Fantasies Come True, and Soon: Mental Construal As a Function of Regulatory State and Time Horizon

Yael Steinhart, University of Haifa, Israel
David Mazursky, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel
Michael Kamins, Stony Brook University, USA

There are events we experience that we savor and those that we shun. The current research proposes that individuals in a promotion state savor via anticipation. They use a narrower form of thinking in the distant rather than in near future as they want to prolong the pleasure of thinking. Alternatively, individuals in a prevention state shun by "pushing away" the experience relating to events that are expected to take place in the distant rather than in the near future. Consequently, they engage in a broader form of thinking about those events. Four experiments found support for the "savor or shun" effect in various consumer contexts.

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Yael Steinhart, University of Haifa, Israel
David Mazursky, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel
Michael A. Kamins, Stony Brook University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Part of our indulgence in desired experiences to come, may involve thinking in detail about just how our experience may be. We savor with anticipation and cloak ourselves with exciting expectations about those wonderful moments to come. Essentially we borrow the expected feeling from the future and place it in the here and now, so as to brighten up our present. Conversely, if that future event is undesired, we may try to shun it, and avoid thinking about it in detail, giving way to what we current experience, for whatever it is worth.

The current research examines the nature of the mental construal process as a function of the consumer’s regulatory focus state and time horizon. It proposes that when individuals are in a promotion state, such as being offered an attractive job when graduating, they savor the experience through anticipation and therefore are expected to consider a more detailed shopping list for the graduation party in the distant as opposed to near future. Alternatively, when individuals are in a prevention state, such as graduating with no job offer, they are expected to shun the experience and avoid thinking about it in details in the distance future more so than in the near future when they ultimately have to “face the music”.

Recent research has directly focused on the form of mental construal as a function of the time horizon. In addition, there is ample evidence about the relationship between regulatory focus and the abstractness of mental construal. However, the role of temporal perspective in mediating the relationship between the type of regulatory state and the type of mental construal process has not been examined until now.

The research consists of four studies which demonstrate the “savor or shun” effect and its underlying mechanism in varying consumer contexts. The first study is designed to measure the anticipated breadth of categories formed in a decision task as a function of regulatory state and events that take place either in the near or distant future. It explores the research hypotheses under a realistic scenario of facing either an economic recession or prosperity, today or in the distant future, and asks participants to prepare a shopping list for each of the conditions. Its findings demonstrate that participants generated more categories in the distant future than in the near future when expecting prosperity; whereas the number of categories was higher in the near future than the distant future when expecting an economic recession. The second study extends the first by keeping the event constant (family weekend) and manipulating the regulatory state in an unrelated manner to the event. It further provides the participants with the list of items (rather than coming up with list by themselves) in order to better control the categorization process. Its findings replicate the ones of the first study both in terms of the number of categories and in terms of their content. The third study examines the “savor or shun” effect on actual decision choice, contingent with the item’s level of abstractness. Results indicate that when exposed to both abstract and concrete items within a shopping list, individuals under a promotion focus selected relatively more abstract than concrete items in the near future than in the distant future. Alternatively, individuals under a prevention focus selected relatively more abstract over concrete items in the distant future than in the near one.

Finally, the fourth study demonstrates the underlying mechanism of the “savor or shun” effect through mediation by scales relating to shunning and savoring.

From a practical perspective, the “savor or shun” effect has significant managerial implications by highlighting how marketers should frame the product (i.e. elaborate about the process of reaching the decision or about its post-usage benefits) and the amount of details they should provide given the state the consumer is in. In terms of positioning, the current research proposes that under a promotion state, consumers would prefer to get more information about the process of reaching a decision over the consequence of their decision. Therefore, when promoting promotional products, marketers should communicate about the process of attaining the product more than about the benefits of having the product. On the other hand, under a prevention state, consumers would prefer to get more information about the consequences of completing their decision than about the process of reaching it. In terms of how to describe the process or the outcomes; the proposed research implies that the degree of abstractness of the product description, should be as a function of the consumer’s level of anticipation toward the product, and/or the time frame of the impending decision, because such factors affect the way information is categorized. Consider consumers anticipating the new model year of their desired car or a couple planning their wedding. In these cases, as the time frame approaches for the launching of the new model or for the wedding, our research suggests that consumers favor a broader description. This is especially true for events that are fixed at a given point in time and hence occur at the same time for everyone (e.g. Valentine’s Day).