The current research suggests that consumers’ choices and preferences shift depending on their time-oriented mindset. More specifically, we show that when consumers think about their current selves (i.e. are in a “being” mindset) they are more likely to be hedonic. However, when consumers think about their future selves (i.e. are in a “becoming” mindset) they are more likely to be prudent. We test this notion in 3 studies (testing spending preferences, gift-receiving preferences, and a choice setting) and find a consistent pattern, in which “being” leads to more hedonic preferences and choices whereas “becoming” leads to more prudent ones.

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Being Hedonic and Becoming Prudent
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“I am who I am or I am what I intend to be?”

Anonymous

People often make choices as a form of self-expression (e.g. Belk 1988, Malhotra 1988, Kleine). It remains unclear whether these self-statements are derived from consumers’ perceptions of their current selves or their future selves. That is, are consumers purchasing an item in order to say “this is who I am” or in order to say “this is what I want to become”?

The current research suggests that consumers do both; that consumption choices and preferences shift depending on their mindset. More specifically, we show that when consumers think about their current selves (i.e. are in a “being” mindset) they are more likely to show hedonic preferences and choices. However, when consumers think about their future selves (i.e. are in a “becoming” mindset) they are more likely to show prudent preferences and choices. This notion integrates two literatures. The first is literature demonstrating the impact of time-orientation on consumer preferences and choices. This literature demonstrated that time-orientation influences consumers’ choices between two computer software options (Lieberman and Trope, 1998). When asked to make a decision about the distant future, desirability aspects are more important. In contrast, when asked to make a decision about the near future, feasibility aspects of new software are more important. The second is literature demonstrating the relation between time-orientation and self-control. This literature has shown that individuals high in self-control are more future-oriented than individuals low in self-control (e.g. Zimbardo and Boyd 1999, Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger and Edwards 1994).

Unlike the literature that manipulate time-orientation by changing the timing of the decision outcomes (e.g., tomorrow versus next year), we manipulate time-orientation by asking individuals to think about their current selves or their future selves; to adopt a “being” mindset in which decisions are made with the purpose of evaluating and defining the current self or to adopt a “becoming” mindset in which decisions are made with the purpose of elucidating future outcomes (Johnson & Stapel, 2007).

We extend literatures by demonstrating that consumer’s mindset can influence subsequent consumption choices and preferences in the domain of self-control. Because a being mindset is associated with defining the current self, a being mindset was expected to have a short-term time orientation associated with the desire to “seize the day”. As a result, a “being” mindset should be associated with hedonic choices and preferences. Because a “becoming” mindset is associated with moving towards future selves, it should lead to a long-term time orientation associated with prudent choices and preferences.

Three studies test these hypotheses. In each study, participants were assigned to a “being” mindset (e.g. write a brief essay about “who you are right now”) or a “becoming” mindset (e.g. write a brief essay about “who you will become in the future”). Then, they were asked to report preferences and make choices for day-to-day consumption scenarios.

In Study 1, we tested the influence of mindsets on spending preferences. After writing a “being” or “becoming essay”, participants (N=64, Age mean =36.4) were asked to imagine that they had won a prize of $1000. Participants reported how they would spend their winnings. The preferences were coded as hedonic (e.g. plasma TV) or rational (e.g. pay bills). As hypothesized, participants in the “being” condition were more likely to report hedonic (N=17) versus rational spending preferences (N=11), while participants in the “becoming” condition were more likely to report rational (N=23) versus hedonic spending preferences (N=13), ($^{2}(4, N=64)=3.83, p=.05$).

In Study 2, we tested the influence of mindset on gift-receiving preferences. After writing the mindset essay, participants (N=72, Age mean =19.5) were asked to imagine that they had recently purchased a home and were assembling a gift registry for a house-warming party. They were asked to put together a 10-item Amazon.com gift registry drawing from a list of 20 items that had been pre-tested by nine judges as hedonic (e.g. Martini glasses) and rational (e.g. pots and pans). We examined the first two items selected. Participants in each mindset were equally likely to make balanced choices (one rational, one hedonic). However, participants in the “becoming” mindsets were more likely to make two rational selections (N=16) compared to participants in the “being” mindset (N=6). And, participants in the “being” mindset were more likely to make two hedonic choices (N=8) than were participants in the “becoming” mindset (N=3), ($^{2}(2, N=72)=6.39, p=.04$).

In Study 3, we further tested our hypothesis in a consumer choice setting. Participants (N=84, Age mean =19.3) were asked to read an ad that asked them think about who they are now or who they may become. Then, they were given a choice between two snacks: a granola or a chocolate bar. Participants in the “being” mindset were more likely to choose the chocolate bar (N=24) over the granola bar (N=17) while those in the “becoming” mindset were more likely to choose the granola bar (N=24) over the chocolate bar (N=14), ($^{2}(1, N=84)=5.72, p=.01$).

In sum, the current studies extend our understanding of the relationship between time-orientation and consumer’s choices and preferences in demonstrating that consumer’s tendency to be hedonic or rational is based upon their view of their self. Focusing on current selves drives consumers to be hedonic while focusing on their future selves drives consumers to be prudent. Across three studies and three different consumption situations, when consumers thought about their current selves, they were more likely to make hedonic choices and preferences. That is, shifts in mindsets influenced preferences and choices, even when the time of the decision and timing on of decision consequences remained the same. Thus, time is not simply a characteristic of the decision, but an alterable characteristic of the consumer.

References