Appendix A lists these 111 articles). Fig. 1 shows the final selection process through a flow diagram.

In the last step, a standardised data extraction form was created to capture and summarise all relevant data or information from the final sample of 111 articles. Keeping review objectives in mind, we designed an Excel sheet to capture, record, and code a comprehensive set of information from each article, including article title, author(s) name(s), publishing journal, publication year, primary objective, how CLT was applied, any other theory integrated with CLT, research approach (e.g., quantitative), data collection method (e.g., survey, experiment), type of participants (e.g., students), sample size, online platforms or professional panels used for recruiting participants (e.g., MTurk), nature of experimental stimuli (e.g., real, fictitious), country of study, advertising

context (e.g., luxury advertising, health advertising), construal-level manipulations and manipulation checks used, and overall findings. This detailed extraction sheet helped to minimise human error and maintained a replicable and transparent record of the applied procedure (Tranfield et al., 2003). All the extracted information was then synthesised to produce the review.

4. Summary of descriptive analysis and theoretical integration

We first analysed the descriptive characteristics of the final 111 articles, including publication year, country of study, publication journals, research design and data collection methods, type of participants, research context, and most productive authors. While a comprehensive critical descriptive analysis is available in the Web Appendix C, this section provides a summary of this analysis.

Our analysis shows that CLT is receiving increasing attention from advertising researchers in recent years, with about half of the articles ($n = 55$) published between early 2021 to mid-2023. Most of the construal-level advertising research was conducted in the US ($n = 52$) and published in three journals: Journal of Business Research ($n = 15$), International Journal of Advertising ($n = 14$), and Journal of Advertising ($n = 13$).

The construal-level advertising research solely used quantitative research design and collected data through experiments from both consumers ($n = 53$ articles) and students ($n = 31$) samples. Over two-thirds of the sample articles ($n = 80$) recruited participants from different crowdsourcing platforms and online panels, with Amazon

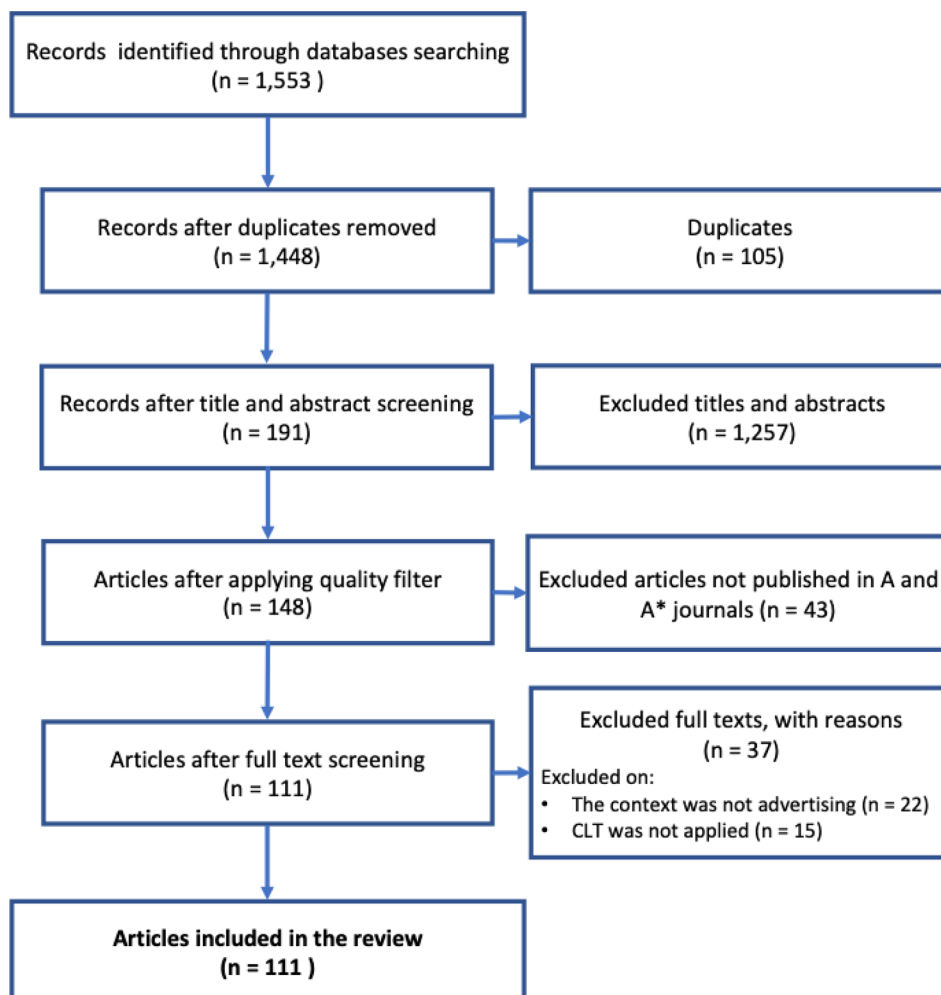


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of final article selection process (Haddaway et al., 2017).

Mechanical Turk (MTurk) as the most used crowdsourcing platform (n = 43 articles) followed by Credamo (n = 5) and Prolific (n = 5 articles). Our review demonstrates that more than half of the articles (n = 63; 57 %) used fictitious brands, thereby posing a threat to the generalisability of the findings of construal-level advertising research.

Lastly, our review reveals that CLT has been applied in multiple contexts [i.e., general advertising (n = 46 articles), environmental or green advertising (n = 10 articles), tourism or destination advertising (n = 9 articles), health advertising (n = 7 articles), social advertising (n = 7 articles), and donation or charity advertising (n = 6 articles)]. Felix Septianto from the Business School of the University of Queensland is the most productive researcher with the highest number of published construal-level advertising articles (n = 12).

Our review demonstrates that CLT has been integrated with several other prominent theories (n = 16) in advertising research. While a detailed overview of this integration of CLT with other theories in advertising research is provided in [Web Appendix C](#), [Table 2](#) lists these theories and cites relevant article(s).

5. Thematic analysis

Common with systematic reviews (e.g., [Cartwright et al., 2021](#); [Deshpande et al., 2023](#); [Vrontis et al., 2021](#)), an inductive approach was followed to identify themes and subthemes from the reviewed articles ([Ryan & Bernard, 2003](#)). Each article included in our review was first content analysed by recording its stated research purpose, key constructs, and underlying arguments. Based on this analysis, the key focus of each article was determined, and a description of this key focus was prepared. A suitable broad thematic title was assigned to each article. All articles were then sorted and grouped based on these thematic names. Finally, these thematic names were further grouped into research sub-themes after discussion and revision. This process produced three broad research themes: (1) underpinning theoretical mechanism, (2) ad appeals, and (3) audience attributes (see [Fig. 2](#)). A critical review of these themes is presented below, and a summary table is provided in the Appendix (see [Table 3](#)).

5.1. Underpinning theoretical mechanism

Our review found that past advertising research drew primarily on two theoretical tenets to explain the efficacy of CLT in advertising research: categorisation effect and matching effect.

Table 2
Theories integrated with CLT in advertising research.

| Theory | Relevant advertising article(s) |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Achievement Attribution Theory | Zhu et al. (2017) |
| Associative network memory model | Sharma (2018) |
| Anthropomorphism | Baek et al. (2022) |
| Cue utilization theory | Martin et al. (2009) |
| Mindset theory | Zhang et al. (2022) |
| Stereotype Content Model | Connors et al. (2021) |
| Prospect theory | Orazi et al. (2015) |
| Reactance theory | Loebnitz et al. (2020) |
| Regulatory focus theory | Kees (2011) ; Park and Morton (2015) ; Salnikova et al. (2022) |
| Social identity theory | Yang et al. (2015) |
| Protection motivation theory | Schuetz et al. (2020) |
| Two-stage model of decision-making | Ma et al. (2021) |
| The functional perspective of emotion | Xin et al. (2022) |
| Art infusion theory | Septianto et al. (2022) |
| Appraisal tendency theory | Kim et al. (2023) |
| Embodied cognition theory | Lee et al. (2023) |

5.1.1. Categorisation effect

To comprehend the categorisation effect of CLT, it is imperative to first review CLT advertising studies that examine the direct impact of dimensions of psychological distance on consumer responses. Our review identified eight such articles. For example, building on social distance, [Wang et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrated that donors who perceived being socially closer to the beneficiaries tend to give more charitable contributions. A close social relationship between consumers and social media influencers also enhances evaluation of ads as a close social distance results in more positive attitudes and behaviours ([Choi et al., 2023](#)). Similarly, consumers feel a sense of psychological closeness when they see a smiling humanlike AI agent in ads, which in turn leads them to more charitable behaviour ([Baek et al., 2022](#)). Compared to low-level construal, a high-level construal also decreases moral outrage towards norm-violating behaviour ([Gong & Medin, 2012](#)). Advertising research revealed that a low vs high psychological distance (or low- vs high-level construal) leads to perceiving erotic ads ([Theodorakis & Painesis, 2022](#)) or taboo ads ([Theodorakis & Painesis, 2018](#)) as more controversial, leading to less favourable evaluations of the ads.

The categorisation effect of CLT is built on the concept of psychological distance. This tenet suggests that high-level construal leads to a more inclusive categorisation ([Trope & Liberman, 2010](#)). People try to identify context-invariant features of objects when construing them at a high level ([Burgoon et al., 2013](#)), leading them to focus on a few central features that connect these objects instead of noticing multiple contextual features that distinguish them ([Henderson, 2013](#)). Our review found four advertising articles that built on the categorisation effect ([Hong & Lee, 2010](#); [McGowan et al., 2022](#); [Scarpì, 2021b](#); [Xin et al., 2022](#)).

Drawing on the categorisation effect, [Hong and Lee \(2010\)](#) showed that a high-level (vs low-level) construal reduces the unfavourable evaluations of mixed emotion appeals, as flexible and inclusive processing associated with high-level construal sorts out conflicting emotions, and reduces the discomfort caused by the mixed emotions. Another study found that high-level (vs low-level) construal consumers evaluate ads of paradoxical brands (brands with contradictory brand personality associations) more favourably because their cognitive flexibility helps them accommodate the paradoxical meanings ([Xin et al., 2022](#)).

5.1.2. Matching effect

Rather than examining the effects of psychological distance alone, most CLT studies attempt to pair or match the psychological distance effect with specific ad appeals, which themselves are perceived to possess construal-level effects. Our review identified 95 articles that are built on the matching effect. The construal-level matching effect posits that individuals evaluate a stimulus more favourably when it matches their construal level ([Liberman & Trope, 1998](#)). A matched stimulus is evaluated more favourably because it fits with individuals' cognitive structure and therefore receives more weight in the evaluation. For example, ad evaluations are more favourable when an abstract (high construal level) vs concrete (low construal level) ad appeal is matched with high vs low social distance ([Sung et al., 2020](#)), temporal distance ([Schuetz et al., 2020](#)), hypothetical distance ([Balaji et al., 2021](#)), or spatial distance ([Kulkarni & Yuan, 2015](#)). Other ad appeals adopted in matching-effect studies include a product benefits vs product attributes appeal ([Hernandez et al., 2015](#)), and positively vs negatively-framed appeals ([Park & Morton, 2015](#)). However, the results are not entirely conclusive as some studies found that these matching effects only work under a high-high, but not low-low, matching condition ([Yang et al., 2015](#)).

Mediators. Our review has uncovered different mechanisms that have been used to explain the matching effect. Processing fluency is the most prominent underlying mechanism (n = 13 articles, e.g., [Gu and Chen \(2021\)](#); [Roose et al. \(2019\)](#); [White et al. \(2011\)](#)), followed by consumer engagement (n = 2 articles, [Yao and Chen \(2014\)](#); [Zhang et al. \(2022\)](#)), and perceived diagnosticity (n = 2 articles, [Kim and Youn \(2019\)](#));

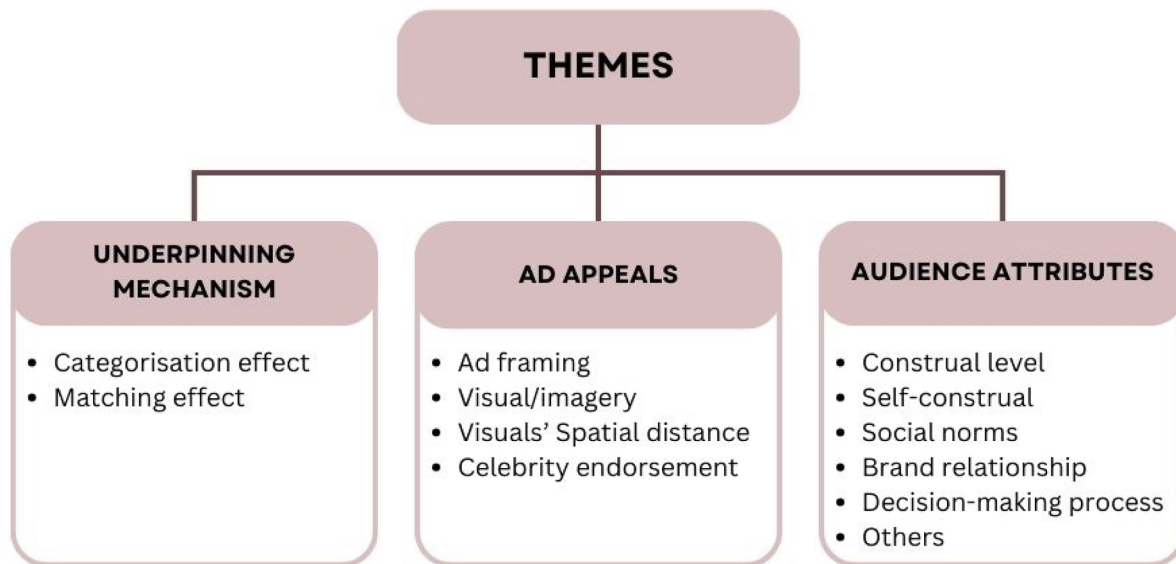


Fig. 2. Broad themes and sub-themes in construal-level advertising research.

Martin et al. (2009)). Lee et al. (2010) suggested a serial mechanism from consumer engagement to processing fluency underlying the impact of construal-level matching on judgment. Some other underlying mechanisms of construal-level matching effect that appeared once across our reviewed studies are perceived message quality (Youn & Kim, 2019), perceived fit (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2023), increased attention to messages (Spasova & Lee, 2013), perceived efficacy (Chen, 2016), and message elaboration (Bauer, 2023).

Moderators or Boundary Conditions. In addition to the underlying mechanisms, advertising research has also uncovered several boundary conditions of the construal-level matching effect. Our review identified two contrary theoretical arguments (i.e., elaborative vs heuristic processing) and findings on some of these boundary conditions. Arguing that elaborative (shallow) processing facilitates (vs diminishes) a construal-level matching effect, a high (low) need for cognition (NFC) was shown to improve the persuasive effect of the construal-level match (Youn & Kim, 2019). A strong (vs weak) ad argument was reported to accentuate the favourable effect of a construal-level match between gift type (gifted cash vs gift card) and ad appeals (why vs how appeals) (Yao & Chen, 2014). The same findings were observed for ad argument strength when construal-level evoked by self-construal (i.e., individuals' self-views that they are independent of or interdependent with others) was matched with temporally framed ad appeals (Spasova & Lee, 2013). Applying the elaborative processing view, previous advertising research showed that a construal-level matching effect holds for heavy (vs light) users because of their higher involvement (Connors et al., 2021).

Contrary to the elaborative processing account, Allard and Griffin (2017) argued that a construal-level match impacts judgment heuristically, and revealed that a construal-level match between comparative price (high vs low price) and ad appeals (abstract vs concrete) yielded more favourable responses for consumers with low (high) NFC. They showed a superior impact of this construal-level match on consumer preferences when product category involvement was low (vs high). A construal-level match in anti-high-risk drinking advertising produced more favourable responses when consumer involvement was low (Park & Morton, 2015). Consistent with the heuristic processing perspective, political novices (vs experts) had more favourable attitudes towards a candidate when there was a construal-level match between temporally framed political ads (6 months vs next week) and ad messages (abstract vs concrete).

Another interesting boundary condition for the construal-level

matching effect is consumer creative mindset (Yang et al., 2011). Consumers with a more creative mindset assess ad appeals more positively when incompatible with their construal mindset. This is because more creative consumers bypass initially activated familiar associations in favour of novel and remotely connected associations. Culture can also moderate the construal-level matching effect such that consumers from an individualistic culture (e.g., the US) respond more favourably to ads when there is a high construal fit between temporal distance and desirability ad appeals (Kim et al., 2018).

5.2. Ad appeals

It is well established that ad appeals drive advertising effectiveness (Hughes et al., 2019; Pieters & Wedel, 2004). Another core theme that arose from this systematic review is ad attributes within construal-level advertising. These articles (n = 86) would almost always compare the differential effects of one particular appeal versus its polar opposite. The wide range of appeals included in these articles include appeals, such as abstract vs concrete (Sung et al., 2020), benefits to self vs to others (Yang et al., 2015), hedonic vs utilitarian (Tsang et al., 2022), warmth vs competence (Septianto, Seo, et al., 2022), mystery vs apparent (Shi, 2021), ability-oriented vs effort-oriented (Zhu et al., 2017), intangible vs tangible (Ding & Keh, 2017). Another type of ad appeals involved emotions (Hong & Lee, 2010). A mixed emotional (sadness and happiness) vs single positive emotional (happy) appeal generated higher positive word-of-mouth when a third-person narration was used in ads (Quach et al., 2021). Curiosity vs boredom as an emotional cue in ads was more effective when the construal level was high vs low (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2023).

Ad appeals in CLT studies could also concern *ad framing*. For example, Septianto and Lee (2020) demonstrated that gain-framed (loss-framed) ads generated more favourable recycling intention and behaviour when consumers had a high-level (low-level) construal. Rather than matching ad frames with consumer construal level, White et al. (2011) confirmed the superiority of gain (loss) frames for recycling intention and behaviour when matched with an abstract "why" (concrete "how") ad message.

Advertising research grounded in CLT has investigated the effectiveness of different *visual/imagery ad elements*. Septianto et al. (2019) found that matching illustrations (photographs) with organic (conventional) in terms of construal level enhanced the likelihood of purchasing. An illustration (vs a photograph) can improve the evaluation of a novel

product (e.g., clean meat) by enhancing its perception of luxuriousness (Septianto et al., 2022). In charity advertising, using cause-focused (product-focused) images was more effective when charities were far from (close to) achieving their goals or targeted international (local) recipients (Chen, 2020). In the context of plastic waste, displaying an image of plastic waste (a victim of plastic waste) with a why (how) message generated a higher intention to reduce plastic consumption (Septianto & Lee, 2020).

Images of animals and humans can impact the construal level by evoking the perception of social distance. Loebnitz et al. (2020) showed that displaying an image of rhino poaching in a positively framed anti-poaching ad decreased the likelihood of purchasing a product associated with rhino poaching and the performance of future poaching behaviour. Contrary to a positive construal-level matching effect, a low-level construal match between an image of human poaching and negative framing resulted in reactance, which increased the likelihood of purchasing a by-product of rhino poaching and the performance of future poaching behaviour. Another study discovered that displaying animals (high social distance) in future-oriented (high temporal distance) ads of organic animal husbandry were more effective than the present-oriented (low temporal distance) ads displaying humans (low social distance) (Loebnitz et al., 2022).

CLT advertising studies also showed the *spatial distance of visuals* in advertisements can also be effective. Ads with close-up (long-shot) images generated more favourable responses when used in rational (emotional) appeals (K. Kim et al., 2019). A more (less) product-model distance in desirability-focused (feasibility-focused) ads resulted in higher purchase intention and actual money spent (Tok et al., 2021). Ads with high (low) horizon images produced more favourable responses when the product benefits framed in ads were far (near) in the future (Roose et al., 2019).

Another type of ad appeal in CLT studies is *celebrity endorsement*. Building on the construal-level matching effect, Chang and Chen (2022) found that a sports star (vs typical person) endorser improved the effectiveness of a black-and-white or outcome-focused advertisement. However, a low-level construal match between a typical person endorser and a coloured or process-focused advertisement did not increase ad effectiveness. Ren et al. (2023) demonstrated that a low-level construal match between a non-celebrity influencer and a prevention focus of consumers generated higher purchase intention. The effectiveness of social media influencers further depends on consumers' social distance from them. When the social distance from a social media influencer is far (close), the endorsement of beauty products by an expert (attractive) social media influencer was more effective (Choi et al., 2023). Construal-level advertising research further shows that spokespersons with high expertise (vs low expertise) are more effective when advertising separate brand products (brands that retailers launch under different names) (Chou & Wang, 2017).

5.3. Audience attributes

Certain individual-specific characteristics collectively termed *audience attributes* in advertising literature can also play an important role in determining an advertisement's effectiveness (Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015). These attributes could lead the audience to respond to the same ad differently (Boerman et al., 2017). Advertising research has extensively investigated the impact of audience attributes on advertising effectiveness (e.g., Brengman et al., 2001; Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Tucker et al., 2012).

Because individuals are psychologically more predisposed to think or operate in low (or high) construal-level mode (Fujita, 2008), the *construal level of the audience*, measured or primed, can determine ad effectiveness. For example, low-level construal consumers evaluate an emotional ad more favourably due to ad-consumer construal congruency (Septianto & Pratiwi, 2016). Low-level construal consumers also respond more favourably to an ad displaying a product's near-future

benefits (Youn & Kim, 2019). Audience construal-level can also influence consumer responses to mixed emotions ads. Consumers with low-level construal responded to a single-emotion ad (e.g., an ad showing happiness) more favourably than the mixed emotions ad (e.g., an ad showing happiness and sadness) (Hong & Lee, 2010). There was no difference between the evaluation of single-emotion and mixed emotions ads for high-level construal consumers, because a high-construal blurs the difference between the two opposite emotions in mixed emotions ads.

Self-construal, how people view the self in relation to others, is also used in CLT-based advertising research (Cross et al., 2011). Individuals with an independent self-view value self-reliance and autonomy, whereas those with an interdependent self-view value social relations and interpersonal harmony (Spassova & Lee, 2013). Empirically confirming that individuals with an independent (interdependent) self-construal mentally represent information at high-level (low-level) construal, Spassova and Lee (2013) showed that individuals with independent (interdependent) self-construal are more persuaded by ad appeals emphasising far-future (near-future) benefits. In health advertising, independent (interdependent) self-construal individuals are persuaded more by gain-framed (loss-framed) messages when the temporal construal is distant (proximal) (Chen, 2016). Pounders et al. (2015) found similar interaction effects among self-construal (independent vs interdependent), message regulatory framing (gain vs loss), and temporal framing (distant vs proximal).

Based on *social norms* literature, Ryoo et al. (2017) argued that general (provincial) descriptive norms, behavioural descriptions of a reference group closer to (far from) one's local environment and situation (Goldstein et al., 2008), lead to high-level (low-level) construal. Subsequently, they showed that sustainability ads containing provincial (vs norms) were more effective when accompanied with low-level-construal (e.g., how) messages. The superiority of provincial norms disappeared when both norms were paired with high-level-construal (e.g., why) messages. Another social factor construal-level advertising literature examined is culture. Septianto, Japutra, et al. (2022) suggested that consumers with high (low) levels of cultural distance respond more positively to brand advertisements emphasising country (vs product) image. Consumers from an individualistic culture (e.g., US) respond more positively to a high-level construal fit between advertisement and temporal distance (i.e., desirability message and far temporal distance) than the low-level construal fit (i.e., feasibility message and close temporal distance) (Kim et al., 2018). Consumers' responses from a collectivist culture (i.e., Korean) were similar between the two fit conditions.

Another common audience-side factor used in CLT studies concerns the strength of *consumers' relationship with brands*. For example, abstract appeals are effective when the consumer-brand relationship is distant (Connors et al., 2021). In contrast, a close brand relationship (e.g., committed) improved the effectiveness of concrete appeals. A strong psychological sense of brand community enhanced consumer favourable responses towards utilitarian appeals (Bauer, 2023). However, a high-level construal match between the weak psychological sense of brand community and symbolic appeals did not yield more favourable evaluations. Anthropomorphised brand roles (servant vs partner brand) enhanced the effectiveness of high (low) construal why (how) ad messages (He et al., 2021). Finally, a construal-level match between strong vs weak brand experience and emotional vs cognitive appeals caused more favourable consumer responses (Kim & Song, 2019).

Consumers at different stages in the *decision-making process* could evoke different construal-levels and thus can enhance or reduce the effectiveness of relevant construal-level ads. Nenkov (2012) found that consumers at the predecisional (post-decisional) stage of decision-making are persuaded more by ad messages focusing on the future (present) or targeting a distant (close) other. Ma et al. (2021) suggested that consumers at stage 1 (motivation formation stage) vs stage 2 (purchase decision-making stage) of the decision-making process are

persuaded more by lifestyle vs functional advertisements for luxury brands. Humphreys et al. (2021) performed a field experiment and discovered that consumers at the informational (transactional) stage of their decision journey click more on an online advertisement when it is abstract (concrete).

Beyond the audience attributes discussed above, other CLT-based advertising studies have considered whether consumers are more concerned with the present or future (Kees, 2011), whether consumers possess strong global (vs local) identity (Salnikova et al., 2022), and whether they are promotion or prevention oriented (i.e., regulatory foci) (Lee et al., 2010). Other audience-side factors that were investigated in construal-level advertising research include creative mindset (Yang et al., 2011), busyness (Yang & Hu, 2024), need for cognition (Youn & Kim, 2019), and even product knowledge (Hong & Sternthal, 2010).

6. Discussion and future research directions

This systematic review aimed to present a comprehensive overview of the use of construal level theory (CLT) in advertising research. The review included 111 relevant advertising articles and identified three broad themes: (1) underpinning theoretical mechanism, (2) ad appeals and (3) audience attributes. This review also documented how research on advertising contributed developments to CLT. Advertising research has extended the testing of the effects of CLT from behavioural intentions (e.g., Trope et al., 2007) to actual behaviour (e.g., Ryoo et al., 2017). Our review shows that advertising research has advanced CLT by revealing new boundary conditions and underlying mechanisms of its matching effect. More importantly, our review demonstrates that advertising research has extended CLT by integrating it with several other prominent theories (e.g., regulatory focus theory [Kees, 2011]; see Table 2). Although a substantial body of advertising research has used CLT to examine the effectiveness of advertising from varied perspectives, there are still several potential gaps that need to be filled by future research. Following previous reviews (Bargoni et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2022), we provide future directions for themes and methods to advance the application of CLT in advertising research.

6.1. Themes

Our review organised previous advertising research around three broad themes. We reviewed these themes to identify critical gaps and provide directions for future research.

6.1.1. Ad appeals

Construal-level advertising research examined the effectiveness of ad appeals emphasising primary vs secondary attributes (Martin et al., 2009). Previous research has yet to explore the effectiveness of two-sided ad appeals. Two-sided ads persuade consumers by highlighting the advertised brand's favourable positioning on primary attributes, and at the same time depicting its less important or secondary attributes unfavourably (Pechmann, 1992). As individuals' construal level can alter the evaluations of primary vs secondary attributes (Trope & Liberman, 2010), it could influence the impact of two-sided ad appeals. Given the ambiguous findings concerning the effectiveness of two-sided advertising (e.g., see Eisend, 2006), investigating the potential moderating role of construal level is valuable to both theory and practice.

Beyond the ad appeals identified in this review, future research should expand the application of CLT by examining other ad appeals and frames. CLT could be used to predict the persuasiveness of signalling vs self-improvement ad appeals. A signalling appeal highlights that using the advertised product can help consumers signal to others they possess the trait(s) associated with the brand (Park & John, 2012). In contrast, a self-improvement ad appeal highlights the use of the advertised product as a way to improve oneself to become more like the trait(s) associated with the brand. As a self-improvement appeal is self-focused (John & Park, 2016) and a signalling appeal is other-focused, self-improvement

vs signalling appeals would be represented at low- vs high-level construal. Accordingly, CLT may be relevant to examine the effectiveness of these appeals.

Regarding ad framing, CLT could be useful in predicting the effectiveness of indulgent vs healthy frames, especially in food advertising. Past literature suggests indulgent framing is effective when consumers have low self-control (J. C. Kim et al., 2019). As a high (vs low) construal leads to higher self-control (Trope & Liberman, 2010), it may attenuate the effectiveness of indulgent (vs healthy) advertising frames. Investigating indulgent and healthy frames based on CLT would extend construal-level findings concerning self-control into advertising research. CLT may be applied to examine the effectiveness of using polite language frames in advertising, as politeness is associated with construal level (Stephan et al., 2010). As using polite language is an important communication strategy (Kronrod et al., 2012), it would be valuable to examine its effectiveness based on CLT.

Future research can also consider other unexplored ad imagery such as the formal vs casual dress of a celebrity. Slepian et al. (2015) show that formal (vs casual) dress can induce high-level construal. Although Slepian et al. (2015) tested the impact of wearing a formal dress on the cognition of the wearer, a formal dress may also impact viewer's perception of social distance from the wearer. It is worth mentioning that a preregistered direct replication study (Burger & Bless, 2017) failed to demonstrate this effect of formality of dress on construal level. CLT can be used in visual brand identity advertising research portraying brand heritage. Our review found only one study demonstrating that brand heritage advertising diminishes brand uniqueness by triggering high construal levels, subsequently lowering consumers' willingness to pay (Scarpi, 2021b). Future research could build on CLT to examine the impact of brand heritage advertising on other outcomes in different contexts, such as luxury advertising, where advertisers use brand heritage in visual communications (Butcher & Pecot, 2022).

Another advertising area where CLT has received little attention is controversial advertising, also called shock advertising (Dahl et al., 2003) or offensive advertising (Chan et al., 2007), which attempts to shock or offend audiences by violating norms (Dahl et al., 2003). Controversial advertising negatively impacts consumer responses (Theodorakis et al., 2015; Vezina & Paul, 1997) because it is perceived as morally inappropriate (Choi et al., 2016; LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). CLT can provide the theoretical rationale for examining the effectiveness of controversial advertising. Construal level psychological research shows that moral transgressions are perceived more harshly when an act's psychological distance is far than near (Eyal et al., 2008). Later, a direct replication research (Study 5) by Gong and Medin (2012) showed opposite findings; that is, a near psychological distance compared to a far psychological distance increased moral outrage towards norm-violating behaviour. Two articles used CLT in controversial advertising (Theodorakis & Painesis, 2018, 2022). These articles primarily focused on sex or erotic ad appeals. Future research could investigate other controversial advertising executions involving death, suffering, and violence (Gurrieri et al., 2016; Huhmann & Mott-Stenerson, 2008). Controversial advertising execution refers to "provocative images, words, or situations that utilize or refer to taboo subjects (e.g., violence, sex/erotica, death, indecent/vulgar body parts or functions and political/racial issues) or that violate societal norms or values" (Huhmann & Mott-Stenerson, 2008, p. 294). It would add to both advertising theory and practice because of limited research on controversial advertising and its frequent use in advertisements of well-known brands (e.g., Calvin Klein, Tom Ford) (Moraes & Michaelidou, 2017; Sabri, 2012).

Future research can also draw on CLT to explore the brand- or product-side in advertising. Future research could apply CLT to investigate the advertising of controversial products, such as gender/sex-related products (e.g., contraceptives), addictive products (e.g., gambling), health and care products (e.g., products to treat or prevent sexually transmitted diseases), and social/political groups (e.g., religious groups) (Waller et al., 2002). Future research could examine how

best to advertise a brand positioned as an activist. Many brands attempt to position themselves as activists – moral actors promoting social, legal, business, economic, political, and environmental reform through communication and practice (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021). Brands that position themselves as activists commonly engage in controversies (Sibai et al., 2021). Given the role of the construal level in moral judgment (Eyal et al., 2004), CLT could explain how best to advertise brands positioned as activists. Finally, some products, such as insurance and some banking services, are naturally associated with temporal distance, a predictor of construal level. Therefore, CLT could be relevant in investigating the effectiveness of advertisements of such products.

Despite its theoretical relevance, CLT has not been considered in direct-to-consumer advertising (DTC). With products such as pharmaceuticals or medical devices, DTC advertising is required to provide true and balanced information, including the mandatory display of the benefits (pros) and the risks (cons) of medicines or medical services (e.g., genetic testing) (Liu & Pearson, 2008). Since pros and cons are construed at high- and low-level construal, respectively (Trope & Liberman, 2010), CLT may be relevant to examine the effectiveness of DTC advertisements displaying drugs' benefits (pros) and side effects (cons).

6.1.2. Audience attributes

Future research could extend construal-level advertising research by investigating the role of consumer-side factors, such as self-affirmation, self-control, and ideologies and values. Self-affirmation has been linked to construal level since individuals looking for self-affirmation focus on their most central self-characteristics to bolster and defend the self (Wakslak & Trope, 2009), a defining feature of high-level construal (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Self-control has also been associated with construal level, such as high-level construal promotes self-control success, whereas low-level construal results in self-control failure (Fujita, 2008).

Trope and Liberman (2010) suggest that individuals' ideologies and values evoke high-level construal. Contrary to this generalised CLT view on values, some values may be construed at different levels. For example, the self-transcendence vs self-enhancement value may be construed at different levels due to increased attention to others vs self and motivation to achieve collective (personal) benefits (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2012). A similar explanation also applies to altruistic vs egoistic environmental values. Some other consumer side factors, such as incremental and entity theorists (Bullard et al., 2019), fear and anxiety (Mayiwar & Björklund, 2023), and hubristic and authentic pride (Yang & Zhang, 2018), may be investigated in advertising research as they are associated with construal level.

6.1.3. Psychological distance

As our review shows, CLT research in advertising is mainly anchored on the theoretical concept of psychological distance. This research manipulated psychological distance mainly through factors outside advertisements (e.g., friends vs average student, location of retailer). Future construal-level advertising research could consider more practical and ad-related manipulations of psychological distance. This is important for extending construal-level advertising research and its practical implications. Based on a thematic analysis of 1,700 real ads of luxury, premium, and mass-market brands, Gurzki et al. (2019) identified several ad-related elements marketers use to create the perception of psychological distance for constructing symbolic meaning. They highlighted that marketers implicitly emphasis a brand's legacy and heritage to create temporal distance. They suggested that aspirational lifestyles (e.g., the global jet set, traditional upper-class activities) and aspirational settings (e.g., remote locations, featuring nature) can create social and spatial distance. The use of natural settings (e.g., mountains, arctic) can reflect distinction from others (social distance) and being far from the global cities (spatial distance). In addition to natural settings, placing models and products in the context of artworks or architectural settings can create perceptions of spatial distance.

Gurzki et al. (2019) further suggested that the imagery advertising elements, such as using arrogant model looks or status symbols (e.g., helicopters, sports cars), can create the perception of social distance. Displaying discrepant model behaviour, social domination, or symbolic exclusion from the group can create social distance. They indicated that advertisers use a high degree of fiction (e.g., impossible scenes), mystical settings, staging in a surreal setting, or exaggeration and displacement in advertisements to create perceptions of hypothetical distance.

6.2. Method

Construal-level advertising studies in our review solely used quantitative research design. It is not surprising considering that a quantitative design is suitable for testing theories (Creswell, 2012). A qualitative design could be valuable for an in-depth understanding of CLT's role in advertising because of the emerging nature of construal-level advertising research (Jebarajakirthy et al., 2021; Kitchen, 1997). Qualitative research can also suit theory testing (Doz, 2011).

Another issue is only the experimental method was used for data collection. This method provides findings concerning the causal effects of different ad appeals or messages based on solid evidence (Chang, 2017), and helps avoid inherent issues in the survey method, such as common method bias and multicollinearity among constructs (Bhukya & Paul, 2023). More than 95 % of the experiments were conducted in lab settings, including the use of single-source data, convenience samples, and recruitment of participants through opt-in panels or crowdsourcing platforms (e.g., MTurk, Credamo). This raises concerns about ecological and external validity.

At the same time, construal-level advertising research primarily applied traditional experimental designs. Future research could address these issues by using field survey research, which investigates phenomena in natural settings and thus produces more generalisable findings (Chang, 2017). Other issues are the use of fictitious brands, print ads, and forced exposure. Such methods, though convenient, may be suitable for increasing the number of studies in the domain but undermine the creativity in research problems addressed (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). Our review indicated that 57 % of the included articles used fictitious brands (e.g., Baek et al., 2022; Park & Morton, 2015). Although using fictitious brands helps researchers control some confounding factors (e.g., prior knowledge and experience), it makes findings less relevant to typical advertising contexts (Vargas et al., 2017). Advertising researchers applying CLT should carefully weigh the pros and cons of using fictitious brands when designing experiments.

Future construal-level advertising research could use secondary data to triangulate the findings with primary data. The emergence of digital environments has made it possible to record many consumer actions, implying that advertising researchers can now access these records, which can be used to complement lab experiments (Liu-Thompkins & Malthouse, 2017). Previous construal-level advertising studies collected data at a single point (see White et al. (2011) for exception). This singular focus on a cross-sectional design is a critical limit on measuring effectiveness, since advertising effects are often progressively incremental (Wymer & Gross, 2023). We recommend using a longitudinal design in future construal-level advertising studies to determine ad effectiveness over time. A longitudinal research design would provide greater theoretical and practical insights, given that time predicts construal levels.

Construal-level advertising research primarily used print ads as experimental stimuli. However, the global advertising shares of digital (60 %) and TV (25.9 %) advertisements were far higher than print ads (3.6 % newspapers ads and 1.5 % consumer magazines ads) (Aukofer et al., 2021). These print ads in construal-level advertising experiments were subjected to forced exposure; that is, participants were asked to focus their attention on the ads. Most consumers view ads in real life in a cluttered environment where they pay partial attention to ads (Vargas

et al., 2017). Forced exposure cannot be used for examining the impact of advertising on attention. Potentially because of this, the extant construal-level advertising research has yet to consider attention as the outcome variable. Therefore, future advertising research could use more innovative research methodologies when applying CLT.

Finally, regarding analysis tools, construal-level advertising research has mainly used experimental-design analysis (e.g., ANOVA, MANOVA). A recent review (Mishra et al., 2020) recommended that future CLT studies consider structural equation modelling (SEM). SEM can be particularly useful in advertising research when collecting data using surveys. It can analyse nonexperimental data collected in natural settings, which addresses the inherent generalisability issue of experimental data, and makes it an excellent tool for extending advertising theories (Hair et al., 2017). Another advantage of using SEM is that it tests both the hypothesised structural and measurement models.

SEM can also be used in cases with complex relationships that can include mediating and/or moderating relationships, as well as to better account for measurement errors (see e.g., Hair et al., 2022). However, when SEM is used to analyse nonexperimental data, it would provide only correlational evidence, not causal evidence (Armstrong, 2012) for CLT-related effects. What is needed most from future research is causal evidence from more replication studies, registered (pre-published) to avoid publication bias, and with sample sizes large enough to detect small effects, if they exist (Maier et al., 2022). Conducting replications of advertising studies applying CLT is important given some inconsistent findings in advertising domain (see Thematic Analysis section for examples) and unsuccessful replications in construal level psychological research (Calderon et al., 2020; Gong & Medin, 2012; Slepian et al., 2015). Calderon et al. (2020) failed to replicate two of the seven studies in Waksalak et al.'s (2006) article suggesting hypothetical distance as a predictor of construal-level. Gong and Medin's (2012) direct replication of Eyal et al.'s (2008) study demonstrated the opposite effect of psychological distance on severity of judgment of moral transgressions.

7. Implications

7.1. Theoretical implications

This systematic review contributes to construal-level advertising research in several ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first systematic review that comprehensively synthesises the existing literature on the application of CLT in advertising research. While a recent bibliometric review was conducted on CLT research (Adler & Sarstedt, 2021), it adopted a more general and broad overview of the overall research landscape. Adler and Sarstedt (2021) did identify promotion and advertising as a major cluster in consumer research within construal-level research. Our study advances CLT advertising research by specifically delving into the nuances and particularities of construal-level advertising research. It identifies critical gaps that future research can pursue to deepen our knowledge of this research stream.

Second, applying a rigorous and in-depth content analysis, our review identified various themes and sub-themes within construal-level advertising. Our research contributes to construal-level advertising research by providing an integrative overview of the scholarly work on construal-level advertising research (Vrontis et al., 2021), and suggests potential niche or emerging themes to explore (Bargoni et al., 2023). The different themes and sub-themes can cross-fertilise each other in terms of commonalities of topics (Mariani et al., 2022). It also highlighted empirical inconsistencies in the findings of existing construal-level advertising research. We also reported contexts/areas within advertising research where CLT could be applied to highlight potential unexplored or emerging contexts to enhance the scope of construal-level advertising research.

Third, we identified CLT's theoretical tenets that form bases for its application in advertising research. Construal-level matching and categorisation effects emerged as the most prominent tenets in CLT

advertising research. Additionally, we indicated various underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of the construal-level matching effect discovered in advertising research. This help to explains when and how the construal-level matching effect occurs. Notably, some contradictory arguments and findings were highlighted regarding boundary conditions.

7.2. Practical implications

This study offers practical guidance for brand managers and advertisers seeking to enhance the persuasive impact of their advertising. Our review identifies a variety of advertising appeals, frames, and claims that advertisers can employ to influence consumer responses in different advertising contexts. It presents several imagery elements marketers can use to design persuasive advertisements. Advertisers can draw on this knowledge to match ad appeals, frames, claims, and imagery elements with the target audience in terms of construal level to improve advertising effectiveness. While prior consumer research has used psychological manipulations of construal level, it is less practical for marketers to implement such manipulations in a real advertising context. Our review identified and listed several ad, brand, and audience-related factors that marketers could use to evoke a particular construal level and enhance the effectiveness of their advertising.

The best evidence for how CLT can be used by advertisers comes from the small number of studies showing its effectiveness in field research. High construal level is associated with psychological distance, but sales effects are logically impossible if the product is distant in time or space. One study measured actual sales of products construed at a high level using a social distance manipulation (Ryoo et al., 2017). Consumers were invited to emulate a distant group (the whole country) in the high-construal-level group, or a close group (the local province) in the low-construal-level group. More coffees were purchased in mugs (rather than disposable cups) when there was a language match with distance compared to local. This social-distance seems very useful for advertising products evaluated more favourably at a high construal level, such as paradoxical brands (Xin et al., 2022). Replication with different messages is needed (Lee, 2019), especially as both types of normative messages might be construed at a high level in individualist cultures (Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

Because of the difficulty of measuring sales when consumers are in a high-construal-level state, other field studies have measured proxies for sales, such vouchers for a distant restaurant (Ding & Keh, 2017). More of these distant/future use vouchers were sold when they used matching high-construal-level language. Future intention is another sales proxy used in field studies. Intentions were more likely to change if a matching distant-time image was used, with a positive emotional valence (Loebnitz et al., 2020). In another field study, clickthrough was higher when there was a match between ad language and the consumer's construal level. Construal level is higher during the information search stage of the purchase funnel, and lower during the final purchase stage (Humphreys et al., 2021). In the information search stage, consumers used abstract keywords ("best" or "how") and these were best-matched with abstract paid search ads ("Be Your Beautiful Best"). In the purchase state, consumers used concrete keywords ("buy"), which were best matched with a concrete ad ("Makeup, Moisturizer, Skincare").

8. Conclusion

The application of CLT in advertising research has been gaining popularity in recent years. Based on CLT, advertising researchers have predicted the effectiveness of different ad appeals, ad frames, and ad-related imagery elements in diverse contexts. Advertising research has applied the well-established tenets of CLT as well as integrated CLT with other prominent theories to understand advertising effectiveness. Because the application of CLT in advertising research has recently gained momentum, there is ample opportunity to further advance this

important research field.

9. Limitations

Our study has some limitations. We adopted strict inclusion/exclusion criteria (e.g., excluded book chapters, conference papers) and used a quality filter (excluded articles not published in A and A* journals) in our review. Although this approach helped us to generate a sufficiently large sample size (i.e., 111 articles) and greater rigor in analysing the included articles, we acknowledge that the findings might have differed if we had relaxed the inclusion/exclusion criteria or did not apply a quality filter. Like any other systematic review, we do not claim to have included every article related to our review. Despite a rigorous approach to arrive at a final sample of articles, we acknowledge that some relevant articles may have been missed during the process of searching and shortlisting articles. Overall, we believe our methods and findings are useful to academics and managers interested in CLT’s role in successful advertising.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Muhammad Rashid Saeed: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Huda Khan:** Writing

– review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Richard Lee:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Larry Lockshin:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Steven Bellman:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Justin Cohen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Song Yang:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.¹**Right retention statement:** “For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) [or other appropriate open licence] licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.”

Appendix A

Table 3
A summary of studies’ findings included in themes and future research directions.

| Broad theme | Sub-theme | Key findings | Future research suggestions |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| Underpinning theoretical mechanism | Categorisation effect | <p>High-level construal fosters more inclusive categorisation, focusing on context-invariant features and central connections (Gong & Medin, 2012).</p> <p>High-level (vs low-level) construal reduces the unfavourable evaluations of mixed emotions appeals, sorts out conflicting emotions, thereby reducing the discomfort caused by conflicting or mixed emotions (Hong & Lee, 2010).</p> <p>Low-level construal leads to perceiving erotic ads or taboo ads as more controversial, leading to less favourable evaluations of the ads (Theodorakis & Painesis, 2022, 2018).</p> <p>High-level construal consumers evaluate ads of paradoxical brands more favorably due to cognitive flexibility accommodating paradoxical meanings (Xin et al., 2022).</p> | <p>Explore additional boundary conditions and psychological mechanisms when applying categorisation or matching effect of construal level theory as an analytical lens.</p> <p>Apply construal level theory to explore how consumers process information conveyed in two-sided ads.</p> <p>Apply matching effect to examine the effectiveness of additional ad appeals, ad frames and ad imagery.</p> |
| | Matching effect | <p>A stimulus (e.g., ad) will be favourably viewed when its aligns with the audience’s construal level (Liberman & Trope, 1998).</p> <p>Ad evaluations are more favorable when abstract (high construal level) vs concrete (low construal level) appeals match with high vs low social, temporal, hypothetical, or spatial distance (Balaji et al., 2021; Kulkarni & Yuan, 2015; Schuetz et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2020).</p> <p>Processing fluency is a prominent mechanism, followed by consumer engagement and perceived diagnosticity (Gu and Chen, 2021; Roose et al. 2019)</p> <p>Some other mechanisms of the matching effect include perceived message quality, perceived fit, increased attention, perceived efficacy, and message elaboration (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2023; Bauer, 2023; Chen, 2016; Spassova & Lee, 2013; Youn & Kim, 2019).</p> <p>With diverse findings, the construal-level matching effect is nuanced, involving various mechanisms, boundary conditions, and cultural influences in advertising research.</p> <p>Matching effect will be moderated either positively or negatively by contextual variables such as elaborative versus heuristic processing, cultural values (individualism) as well as boundary</p> | |

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

| Broad theme | Sub-theme | Key findings | Future research suggestions |
|---------------------|-----------------------|--|---|
| Ad appeals | Ad framing | <p>conditions like involvement, creative mindset (Youn & Kim, 2019; Kim et al., 2018).</p> <p>Appeals are examined in this review involving abstract vs concrete (Sung et al., 2020), benefits to self vs others (Yang et al., 2015), hedonic vs utilitarian (Tsang et al., 2022), warmth vs competence (Septianto et al., 2022), mystery vs apparent (Shi, 2021), ability-oriented vs effort-oriented (Ding & Keh, 2017).</p> <p>Gain-framed ads were more effective in generating favorable recycling intention and behavior when consumers had a high-level construal, whereas loss-framed ads were more effective with low-level construal (Septianto and Lee 2020).</p> <p>Gain frames were superior to loss frames for recycling intention and behavior, especially when matched with an abstract “why” ad message, as opposed to a concrete “how” ad message (White et al. 2011).</p> | <p>Employ construal level theory as an analytical framework as well as a psychologic rationale or cognitive mechanism to gain a comprehensive understanding about how ad appeals affect consumer behaviour.</p> <p>Explore additional ad appeals, such as signaling vs self-improvement appeals.</p> <p>Examine potential application of CLT to predict the effectiveness of indulgent vs healthy frames, polite language frames, and formal vs informal celebrity dress.</p> <p>Investigate visual brand identity, particularly in portraying brand heritage and its impact on different outcomes.</p> <p>Assess controversial advertising, expanding beyond sex or erotic appeals to include execution involving images or words that refer death, suffering, and violence.</p> <p>Expand the application of CLT to advertising controversial products and brands positioning themselves as activists.</p> <p>Delve CLT relevance in investigating the effectiveness of advertisements for products naturally associated with temporal distance, like insurance and certain banking services.</p> <p>Examine CLT to examine the effectiveness of direct-to-consumer advertisements displaying drugs’ benefits and side effects.</p> |
| | Visual imagery | <p>Aligning illustrations and photographs with construal levels enhances the likelihood of purchasing (Septianto et al. 2019).</p> <p>Illustrations lift the evaluation of novel products, like clean meat, fostering a perception of luxuriousness (Septianto et al., 2022).</p> <p>In charity advertising, the efficacy of cause-focused versus product-focused images depends on the proximity of charities to their goals and the target recipients (Chen, 2020).</p> <p>Presenting an image of plastic waste with a why/how message increases the intention to reduce plastic consumption (Septianto & Lee, 2020).</p> | |
| | Spatial distance | <p>Images of animals and humans impact construal levels, influencing social distance perceptions. Displaying animals in future-oriented ads is more effective than human-oriented ads, based on social and temporal distance considerations (Loebnitz et al., 2020, 2022).</p> <p>Kim et al., 2019). Varying the product-model distance in desirability-focused (feasibility-focused) ads influenced purchase intention and actual spending (Tok et al., 2021). The spatial arrangement of visuals was influential, where high (low) horizon images in ads were more effective when emphasising far (near) future product benefits (Roose et al., 2019).</p> | |
| | Celebrity endorsement | <p>Celebrity endorsement studies within CLT consider construal-level matching effects.</p> <p>Sports star endorsers enhance effectiveness with specific ad characteristics (e.g., colour vs black and white), while typical person endorsers show different results (Chang and Chen 2022).</p> <p>Social media influencers’ effectiveness depends on social distance, with expert influencers more effective when socially distant (Choi et al., 2023).</p> <p>Spokespersons with high expertise are more effective when advertising separate brand products (brands launched by retailers under different names) (Chou & Wang, 2017).</p> | |
| Audience attributes | Self-construal level | <p>Audience attributes, the individual-specific characteristics, including the construal level, will largely determine an advertisement’s effectiveness (Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015).</p> <p>The construal level of the audience, whether measured or primed, plays a significant role in determining ad effectiveness.</p> <p>Low-level construal consumers evaluate emotional ads more favorably due to ad-consumer construal congruency (Septianto & Pratiwi, 2016).</p> <p>Low-level construal consumers respond more positively to ads displaying a product’s near-future benefits (Youn & Kim, 2019).</p> <p>Audience construal-level influences consumer responses to mixed emotions ads; low-level construal individuals respond more favorably to single-emotion ads compared to mixed emotions ads (Hong & Lee, 2010).</p> <p>High-level construal consumers show no significant difference in the evaluation of single-emotion and mixed emotions ads due to blurred boundaries between opposite emotions in mixed emotions advertisements.</p> | <p>Assess the association between self-affirmation and construal level. Individuals seeking self-affirmation focus on central self-characteristics, a characteristic of high-level construal.</p> <p>Investigate the causality between self-control and construal level, given the fact that high-level construal promotes self-control success while low-level construal leads to self-control failure.</p> <p>Explore the causal relationship between construal level and individuals’ ideologies and values.</p> <p>Examine the role of some values (e.g., self-transcendence vs self-enhancement and altruistic vs egoistic environmental values) potentially associated different construal levels in advertising research.</p> <p>Investigate how other consumer-side construal associated factors (e.g., incremental and entity theorists, fear and anxiety, and hubristic and authentic pride) predict advertising effectiveness.</p> |
| | Social relatedness | <p>Social relatedness, involving how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others, is a key factor in CLT-based advertising research (Cross et al., 2011).</p> <p>Those with an independent self-view prioritise self-reliance and autonomy, whereas individuals with an interdependent self-view value social relations and interpersonal harmony (Spassova & Lee, 2013).</p> <p>Individuals with independent (interdependent) self-construal mentally represent information at high-level (low-level) construal and are more persuaded by ad appeals emphasising far-future (near-future) benefits (Spassova & Lee, 2013).</p> | |

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

| Broad theme | Sub-theme | Key findings | Future research suggestions |
|-------------|-------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| | Social norms | In health advertising, individuals with independent (interdependent) self-construal are more persuaded by gain-framed (loss-framed) messages when the temporal construal is distant (proximal) (Chen, 2016). Interaction effects are identified among self-construal (independent vs interdependent), message regulatory framing (gain vs loss), and temporal framing (distant vs proximal) (Pounders et al. 2015). General (provincial) descriptive norms, corresponding to high-level (low-level) construal, demonstrated increased effectiveness in sustainability ads when paired with low-level-construal (e.g., “how”) messages (Ryoo et al. 2017). Consumers with high (low) levels of cultural distance respond more positively to brand advertisements emphasising country (vs. product) image (Septianto, Japutra, et al.2022). Consumers from individualistic cultures (e.g., US) favour a high-level construal fit between ads and temporal distance, whereas consumers from collectivist cultures (e.g., Korean) respond similarly between the two fit conditions (Kim et al., 2018). | |
| | Brand relationship | Abstract appeals are effective when the consumer-brand relationship is distant, while weak brand relationships improve the effectiveness of concrete appeals (Connors et al., 2021). A strong psychological sense of brand community enhances consumer favorable responses towards utilitarian appeals, but a high-level construal match between a weak psychological sense of brand community and symbolic appeals does not result in more favorable evaluations (Bauer, 2023). The effectiveness of ad appeals is increased when matched with consumer-brand relationship strength, psychological sense of brand community, anthropomorphised brand roles, and brand experience in terms of construal level (He et al., 2020, Kim & Song, 2019). | |
| | Decision-making process | Consumers at different stages of the decision-making process may evoke different construal levels, impacting the effectiveness of relevant ads. Consumers at the predecisional (post-decisional) stage are more persuaded by ad messages focusing on the future (present) or targeting a distant (close) other (Nenkov 2012) Consumers at Stage 1 (motivation formation stage) vs Stage 2 (purchase decision-making stage) of the decision-making process are more persuaded by lifestyle vs functional advertisements for luxury brands (Ma et al. 2021) Consumers at the informational (transactional) stage of their decision journey browse online advertising more frequently when it is abstract (concrete) (Humphreys et al. 2021). | |
| | Wide range of others | CLT-based advertising studies explore the role of consumers present vs future orientation (Kees, 2011), consumers global (vs local) identity (Salnikova et al., 2022), consumers promotion or prevention oriented (regulatory foci) (Lee et al., 2010), creative mindset (Yang et al., 2011), and busyness (Yang & Hu, 2023). Need for cognition (Youn & Kim, 2019) and product knowledge (Hong & Sternthal, 2010) are also investigated as additional audience-side factors in construal-level advertising research. | |

Appendix B. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114870>.

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