

Using spatial distance strategically with luxury and popular product displays

April 23 2021, by Matt Weingarden

Researchers from Nanjing University, National Sun Yat-sen University, and Northwestern University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that shows that the spatial distance between products and consumers can affect perceived value and willingness to pay.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Values Created from Far and Near: Influence of Spatial Distance on Brand Evaluation" and is authored by Xing-Yu (Marcos) Chu, Chun-Tuan Chang, and Angela Y. Lee.

No one ever questions why some retail products are on display in cabinets behind the sales counter, where shoppers can only view them from a distance, while other displays take center stage to greet shoppers as they walk inside the store. Consumers likely reason that the former practice is to protect [high-value products](#) from potential damage or theft and that the latter practice is to entice shoppers to purchase these items. However, there are additional hidden advantages to these practices. This research team finds that keeping a distance between [consumers](#) and products enhances the perceived value and prestige of luxury items while proximity increases the perceived sincerity and closeness of popular products.

The researchers propose that the spatial distance between the product and the consumer, whether in real life or in ads or websites, may enhance or devalue consumers' perceptions of the product depending on whether the [brand](#) image reflects status or broad appeal. Specifically,

distance signals prestige when status and luxury are relevant to the brand image, in which case a far distance should help enhance the brand image. On the other hand, distance signals social closeness when popularity and broad appeal are relevant to the brand image, in which case a close distance should help to enhance that brand image.

Across seven studies, they show that the distance between the product and the consumer, whether in real life or in ads, can have a profound influence on how consumers evaluate the product and make purchase decisions. The researchers observe the relationship between spatial distance and consumer perception and price judgments in a variety of contexts that include store display, window display, print ads, and websites. In the first study, participants designing a mock ad positioned the image of a product further away from the image of the model when the ad was for a prestigious brand than for a popular brand. In the next set of studies, participants estimated the same distance between the model and an expensive handbag to be further apart than for an inexpensive handbag; but they estimated the distance between the model and a popular brand to be closer than for an unpopular brand.

In the next two studies, participants evaluated an expensive leather backpack more favorably when they were standing five feet (versus three feet) away, but an everyday-use canvas backpack more favorably when they were standing three ft (versus five feet) away. Participants in the sixth study evaluated a coffeemaker with the tagline "Aromatic coffee, distinguished taste. Luxurious life, prestigious choice" more positively when it was positioned further away from the model in an ad, but the coffeemaker with the tagline "Aromatic coffee, trendy taste. Cozy life, popular choice" more positively when it was positioned closer to the model in the ad. Finally, in the last study, consumers receiving a text sent to their mobile phone were more likely to click on the ad with a "Luxurious lifestyle, Prestigious choice" tagline and visit the website to redeem a discount coupon when the product image is further away from

the model in the ad. But they were more likely to click on the ad with a "Cozy lifestyle, Popular choice" tagline when the product image is closer to the model in the ad.

These findings offer useful insights to marketers about how to leverage visual cues in window and store displays and in advertising. By strategically matching the distance between the product and the consumer, marketers can effectively enhance value and increase consumers' willingness to pay a price premium for luxury brands by enhancing perceived prestige. Alternatively, they can enhance value and increase consumers' willingness to pay a price premium for brands with broad appeal by enhancing perceived social closeness. For luxury brands or products with an exclusive brand image, a distal distance signals prestige and exclusivity. In contrast, for popular brands or products that appeal to a wide customer base, a proximal distance signals connectedness and sincerity.

Images are powerful communication tools. Today's time-starved consumers are bombarded by information. Chu explains that "Vivid images can capture attention and convey meaning without words and lengthy messages. Marketers can easily incorporate the insights from our research into their communication strategy—whether it be window displays, store layouts, website designs, billboards, print ads, etc. Far distance can enhance perceived status for brands with a prestigious brand image whereas proximal distance can enhance social connectedness for brands with a popular [brand image](#)." Marketers should also be aware of the corresponding downsides—keeping a distance can dampen the perceived connectedness of popular products, while proximity can lower the perceived prestige of luxury products.

More information: Xing-Yu (Marcos) Chu et al, EXPRESS: Values Created from Far and Near: Influence of Spatial Distance on Brand Evaluation, *Journal of Marketing* (2021). [DOI:](#)

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