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The Mere Forecasting Effect: How Focusing on the Future Influences Current Attitudes

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The present research seeks to demonstrate that future experience, elicited by anticipating one's future affective experience with a product, can influence current product attitudes. Our claim is that the mere act of forecasting one's future affective experience can alter current evaluations of a product, often irrespective of the future attitude itself. We provide evidence that forecasting can influence current attitudes through two separate routes. First, focusing on the future increases the salience of distal information. As a result, this information is disproportionately weighted when participants consider their current attitudes. Second, even if one's anticipated future attitude is non-diagnostic (no different than the current attitude), we find evidence that the process or act of contemplating one's future experience with a product can impact current judgments through a meta-cognitive route.

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The Mere Forecasting Effect: How Focusing on the Future Influences Current Attitudes

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The present research seeks to demonstrate that future experience, elicited by anticipating one's future affective experience with a product, can influence current product attitudes. Our claim is that the mere act of forecasting one's future affective experience can alter current evaluations of a product, often irrespective of the future attitude itself. We provide evidence that forecasting can influence current attitudes through two separate routes. First, focusing on the future increases the salience of distal information. As a result, this information is disproportionately weighted when participants consider their current attitudes. Second, even if one's anticipated future attitude is non-diagnostic (no different than the current attitude), we find evidence that the process or act of contemplating one's future experience with a product can impact current judgments through a meta-cognitive route.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Empirical research has validated the lay intuition that prior experiences impact current attitudes, which in turn inform future behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Within consumer contexts, the role of direct experience in generating strongly held product attitudes is well-documented (Smith and Swinyard 1982). The present research seeks to demonstrate that future experience, elicited by anticipating prospective product-related emotions, can influence current product attitudes. Our contention is that the mere act of forecasting one's future experience can alter current evaluations of a product. In itself, this claim is not novel; it has previously been suggested that consumers base their intentions or choices in part on premonitions of how they will feel in the future (Mellers 2001; Soderlund 2003). However, we provide evidence that forecasting can influence current attitudes through two separate routes. First, focusing on the future increases the salience of distal information. As a result, this information is disproportionately weighted when participants consider their current attitudes. If distal information is primarily negative, current attitudes of forecasters are shown to be more negative than current attitudes of non-forecasters. The converse is true if distal information is positive. Second, even if one's anticipated future attitude is non-diagnostic (no different than the current attitude), we suggest that the process or act of contemplating one's future experience with a product can impact current judgments through a meta-cognitive route. We show that the feelings of ease or difficulty associated with forecasting one's future experience are themselves informative and can impact current product evaluations.

Although basic models linking attitudes to behavior do not explicitly specify a role for future experience, "existing definitions of attitudes generally do not preclude the construct from referring to an object not yet experienced" (Soderlund, 2003). To the extent that future attitudes differ from current attitudes and as long as both types of evaluation affect behavioral intentions, it follows logically that focusing on the future might alter behavior. Indeed, extant literature generally supports the view that forecasts of future emotional states exert substantial influence on intentions (Bagozzi and Edwards 2000; Strathman et al. 1994) and choice (Crawford et al. 2002; but see Hsee 1999; Zeelenberg 1999). Anticipated panic and fear have been shown to affect decisions made by individuals prior to facing a frightening situation (Cox and

Swinson 1994; Craske, Rapee, and Barlow 1988). In gambling tasks, Mellers and colleagues (1999; 1997) found that people's anticipated emotions influenced wager decisions more than economic utility. Shiv and Huber (2000) demonstrated that simply asking consumers to consider their anticipated satisfaction with each of the options in a choice set impacted choices that were subsequently made. According to the authors, preference shifts arose because anticipating satisfaction produced a mental-imaging processing strategy which resulted in options with vivid attributes being disproportionately favored.

In our research, we extend previous work by demonstrating the existence of two routes by which focusing on future affective experiences can influence current attitudes. In experiment 1, we show how making negative distal information more salient can influence product evaluations. We ran a 2-cell experiment where all participants first reviewed a brief description of a new miniature digital camera, MicroPix, that they were considering purchasing. All participants were informed that a competitor's camera would be released in nine months with superior features and a lower price than MicroPix. Participants in the "forecast" condition were asked to anticipate their satisfaction with MicroPix after two years. Participants in the "no forecast" condition did not anticipate their satisfaction in the future. Subsequently, all participants provided their current evaluation of the MicroPix camera. Due to stronger feelings of anticipated regret, the average current evaluation of MicroPix was significantly lower for participants who made an affective forecast ($M=4.5$) compared to participants who did not make a forecast ($M=5.0$), $t(98)=2.15$, $p<0.04$.

In experiment 2, we ran a 5-cell experiment where all participants first reviewed a detailed description of a laptop computer. Participants in four of the conditions were then instructed to look one year in the future and anticipate either: (1) how happy they would be because of the laptop, (2) how happy they would be with the laptop, (3) how much they would like the laptop, or (4) how satisfied they would be with the laptop. Unlike experiment 1, no distal information was provided (either positive or negative) about the laptop. Participants in the control condition did not make a forecast. All participants then provided their current evaluation of the laptop. Across the four groups who made a forecast, mean forecasted values did not differ significantly, $F(3,70) = 1.03$, $p = 0.38$. However, the current evaluation of the laptop was significantly lower for participants who made a forecast ($M=4.2$) compared to participants who did not make a forecast ($M=5.0$), $t(87) = 2.17$, $p < 0.04$. Based on thought listing data, participants found it difficult to forecast their feelings about the laptop one year in the future. We suspect that the difficulty associated with making these forecasts influenced forecasters' current evaluations of the laptop. In subsequent experiments, we attempt to provide converging evidence for the two proposed routes whereby forecasting impacts current attitudes. In order to specifically isolate the meta-cognitive mechanism, we explore how varying forecasting difficulty affects current attitudes.

In sum, our research provides a clear demonstration of the malleability of current attitudes. Specifically, we show that focusing on future affective experiences can affect current product evaluations directly, by increasing the salience of distal information, and indirectly, by highlighting the ease or difficulty of the forecast itself.

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