SOCIAL PROXIMITY AND USER-GENERATED HEALTH CONTENT:
AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST OF PERCEIVED SOURCE SIMILARITY
AND CONSTRUAL LEVEL THEORY

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Abstract

The affordances of the internet, particularly as manifest in social network site platforms, allow for interpersonal mediated communication with socially proximal sources. In a 3 (expert source cues vs. low cues vs. low cue) × 2 (socially proximal vs. distal source cues) online between-subjects experiment (n = 305), this study explores how source cues indicating expertise and social proximity affect assessment of interpersonal similarity and user-generated health messages. Assessment of interpersonal similarity moderates the impact of source proximity cues on assessments of messages, which in turn influence health-related behavioral intentions. In a test of construal level theory, results also show that psychological proximity to message sources influences how readers construe the actions depicted in those messages and how they describe beliefs related to message topics. The findings from this study add to the literature on perceived similarity as a variable relevant to health communication and identify mediated interpersonal health content as a domain ripe for further study. They also extend the application of construal level theory by demonstrating how psychological distance from sources influences reactions to messages produced by those sources.