



Dissertation Abstract

Being Present: Expanding Perceptions of Time through Momentary Temporal Focus

Dissertation Committee:

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Consumers today often find themselves struggling to keep up with the hectic pace of everyday life and meet the expectations of a society that currently places an extremely high value on time. Many, in fact, perceive themselves to be victims of a “time famine”, feeling that there is too much to do and not enough time to do it (Perlow, 1999). And despite technological innovations that have automated many daily tasks, this time shortage problem has only worsened in recent years. Indeed, a perceived lack of time availability now may be one of the most pervasive experiences in modern society. A recent poll of over 1,000 Americans found that nearly half (47%) felt they lacked enough time in daily life (Carroll, 2008), and the percentage of adult Americans who report feeling “always rushed” has been increasing (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). And unfortunately for consumers, research has indicated that time shortage can negatively impact health and well-being (Menzies, 2005) and have other undesirable effects, such as encouraging greater consumption of fast food and multitasking while driving (Darian & Cohen, 1995; Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company, 2008). So, what can be done to shift consumers’ perceptions of how much time is available and make them feel more time affluent?

I posited that consumers’ momentary temporal focus (i.e., the extent to which they are currently focused on the past, present, and future) is capable of altering time perception. Specifically, I examined how a stronger focus on the present expands perceptions of current time availability. Across the three essays of my dissertation, I demonstrate not only that this heightened focus on the present (and the resulting perception of greater time availability) can be attained in a variety of ways, but also that perceived time affluence has important consequences for consumer decision making and well-being.

Essay 1 explores the hypothesis that focusing more strongly on the present expands perceptions of time availability, and builds upon an extant psychological model of time perception in order to illuminate why this effect occurs. Three studies demonstrated that when one’s focus on the present moment was amplified (versus muted), consumers perceived time as more plentiful, felt less pressed for time, and felt that time was passing at a more comfortable (and slower) rate. More interestingly, this expanding of perceived time diminished consumers’ symptoms of time urgency (i.e., feelings of being rushed and hurried) and altered their decision making. For example, when participants were asked how much they would pay for a software program upgrade that would save them time, they were willing to pay less when they were focused on the present (versus the future). Additionally, participants focused on the present (versus the future), found hedonic product attributes (e.g., “pleasurable”, “attractive,” “fun,” etc.) to be more desirable. Mediating these effects was the perception that time felt more plentiful when in the present-focused condition. Last, a fourth study provided evidence that time perceptually “expands” when one focuses more strongly on the present because the number of contextual changes that one encodes (and later retrieves) increases. In other words, when people are focused on the present, they are more likely to note the nuanced emotional, physical, and environmental changes that they experience in the moment, which in turn makes their experiences seem fuller and enhances the perception that time is more plentiful and expansive.

Essay 2 deepens our understanding of the link between time perception and well-being by providing one possible explanation for why prior research (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003) has found a positive association between activities that incorporate slow breathing (e.g., yoga and mindful meditation) and subjective well-being. Four studies demonstrated that, by heightening consumers’ focus on the present moment, slow and deep (versus fast and

shallow) breathing caused consumers to perceive time was more sufficient and that it was passing more slowly. Further, consumers felt they had more hours in the day and reported feeling less impatient. Perhaps more importantly, the results also revealed a boost in life satisfaction that was brought about by breathing slowly (versus quickly). When people breathed more slowly, they perceived greater time availability, which fueled the increase in reported life satisfaction.

Essay 3 (an article based on this essay is forthcoming in *Psychological Science*) calls attention to a relatively underexplored dimension of emotions—the temporal orientation of emotions—by focusing on how experiencing awe can bring people into the present and expand their perceptions of time. The studies in this essay demonstrated that consumers who experienced awe, relative to other emotions (i.e., happiness or a neutral state) felt they were less pressed for time, felt they had more time available, and felt less impatient. The experience of awe (relative to other states) also led consumers to be more willing to volunteer their time to help others, more strongly prefer experiential (versus material) goods, and view their lives as more satisfying. Importantly, mediation analyses revealed that these changes in prosocial decisions, consumer preferences, and subjective well-being were all driven by the greater perceived time affluence elicited by the experience of awe. Moreover, by demonstrating that awe’s observed time expansion effects were not simply characteristic of all positive emotions, these results underscored that, although they may share the same valence, discreet positive emotions are capable of educing divergent consequences.

Taken together, these essays highlight the malleability of the subjective experience of time by introducing momentary temporal focus as a factor capable of altering perceived time affluence. Specifically, across various methods of construct activation and across dependent variables, my dissertation shows that a stronger focus on the present is able to alleviate the feelings of time starvation that plague so many consumers in modern life. Furthermore, by approaching the problem of declining time affluence from a psychological perspective, this research makes a notable contribution to the broader study of time shortage. Indeed, though contributions to the topic of time shortage have come from a wide variety of disciplines—from anthropology, epidemiology, and sociology to economics, occupational health, and medicine—there is a relative paucity of psychological inquiries into this particular aspect of time perception. Thus, my dissertation intends to further emphasize the importance of a psychological study of time affluence by connecting and incorporating time affluence research with research in other domains of consumer psychology, such as consumer judgment and decision making, subjective well-being, and emotions. And in doing so, my dissertation not only sheds light on each of these domains, but also accurately reflects the vigor with which perceived time affluence permeates various aspects of consumers’ lives and influences their thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

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