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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Time to Possess, Time to Progress: the Impact of Temporal Ownership on Time Perception

Sang Kyu Park, Korea University, Korea, Republic of

Yegyu Han, Korea University, Korea, Republic of

Yongjun Sung, Korea University, Korea, Republic of

Time is often linguistically portrayed either in a narrative or possessive framing. Building on this tendency, the authors demonstrate that communicating time in possession framing increases perceived ownership and feelings of responsibility towards making use of time. The heightened responsibility leads consumers to minimize time loss, but maximize time investment.

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Time to Possess, Time to Progress: The Impact of Temporal Ownership on Time Perception

Yegyu Han, Korea University Business School, South Korea
Sang Kyu Park, Korea University Business School, South Korea
Yongjun Sung, Korea University, Department of Psychology, South Korea

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Indeed, the adage, 'Time is Gold', is rather axiomatic today. Scholars have long acknowledged that money is not the only scarcity in the world, and asserted that time is an ultimately scarce resource (Mogilner and Aaker 2009). Now, take a moment to revisit the gold metaphor, and ponder upon the question: whose gold is it? Though the metaphor implicitly assumes that time can be possessed, temporal dimension is theoretically not something that can be possessed (Radin 1986), and descriptions of time as a powerful force influencing many domains of life (Haan, Millsap, and Hartka 1986) further complicate drawing a polarized conclusion regarding temporal ownership. Nonetheless, time is often described both in a possessive framing (i.e., have time to ...) and in a narrative framing (i.e., is time to ...).

Considering that the temporal dimension is relatively fragile (Ebert and Prelec 2007), and that merely addressing time in an anthropomorphic perspective is demonstrated to alter perceptions of time (May and Monga 2014), it seems likely that linguistically portraying time in a possessive framing would similarly influence how time is mentally represented in the minds of individuals. In this sense, communicating time in a possessive framing may encourage people to think time as their possession, and its plausibility is further corroborated by the fact that the endowment effect also pertains to the temporal dimension (Hoorens, Remmers, and Van De Riet 1999). The elevated perceptions of possession and ownership of time may have important implications towards consumers' time spending decisions, given that the extant literature have fruitfully documented the increased feelings of responsibility arising from psychological ownership (Beaglehole 1932; Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003).

Building on people's tendency to represent time both ways, the aim of this research is to identify the impact of perceived possession of time on subsequent consumer behavior. Specifically, feelings of ownership towards the temporal dimension are suggested to increase the responsibility of time usage relative to those who are not entitled the possession of time. The heightened responsibility is then proposed to lead consumers to minimize time loss arising from aversive events, but maximize time investment for desirable events, paralleling the notion that people are disposed to invest more time on a pleasurable event, and to spend less time on an aversive event (Tsai and Zhao 2011). Hence, the experiments were conducted to demonstrate the hypothesized impact of temporal ownership on multiple dimensions of time spending decisions.

Study 1A utilized advertisements with the two common linguistic representations of time to show its influence on perceived ownership. Participants from the U.S. were randomly assigned to one of the two following conditions: possessive (i.e., you have 24 hours) and narrative (i.e., there are 24 hours) framing of advertisement message. Afterwards, they responded to the ownership measures derived from a previous research (Peck and Shu 2009). ANCOVA with individual mood as a covariate revealed a significant main effect of advertisement message frame on perceived ownership of time as predicted ($F(1, 47) = 4.53, p < .05$). Participants who were presented with a possessive frame of time showed greater ownership toward time compared to those who were given a narrative frame of time.

Study 1B illustrated the impact of increased ownership to consumers' responsible use of time. Respondents were allocated to either a possessively or a narratively framed scenario regarding time, and were asked to imagine that they purchased a pair of sneakers of their favorite brand online. They also indicated their likelihood of using expedited shipping service over the standard delivery option. Consistent with pretest results, participants felt greater ownership in the possessive condition compared to the narrative condition. More importantly, participants with an elevated sense of ownership of time seemingly demonstrated greater reluctance to use time irresponsibly by waiting and thus showed a greater likelihood of using the expedited shipping service ($F(1, 35) = 4.14, p = .05$).

Study 2 aimed to extend the impact of time ownership and perceived responsibility to a different dimension by fixing the amount of time to be spent, and measuring differences in indulgent behavior. As theorized, responsible individuals were predicted to spend time in a more considerate manner by striving to achieve maximal outcome from the given time. Therefore, participants with greater ownership, manipulated by the same scenario employed in study 1B, were hypothesized to purchase a VIP ticket for a concert to make the most out of the running time unless its price is deemed inappropriate. The results yielded a significant interaction between time framing and price appropriateness on the likelihood of purchasing a VIP ticket ($b = .33, t = 2.38, p < .05$). Decomposing this interaction revealed that among those who consider the price of the VIP ticket to be appropriate, participants with a sense of ownership towards time were more likely to buy a VIP ticket for maximum enjoyment. On the counterpart, no effect was observed for respondents who thought the price of the ticket to be inappropriate.

The converging evidence from the three studies suggest that describing time in a possessive frame increases psychological ownership and perceived responsibility for making use of time. The experiments demonstrated that people either minimize the time wasted or maximize the utility from a given time usage. In this regard, the second study is one of the pioneering attempts to dynamically demonstrate time spending decisions by concentrating on the desirability aspect. The findings are singular as the value-based explanation cannot fully account for the tendency to spend even more monetary resource for an already determined use of time.

The current article will join the stream of research on the qualitative perceptions of time, and enrich the literature on possession by demonstrating that perception of ownership can also occur for objects that are not obtainable and controllable. Also of particular interest, the framing effect on proprietorship was delineated to arouse responsibility regarding subsequent decisions. Since the article utilized advertisements and gauged intentions, practitioners can readily apply the implications to strategically adapt their marketing messages according to how their products help consumers use time responsibly.

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