

Rethinking Time: Implications for Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

How people think about and use their time has critical implications for happiness and well-being. Extant research on time in the consumer behavior literature reveals a predominantly dichotomized perspective of time between the present and future. Drawing on research on emotions, social relationships, and financial decision making, we discuss how removing categorical dichotomies might lead to beneficial outcomes. From this, we propose a conceptualization of time that assumes a less stark contrast between the present and the future, allowing these two timeframes to more flexibly co-exist in people's minds and experiences. Finally, we discuss one way people might adopt this perspective to increase happiness—by taking an elevated or “bird’s-eye” perspective of time where the future and present, as well as the past, become equally visible, and where events from different time points are treated and experienced as part of one’s life and being overall.

Keywords: happiness, well-being, time, experience

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“The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too. We all try to lie out of that, but life won’t let us.”

– Eugene O’Neill, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1956; 2.2.103)

Time is the medium in which we live. Psychologically, time contextualizes our thoughts as they reach into the future, absorb the present, or reflect on the past, and it becomes the material of our thoughts as we anxiously manage our daily schedules. Behaviorally, time manifests as a resource that plays into the decisions we make for how to save it or spend it, thereby determining the substance of our hours, days, and ultimately lives.

Though time is central to people’s lives (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Mogilner & Norton, 2016; Sellier & Avnet, 2014), consumer researchers have traditionally focused on the purchasing of material goods, and on money as the key resource to do so (e.g., Belk, 1985, 1988; Richins, 1994; Richins & Dawson, 1992). In this tradition, time is typically viewed as relevant to the extent it influences or reflects the decision processes driving material purchases (Jacoby, Szybillo, & Berning, 1976). More recently, however, the construct of time has received growing attention with work showing that, although time and money share some similarities, consumers treat these two resources differently (e.g., DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007, 2011; Festjens & Janiszewski, 2015; Hershfield, Mogilner, & Barnea, 2016; Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dube, 1995; Monga & Saini, 2009; Okada & Hoch, 2004; Saini & Monga, 2008; Soman, 2001; Soster, Monga, & Bearden, 2010; Spiller, 2011; Whillans & Dunn, 2015; Zauberaman & Lynch, 2005). Most notably, time (and the way people choose to spend it) serves as a clearer reflection of one’s self, and is thus more connected to happiness than is money (Gino & Mogilner, 2011; Hershfield et al., 2016; Liu & Aaker, 2007; Mogilner, 2010; Mogilner & Aaker, 2009; Whillans, Weidman, & Dunn, 2016).

Despite its intimate relevance to individuals’ lives and despite its enormity and perpetual force, time generally only becomes the focus of people’s attention when it feels scarce

(Carstensen, 2006; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). It is from feeling that there are too few hours in the day that people view their behavior as tradeoffs (Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012; Shah, Shafir, & Mullainathan, 2015; Spiller, 2011). Under such time constraints, people seem to experience their decisions as trade-offs between doing it (now) or not. For instance, do you say yes to grab coffee with a friend in the busy workweek or not (and push it off to sometime later)? Do you say yes to give a talk in front of an opportunity-filled audience during a teaching semester or not (telling yourself you'll say yes next time)? Do you buy that car, iPhone, painting, sweater, or whatever it might be now or not (and save that money for later)? Do you eat the delicious, calorie-laden cake now or not (for the sake of skinniness later)? These decisions reflect the typical treatment of time by individuals and consumer researchers as a dichotomy where time is parsed between the vivid and real *now* versus some vague notion of a later time, which is experienced as remote and much like “not” in the previous examples (Hershfield & Bartels, 2017; Hershfield, 2011).

When standing on the line of time with the future in front and the past behind, the present is experienced as immediate, limited, and seemingly all-consuming. From this ground-level view, the present is the only thing in clear sight: there is no direct view into whatever else awaits in the future, nor into what has already happened in the past. Thus, any decision about what to do (i.e., how to spend one's time) is experienced as the final and weighty question of *whether* to do it (now). From reviewing the literature on time and consumer well-being, we propose a rethinking of time that might reduce the propensity to frame decisions as these types of tradeoffs. By removing the divider between now and not now by taking an elevated view over one's time course, the present and the future are able to co-exist in consumers' minds as equally important contributors to one's week, year, or life as a whole. This rethinking of time could shift decisions

away from the question of *whether* to the question of *when*, which may reduce stress and ultimately foster greater overall well-being.

In this article, we first review prior work on time in the consumer behavior literature, which highlights a predominantly dichotomized perspective of time that distinguishes the present and future. We then draw on literatures from three other research domains (emotions, social relationships and financial decision-making) to show the potential benefits of reducing the salience of categorical dichotomies. We go on to propose one way consumers might adopt a more integrated perspective of time: by taking an elevated or “bird’s-eye” perspective where the future, present, and past become equally visible and thus subjectively relevant. We conclude by suggesting how this elevated perspective on time might impact consumer well-being.

TIME, DICHOTOMIZED

To make the complex, dynamic force of time more tractable, much of Western psychology-based research on time reins it in and frames it as a linear construct placing the consumer as the center point (Graham, 1981; Ji, Guo, Zhang, & Messervey, 2009). From that point, the line is parsed between the past, present, and future. Though memories and past life experiences influence present behavior (Griskevicius, Tybur, Delton, & Robertson, 2011; White, Li, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Kenrick, 2013), and though individuals report thinking about all three time periods (Baumeister, Hofmann, Summerville, & Vohs, 2016), it is how people navigate from the present to the future that is of utmost relevance to behavior and decision-making (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013). In an effort to mentally grapple with time and make decisions for how to spend it, consumers and

researchers have thus come to ground time in temporal dichotomies between the present and the future, or the near versus distant future.

The influential body of work on temporal construal, for instance, dichotomizes time between the imminent future and the distant future to understand how viewing potential outcomes through either temporal lens affects consumers' judgments and predictions (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The central tenet is that events that are temporally imminent are construed concretely with considerations of feasibility and *how* to achieve the desired outcome, whereas events that occur further into the future are construed more abstractly with considerations of desirability and *why* to pursue the desired outcome (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). A snapshot of this literature shows that whether a product will be purchased or used in the near versus distant future determines the sources of information used to evaluate the product (Kim, Zhang, & Li, 2008; Kim, Park, & Wyer, 2009), the level of scrutiny used to process related persuasive messages (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1992), and the appeal of prevention- versus promotion-focused messaging (Mogilner, Aaker, & Pennington, 2008).

Outside the domain of purchasing, whether an event will occur in the imminent versus distant future determines the reliance on concrete or abstract sources of information when making confidence predictions (Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2006), as well as judgments about the likelihood of intuitively probable or improbable events (Wakslak, 2012). Notably, psychologically placing an event into one of two temporal buckets results in a variety of prediction errors: people too easily write off immediate big-ticket purchases as "special" expenditures, because they assume them unlikely to occur again in the future (Sussman & Alter, 2012); people perceive too much time slack in their futures and consequently take on too many commitments (referred to as the "yes-damn" effect; Zauberan & Lynch, 2005); and people are

overly optimistic when thinking about how much they will save in a future month, and thus perpetually save too little (Tam & Dholakia, 2011).

The literature on intertemporal choice also dichotomizes time, but directly between the present and future (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991). With the overarching intent to help consumers by pushing them away from their tendency to choose immediate (lesser) outcomes towards choosing later (better) outcomes, the research on intertemporal choice builds off the notion that consumers are perpetually choosing and making tradeoffs between the present and the future. Perhaps the most classic demonstration of the tradeoff between less in the present and more in the future was among 4-year-olds presented with the choice between gobbling up one marshmallow now or waiting 15 minutes to enjoy two marshmallows later (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). Similarly, the work on temporal discounting presents adult consumers with a series of tradeoffs between smaller rewards received sooner and larger rewards received later (e.g., \$6 tonight and \$8 in 4 days) to calculate discount rates: the extent to which one discounts the value of outcomes that cannot be enjoyed until the future compared to outcomes that can be enjoyed immediately (e.g., Berns, Laibson, & Loewenstein, 2007; Urminsky & Zauberman, 2014).

Investigations into consumers' choices between immediate versus future outcomes have been informative—illuminating such insights as the rate at which consumers discount the value of future rewards (Frederick, Loewenstein, & O'Donoghue, 2002; Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991), whether preferences between options shift as rewards become more proximate (i.e., hyperbolic discounting; Kirby & Marakovic, 1995; Laibson, 1997; Benhabib, Bisin, & Schotter, 2010; Read, Frederick, & Airoldi, 2012), whether discounting is best explained by exponential, hyperbolic, quasi-hyperbolic, or subadditive models (Green & Myerson, 1996; Read, 2001),

whether rates of discounting change with age (Green, Myerson, Lichtman, Rosen, & Fry, 1996; Steinberg et al., 2009; Read & Read, 2004), whether non-monetary rewards are discounted differently than monetary rewards (McClure, Ericson, Laibson, Loewenstein, & Cohen, 2007), as well as what the neural and perceptual underpinnings of discounting are (McClure, Laibson, Loewenstein, & Cohen, 2004; Peters & Buchel, 2011; Zauberman, Kim, Malkoc, & Bettman, 2009). Though valuable in documenting meaningful patterns of consumer behavior, this work propels the typical treatment of time as dichotomous.

In addition to revealing the manner by which consumers choose between the present and the future, research has shown that people's proclivity to choose one over the other can predict future successes and failings. For instance, the 4-year-olds who delayed their gratification and chose two marshmallows later over one immediately were more likely to score higher on their SATs in high school (Mischel et al., 1989) and to have a lower Body Mass Index thirty years later (Schlam, Wilson, Shoda, Mischel, & Ayduk, 2013). Similarly, higher discount rates are predictive of tendencies to engage in certain destructive behaviors, such as drug dependency (Bickel, Koffarnus, Moody, & Wilson, 2014; Yi, Mitchell, & Bickel, 2010), heroin and opioid abuse (Kirby, Petry, & Bickel, 1999), problematic gambling (Petry & Casarella, 1999), and smoking (Baker, Johnson, & Bickel, 2003).

To help individuals discount future rewards to a lesser degree, recent work (mostly in the financial decision-making domain; Joshi & Fast, 2013; May & Monga, 2014) has developed interventions that direct attention toward the future, away from the present. For example, when consumers were reminded that they would get no financial reward in the future by choosing a smaller immediate financial reward (i.e., the hidden zero effect), they exhibited lower discounting rates (Magen, Dweck, & Gross, 2008; Read, Olivola, & Hardisty, 2016). Along

similar lines, when employees considered the responsibility they had toward their future selves or were shown how much (or how little) money they would have in retirement based on their current saving behavior, consumers advocated saving more for retirement (Bryan & Hershfield, 2012; Goda, Manchester, & Sojourner, 2014; Goldstein, Hershfield, & Benartzi, 2016). Indeed, whether led to vividly visualize their future selves (Hershfield et al., 2011), to think about the similarity between people's current and future selves (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011, 2015), or to align their current emotions with those experienced by the future self (Pronin, Olivola, & Kennedy, 2008), these individuals demonstrated greater patience on temporal discounting tasks. Outside of the financial domain, research shows that people who were led to put greater weight on the future over the present exercised more frequently (Fong & Hall, 2003), followed more ethical paths (Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012), and were less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (van Gelder, Hershfield, & Nordgren, 2013; van Gelder, Luciano, Weulen Kranenbarg, & Hershfield, 2015).

Although these sorts of interventions have helped consumers act in ways that are more aligned with "ideal" behavior, they nonetheless have two notable drawbacks. First, the greater value necessarily placed on future outcomes is debatable (Hausman & Welch, 2009). Second, the conflict, guilt, and stress that consumers feel when forced to make tradeoffs between present wants and future ideals are undesirable emotions. Even though the dichotomization of time has been useful both by making the construct of time tractable and by helping consumers grapple with the associated tradeoffs, it may be that there are cases where removing the categories and allowing these two timeframes to more flexibly co-exist would benefit consumers emotionally, financially, and without the physiological burden of stress—ultimately leading to improved well-being.

REMOVING THE DIVIDE

Research from at least three domains highlights the power of integrating across formerly bifurcated categories, shedding insight on how a more integrated approach can lead to positive outcomes and enhanced well-being: (1) emotions, when oppositely valenced emotions can co-occur, (2) social relationships, when other people are included in the self-concept, and (3) financial decision-making, when debt and savings are thought of as components of an overall goal. Although these domains are obviously quite different from our target topic, we nonetheless draw on them to underscore the potential benefits of a non-dichotomized approach to time.

Emotions: Positive vs. Negative Affect

Traditionally, research on emotions assumed a dichotomy, conceptualizing positive and negative emotions as being on opposite ends of the spectrum (Russell, 2003; Russell & Barrett, 1999). Yet more recent work has empirically shown that mixtures of positive and negative emotions can and do occur (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001; Larsen & McGraw, 2011, 2014; Williams & Aaker, 2002), and that attending to both positive and negative emotions at the same time can be beneficial—increasing motivation, resilience, a sense of meaning, and physical health (Adler & Hershfield, 2012; Bonnano & Keltner, 1997; Coifman, Bonnano, & Rafaeli, 2007; Hershfield, Scheibe, Sims, & Carstensen, 2013; Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, & Wallace, 2006; Spiegel, 1998; Stephan et al., 2014).

Instead of separately focusing on the benefits of positive emotions (e.g., Cohen & Pressman, 2006; Danner, Snowden, & Friesen, 2001; Ong, 2010) and the detriments of negative emotions (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002; O'Donovan et al., 2012), Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, and Cacioppo (2003) argued that people should not suppress negative emotion (which has negative interpersonal and medical consequences; Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007; Gross & John, 2003; Mund & Mitte, 2012) and proposed that integrating positive and negative emotions could ultimately benefit well-being. Their co-activation model asserts that allowing for the occurrence of negative emotions alongside positive emotions (“taking the good with the bad”) bolsters people’s ability to cope with negative events and ultimately gain insight into life’s stressors (Davis, Zautra, & Smith, 2004; Larsen et al., 2003).

Together, the growing literature on mixed emotions suggests that a more integrated conceptualization of emotion can lead to better physical and mental health outcomes. For instance, by allowing negative emotions like sadness and anxiety to occur alongside positive emotions like joy and hope, people can more effectively learn and emerge from life’s stressors with strength (Quoidbach, Gruber, Mikolajczak, Kogan, Kotsou, & Norton, 2014). By permitting both positive and negative emotions to be experienced and attended to at the same time, each becomes equally relevant in determining the overall outcome of the event and one’s life. Similarly, it may be that a conceptualization of time wherein the present and future are co-activated in consumers’ experience may benefit their well-being.

Social Relationships: Self vs. Others

A critical phase of childhood development involves learning the concept of self as distinct from others (Erikson, 1959), and much moral psychology and philosophy assumes a strong distinction between the self and others, each with their own self-interests that must be weighed (Berman & Small, 2012; Hobbes, 1651; Mellers, Haselhuhn, Tetlock, Silva, & Isen, 2010). An alternative to this dichotomized perspective treats the self as a cognitive representation that can contain close others (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Perhaps most famously, Aron and Aron (1986) describe close relationships as those in which the other is treated as or confused with one's self, and it is this type of "self-expansion" that occurs when people fall in love (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995, see also Lewin, 1948).

Further, greater self-other overlap has been linked to positive interpersonal consequences. For instance, in the romantic domain, participants who reported greater overlap between their self and their relationship partner exhibited greater relationship satisfaction, and their relationships were more likely to still be intact three months afterwards (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). A recent meta-analysis comprising 137 studies over 33 years similarly showed that higher levels of self-other overlap were associated with a lower likelihood of relationship dissolution (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Even in non-romantic settings, heightened self-other overlap showed beneficial outcomes – more complex understanding of new college roommates (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006), greater forgiveness of transgressions (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998), increased willingness to help others in need (Cialdini, 1997), and a greater ability to celebrate another person's successes (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002). Greater overlap between the self and a member of an out-group was associated with less prejudice towards that outgroup (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997), and greater overlap perceived between the self and the

environment was associated with more pro-environmental behaviors (Davis, Green, & Reed, 2009; Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2008; Schultz, 2001; Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004).

In sum, the literature on self-other overlap suggests that when people integrate valued others, groups, and even the environment into the concept of the self, they enjoy beneficial outcomes—placing more psychological weight onto the entity that might normally be neglected and resulting in behaviors that benefit the relationship (or community) as a whole. Similarly, it may be that a more integrated perspective of time that allows consumers to attend to the future together with the present would produce behaviors that benefit their lives overall.

Finances: Debt vs. Savings

Though nascent, research in the financial decision-making domain suggests that a more integrated approach to debt and savings can, at times, create beneficial outcomes. Researchers have traditionally treated debt and savings as separate categories of money to show that such earmarking can help increase savings (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Soman & Cheema, 2011). For example, creating a separate budget category for “weekend fun” limits the amount of overall spending to spending just within that particular category (Soman & Lam, 2002).

Interestingly, this same propensity to treat money categorically has proven to be problematic in emergencies. Namely, Sussman, and O’Brien (2016) found that consumers often opt to pay for sudden expenses using debt vehicles (e.g., a credit card) rather than drawing on liquid assets in their savings accounts. Because credit cards carry much higher interest rates than saving accounts, using the former to pay for emergency expenses can be detrimental to one’s

overall financial well-being. This finding suggests that a more integrated conceptualization of money where savings and debt are not divided can, in some circumstances, help consumers realize better financial outcomes overall. This finding also hints at the benefits of integration across categories more generally (including time): keeping people from ignoring outcomes placed in another category (like the future) might improve their overall well-being.

RECONSTRUCTING TIME

Across three domains, research has demonstrated the benefits of considering seeming opposites in a more integrated manner. Here, we consider a similar re-construal in the domain of time. Rather than bifurcating time between the present and the future, we entertain a more integrated perspective on time—one that does not force a tradeoff between the two and instead allows the present and future to more flexibly co-exist in consumers' minds and experience.

Even though the prior literature on time is grounded in the assumption that the present and future are separate, emerging work suggests that the distinction between what constitutes the present and the future in people's minds is not clear. Though the present and future serve as prototypical categories, their boundaries are fuzzy (Hershfield & Maglio, 2017). Several factors influence when people think the present ends and the future begins, including temporal markers (e.g., birthdays, New Year's, etc.; Dai, Milkman, & Riis, 2014; Hennecke & Converse, 2017; Peetz & Wilson, 2013), level of emotion regulation (Vohs & Schmeichel, 2003), as well as chronic individual differences (Hershfield & Maglio, 2017). The Eastern-based philosophy of Buddhism also teaches a less stark contrast between the present and the future, suggesting

instead that the present subsumes all time, including the future and past (Mick, 2016; Thurman, 1998).

Cultural variation in the extent to which the present and future are conceptually distinct is also evident in language. Although some languages strongly distinguish between the present and future (i.e., languages with a strong future tense like English say “it rains today” but “it will rain tomorrow”), others have a weaker distinction between the present and future (i.e., languages with a weak future tense like German say “it rains today” and “it rains tomorrow”). More interestingly, these differences play out in behavior. Researchers investigating the effects of language on how people behave shows that, compared to speakers of languages with a strong present-future distinction, speakers of languages with a weaker present-future distinction smoke less, practice safer sex, have lower obesity rates, and save more for retirement—all behaviors that have traditionally been described as “future-oriented,” yet are clearly beneficial for the individual’s well-being both now and in the future (Chen, 2013). Building on these correlational findings, a recent investigation showed that when bilingual respondents answered a survey in a weak future tense language (Estonian) versus a strong future tense language (Russian), they discounted the future less and supported future-oriented policies more (Perez & Tavits, 2017).

These findings suggest that a reconceptualization of time whereby the present and future are not divided may lead consumers to treat the future as the present. Notably, the future will be the present at some point, and the present is perpetually shifting. We opened the paper with this very insight from the American playwright Eugene O’Neill (1956), “The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too.” Similarly, the writer Harriet Beecher Stowe was attributed to saying, “The past, the present and the future are really one: they are today.” With this view, all timeframes are equally relevant to one’s existence. The present is ultimately important, not

because it should be weighed more heavily than the future, but because it *is* the future (or will be at some point). Along the same lines, the future is ultimately important because it is contained within the overarching present.

An Elevated Perspective of Time

We suggest that one way to achieve this conceptualization of time involves adopting a new perspective of one's time course, whereby consumers pull up and away from the ground-level view where only the immediate present is visible. Assuming an elevated view should make the future, present, and past equally visible and thus subjectively relevant. Here, we will explain this perspective and theorize how this approach could potentially improve consumers' happiness and well-being. We note that these propositions have yet to be empirically tested; our intention and hope is that these ideas spur such investigation.

The default mental model of time (in Western contexts) is grounded in the present, with the past spanning backwards and the future unfolding ahead. From this vantage point, people are encased in the perceptually all-consuming present. Anything that is beyond the immediate future (or past) is not clearly visible, and is thus experienced as "other" and less personally relevant (see Figure 1).

A rethinking of time would involve people shifting from a grounded perspective to obtain a more elevated perspective over one's time course, such that moments, days and years in the future or past are equally visible and thus personally relevant (see Figure 2). Such an elevated perspective is much like looking down on one's calendar, with the squares representing moments, days, and years laid out alongside each other. Even though time may still unfold

linearly, every equivalent unit of time is the same size and is equally visible, reflecting its similar importance and role within the whole. For example, a day is the same size as any other day; it is not distorted by its proximity to the square representing the current day. Perhaps a more visually appealing analogy is that of a mosaic, where each block of time is a colored tile representing a given activity or experience. Pieced together, the thousands of tiles form a colorful mosaic of one's life. If any tile stands out as being particularly critical to the overall image, it is because of the content of that experience – not because of its proximity to whatever tile represents the immediate now. In this way, rather than considering now *versus* later, this elevated perspective of time pushes consumers to consider now *and* later, because sometime later is just another piece in one's trajectory, like now. This elevated perspective of time highlights that the past, present, and future are not in competition with one another, but instead co-exist and together form the pieces of one's life story. Work and rest should therefore not be treated as if they are in opposition to one another, but instead are “inextricably bound, each enhancing the other” (Huffington, 2016, p. BR10), “like different points on life's wave” (Pang, 2016, p. 3).

Taking an elevated perspective of time is much like zooming out on a camera, such that the image is no longer bounded to that singular present point in the middle, but captures the surroundings as well. An even more concrete implementation of an elevated perspective of time would be to keep one's calendar in its month view (with regular checks in the year view), rather than scheduling using the calendar's day view, which results in a present consumed hour-to-hour existence.

Notably, this elevated approach is distinct from simply taking a more abstract view of events (e.g., as advocated by Construal Level Theory (CLT); Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Whereas CLT suggests that a more psychologically distant and abstract perspective can help in

certain domains (e.g., self-control) by promoting thoughts of “why” to do something rather than “how” to do it (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006), the elevated perspective nudges consumers toward viewing all of the pieces of one’s timeline at once to promote a more deliberate and thoughtful curation of one’s behavior and time-use. Here, it is not important whether the individual components of the past, present, and future are viewed concretely or abstractly; rather, what is central to the elevated perspective is that these different time points are viewed next to each other and given equal weight. For example, when deciding what aspects of one’s life to prioritize, a CLT approach might lead consumers to consider “why” they should do a given activity instead of “how” to do it. By contrast, the elevated perspective would prompt considerations of “when” a given activity should be undertaken instead of “whether” to do it now. Next, we discuss three ways in which this approach may improve consumer well-being.

Prioritizing Activities. An elevated perspective allows individuals to establish their overarching goals looking across their months, years, and lifetime. Removed from the constraints of considering *whether* to do something strictly based on a current sense of temporal scarcity or “bandwidth,” people can more easily assess the extent to which a given activity or request builds to their personal overarching goals and then place those that do in their calendar accordingly. Thus, only activities that contribute to a consumer’s higher order objectives would receive time and a space in one’s calendar. Notably, this shift in perspective allows consumers to be proactive, rather than reactive, in deciding how to spend their time.

Taking an elevated perspective of one’s time would not only reduce the likelihood that people rush past and miss a worthwhile expenditure of their time when they happen to be feeling time-constrained (Darley & Batson, 1973; Mogilner, Chance, & Norton, 2012), but this perspective should provide confidence, clarity and insight on when to indeed say “no” to a

request. Removing the division between the present and the future also removes the far too easy catchall bucket for doing something “later.” This perspective might thus reduce consumers’ tendency to overcommit their future time (Zauberman & Lynch, 2005).

Perhaps most importantly, the elevated perspective might help reduce the stress, guilt, and regret from not being able to spend time in a desired and worthy way, just because it is not possible to do it all *right now*. For instance, a parent who is at work away from her children on a Monday afternoon wouldn’t need to feel badly and like any less of a parent, since she can clearly see her overall week containing quality, playful hours with her children over the weekend and on weekday mornings and evenings. It may be true that “women [and men] still can’t have it all” (Slaughter, 2010) in any given moment, but perhaps they would realize they do when looking across their weeks and years from a bird’s-eye view. Touching back to the visual analogy of the mosaic, the swaths of different colored tiles representing the different activities that contribute to one’s various pursuits all make up the interesting, multi-dimensional, and complete view of one’s self and life.

The elevated perspective might similarly help people resolve dilemmas in other domains, such as food choice. For instance, the question of *whether* to eat the delicious yet calorie-laden cake shifts into a question of *when* to eat the cake—as well as *when* to eat food options that are kinder to one’s waistline. In the traditional, dichotomized perspective of time, the choice to eat cake represents a tension between now and not now. Taking an elevated perspective of time, however, would allow people to assign moments for indulgence within their week (perhaps on the weekend or special evenings out and at parties). This would keep people from feeling deprived while sticking to their routine salad lunches during the workweek. Similarly, the question of whether to say yes to coffee with a friend gets transformed into a question of when to

allocate time for cultivating social connections within one's busy work schedule. This elevated perspective involves optimizing one's weeks, rather than any given moment.

Zooming further out to a view over one's life course, the benefits of such a perspective continue to emerge. Many adults intuitively divide their life into three stages: education, work and family, and retirement (Kohli, 2005). But with people living longer than they ever have before, one consequence of the three-stage model is that education is limited to adolescence, work and family obligations create a stressful middle age, and retirement ends up being a long, underfunded vacation. However, Carstensen (2009) provocatively suggests a novel trajectory that is consistent with an elevated perspective of time. Namely, she proposes that people spread education and work farther across the life span and sprinkle personal and family-focused time throughout. Rather than students trying to finish school as quickly as possible so that they can sooner start work and sooner retire, they could instead pull some of those future opportunities forward by inserting internships or a gap year to explore the world before they launch their career. Or people could reduce their work hours during their prime child-rearing years and "lean in" to their careers more fully once their children become less demanding of their constant attention, and continue working (but at a more gradual pace) until later in life. Although this proposal undoubtedly faces institutional and cultural hurdles, it is not difficult to see how spreading work out over the life span—that is, taking a now *and* later approach to work-life balance—could ultimately reduce some of the time pressure, stress, and tradeoffs that occur during each life stage.

Whether at the level of weeks or years, this approach also affords individuals the ability to optimally design their calendars and lives. For instance, recent work shows that injecting a variety of activities into one's hours leads to reduced levels of happiness; however, filling one's

weeks and months with varied activities increases happiness (Etkin & Mogilner, 2016). This insight along with an elevated planning of one's schedule would lead consumers to assign similar activities within days, and varied activities across days – resulting in greater happiness with one's time overall. As yet another example, research has found that younger people (or those who see their future as extensive) enjoy greater happiness from exciting stimuli, whereas older people (or those who see their future as limited) enjoy greater happiness from calming stimuli (Mogilner, Aaker, & Kamvar, 2012). This insight and an elevated perspective of one's time would lead consumers to assign exciting adventures to their younger years (or beginning of their retirement), and save the calming and sublimely simple joys to their elder years (or the later phase of their retirement; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014).

An elevated perspective over one's time highlights that each moment is a critical piece of one's overall time course: each tile contributes to the mosaic of one's life. As author Annie Dillard (1989) noted, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Seeing how any given moment fits in with all of the other moments should lead consumers to become more deliberate with how they spend their time—prioritizing activities that reflect their ideal self and optimal life (Loewenstein, 1999; Mogilner, 2010), as well as getting the most out of any given moment by doing activities that satisfy multiple pursuits at the same time (Etkin, Evangelidis, & Aaker, 2015).

Intertemporal Choice. In the realm of intertemporal decisions, it is possible that an elevated perspective of time could help consumers curb some of the tendencies that lead to excessive discounting of future rewards, financially or otherwise. One reason that people often opt for a smaller but immediately obtainable reward is that the temporal distance between now and later dampens the appeal of the larger reward, which can only be enjoyed at a future point in

time. We suggest, however, that taking an elevated perspective of time will make the future reward equally visible as the more immediate reward, so consumers will focus on actual differences in value between two rewards, and the temporal distance will become less relevant. By maintaining the traditional, ground-level perspective where consumers are perceptually encased in the present with the future in front, the temporal distance between rewards is amplified. But, nudging consumers to see options from an elevated perspective could help promote more patient decision-making. Beyond its theoretical appeal, this may soon become practically relevant as a growing portion of consumers are predicted to use forms of virtual or augmented reality in the coming years (McKone, Haslehurst, & Steingoltz, 2016). Such technological advances could be used by socially conscious marketers to present intertemporal choices from an elevated view, instead of resigning consumers to the traditional view of time where the present necessarily dominates attention.

Moreover, intertemporal choices are almost always framed as tradeoffs, (e.g., between a smaller reward now and larger reward in the future). The elevated perspective over one's time course, however, might help reframe "waiting" for a larger reward (or a larger amount of future money) as "anticipation" and as part of the consumption experience itself. From this view, whatever is experienced in the space between moments gets integrated into the overall experience. Indeed, research has found that anticipation and retrospection can evoke some of the same feelings as actual consumption (Morewedge, 2016; Morewedge, Huh, & Vosgerau, 2010). If the past, present, and future are equally visible and relevant then the question isn't a matter of "when might I consume this reward," but rather "how will the consumption of this reward affect me overall?"

Meaning in Life. Extant work has found that a heightened ability to simulate other times in one's mind is positively related to perceptions of meaning in life. For example, Waytz, Hershfield, and Tamir (2015) found that people who had an easier time simulating the past and future (measured both neurally and behaviorally) also reported greater meaning in their lives. By simulating the past and future, participants naturally called to mind more profound and meaningful events, which in turn fueled the greater sense of meaning. It is possible that viewing time from an elevated perspective may make it easier to mentally time travel. Rather than needing to traverse great temporal distances, an elevated perspective could prompt consumers to more nimbly mentally jump from one period of time to another. This elevated perspective of time could thus help boost meaning in life, a pursuit that is a central concern for many consumers (Frankl, 1985; Heintzelman & King, 2014).

The elevated perspective of time may also affect one's sense of meaning through another avenue. Namely, many consumers are at once present-oriented and heavily focused on pursuing happiness in their lives (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Paradoxically, short-term pursuits of happiness may be potentially detrimental to a more permanent sense of joy. Indeed, recent work has begun to differentiate between short-term joy (or, happiness) and longer-lasting feelings of positivity (or, meaning in life). Although feelings of happiness and feelings of meaning can overlap, happiness is often associated with fleeting, momentary joys, whereas meaningfulness is associated with an integration or awareness of the past, present, and future (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). In pursuing longer-lasting meaning in life, consumers may be hampered by a dichotomous perspective of time that pits pleasures in the present against outcomes in the future. An elevated view, however, might prompt consumers to recognize how their pursuits can provide meaning now, later, and when looking back on what

was once now. By seeing the past, present, and future laid out all at once in mosaic form, people might be more inclined to take immediate actions that increase long-term meaning in life.

Why, exactly, people might take such actions, however, remains unknown. In line with the literature on mixed emotions and health (e.g., Davis et al., 2004), it is possible that the elevated perspective fosters a better ability to confront tensions between the present and the future. Alternatively, the social relationships literature might suggest that an elevated perspective prompts greater awareness and consideration of maximizing well-being across time (i.e., for both the present and the future).

CONCLUSION

Behavioral research in consumer psychology has recently focused on understanding, and ultimately improving well-being (Aaker, 2014; Mick, 2006; Mogilner & Norton, 2016). Although accruing financial wealth is generally associated with favorable life outcomes and physiological benefits (Adler et al., 1994; Backlund, Sorlie, & Johnson, 1996; Chen, Cohen, & Miller, 2010), it does not appear to deliver as much in terms of improved happiness and well-being as one might expect (Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009; Argyle, 1999; Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Diener, Luca, & Napa Scollon, 2006). What does cultivate a more lasting sense of well-being? As we and others have noted, focusing on time seems to hold some of the answers: the way people naturally think about and schedule their time affects well-being (Sellier & Avnet, 2014), and perhaps most importantly, the way people choose to spend their time acts as a clear reflection of one's self, and as a result, is more connected to happiness than is money (Gino & Mogilner, 2011; Mogilner, 2010).

Yet, the very way in which most researchers have construed time may ironically hinder its ability to promote positive outcomes. In our review of the extant literature on time in consumer research, we found that there often exists a dichotomy between the present and the future, which is experienced as what is now and what is not now. One consequence of this dichotomous treatment is that consumers (and researchers) are forced to think about intertemporal pursuits in terms of trade-offs. Spending money now may mean less for later, eating calorie-rich desserts today may result in a larger waistline in six months, and going on vacation this year may mean not going on vacation next year. Although recognizing the future consequences of present decisions is an important skill to master (Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994), constantly pitting the present against the future—and thinking in terms of trade-offs—may unnecessarily result in decision-related stress and post-decision related guilt (Mogilner, Shiv, & Iyengar, 2013).

As a result, we draw on work in other domains that has documented benefits of integrating previously dichotomized concepts, i.e., literatures on positive vs. negative affect, self vs. others, and debt vs. savings, to encourage researchers and consumers to remove the bifurcation between the present and the future. Rather than treating the present and future as mutually exclusive tradeoffs, we discuss a reconceptualization of time in which the present and future can co-exist in the minds and experiences of consumers. Namely, we consider the potential impact of adopting an elevated perspective on time where the past, present, and future are equally visible and subjectively relevant. This focuses on time as it is experienced in the moment, in the day, and over the life course with implications for consumers' well-being across times.

We hope that future work picks up on these ideas to empirically test them and develop ways to implement the elevated perspective in day-to-day thought. How, in other words, might researchers and consumers move away from the traditional, ground-level dichotomized perspective of time towards an elevated view? Additionally, we are careful not to suggest that this reconceptualization of time will solve all problems for all consumers. Future research must test what domains, situations and cultures might benefit from an increased propensity to adopt a grounded or elevated view of time, or simply to more flexibly shift between them.

The ability to monitor the passage of time is a uniquely human quality, and yet it can also be the source of uniquely human forms of misery: the feeling of time scarcity creates stress in the day-to-day, and the knowledge that with each passing day, we come closer and closer to the end of our lives creates fear. However, the awareness of time's passage can also be a cause of celebration and savoring. Our aim in offering a reconceptualization of time where the past, present, and future co-exist is to improve the choices people make and the well-being they experience.

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FIGURE 1

GROUND-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE OF TIME

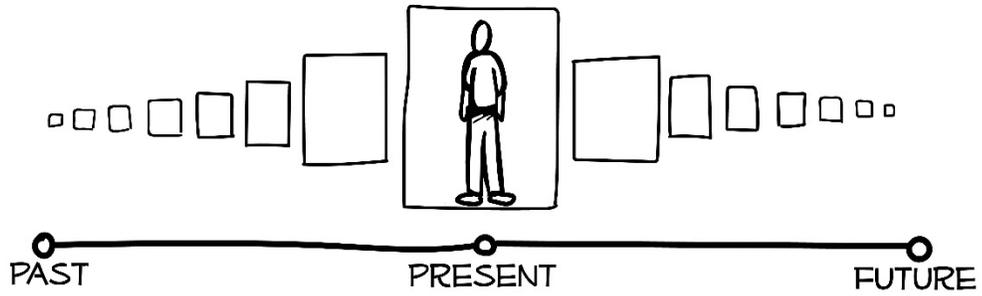


FIGURE 2

ELEVATED PERSPECTIVE OF TIME

