The Tense of the Question Matters: Asking About the Past Leads to Personally Typical Future Behavior

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This research demonstrates that being asked about future intentions to engage in behavior leads to different behavioral consequences than being asked about behavior engaged in the past. Three studies found that individuals behave in socially normative ways when asked about the future, and in personally typical ways when asked about the past. We propose that this observed effect occurs because while being asked about the future evokes social norms (in addition to thoughts of one’s past behavior), being asked about past behavior simply evokes one’s past behavior (and what is personally typical), which in turn affects subsequent behavior. Supporting this, we demonstrate that the effect of asking about the past (and evoking what is personally typical) is attenuated when individuals are reminded of social norms. This research makes novel contributions to understanding how mental travel to the future versus the past serves as differential social influences to alter behavior.

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How likely are you to visit the gym in the coming week? How often did you visit the gym in the past week? Both of these questions are about visiting the gym, but the key difference is that the former asks about visits intended in the future whereas the latter asks about visits already made in the past. According to existing research, when you are asked about future intentions to visit the gym, you are more likely to visit the gym more often than if you were not asked. That is, you are more likely to behave in the socially desirable way and align with social norms. However, extant research does not address what happens to your subsequent gym attendance when you are asked about your past gym visits. In the present research, we theorized that being asked about your past gym visits (or lack thereof) will lead you to go to the gym as frequently (or infrequently) as you did in the past. In other words, your subsequent gym visits will be aligned with how often you typically visit the gym, or what is personally typical for you.

Research has demonstrated that the simple act of asking future intention questions leads to biased responses on the part of respondents (e.g., Simmons, Bickart, and Lynch 1993) and it can even change the underlying behavior itself (e.g., Morwitz, Johnson, and Schmittlein 1993; Sherman 1980). This phenomenon has been referred to as the “question-behavior effect,” (for a review, see Sprott, Spangenberg, Block, Fitzsimons, Morwitz, and Williams 2006) although it was originally referred to as the “self-erasing nature of errors of prediction” (Sherman 1980) and later referred to as “self-prophecy” (Spangenberg & Greenwald, 1999) and “mere-measurement” (Morwitz, Johnson, and Schmittlein 1993). This robust phenomenon has been demonstrated for a wide range of socially normative (desirable and undesirable) behaviors, including increasing voter registration and turnout (Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, and Young 1987), increasing volunteering for a charitable organization (Sherman 1980; Williams, Fitzsimons, and Block 2004), reducing cheating in a college classroom (Spangenberg and Obermiller 1996), and reducing gender stereotyping (Spangenberg and Greenwald 1999). Past research has repeatedly demonstrated that the simple act of answering a question about socially normative behaviors causes behavioral change aligned with social norms.

Still, it is questionable whether questions always lead to behavioral change aligned with social norms. Past research has shown that individuals align to social norms after answering questions about their future behaviors. However, in the present research, we predict and find that individuals align with personally typical behavior after answering questions about their past behaviors. We argue that this is because asking individuals about past behaviors (but not future behaviors) simply reminds them of the various past instances in which they have engaged (or not) in the target behavior and makes salient how typical it is for them to engage in that behavior. This thought of personally typical behavior then directs behavior accordingly (studies 1 and 2). We test this mechanism for the observed effects (study 3). If it is the case that asking about past behaviors makes salient what is personally typical and then aligns behavior in that way, then it should be possible to wipe out the effect when we make the discrepancy between what is personally typical and socially normative clear. Thus, we test for this possibility. We find that even when individuals are asked about their behavior in the past (and reminded of what they have typically done in the past), simply informing them that what is personally typical is not socially normative (i.e., they are doing “worse” than the average peer) leads their behavior to be more socially normative (than personally typical).

In three studies, we demonstrate that asking about future intentions to engage in behavior alters subsequent behavior differently than being asked about behavior already engaged in in the past. While extant research on the effect of questions on behavior has typically focused on asking about future behaviors, the present research raises the issue of asking about past behaviors. Our data suggest that asking about the past has significant behavioral consequences for the respondent, namely that asking about the past leads the respondent to engage in behavior one typically engages in (personally typical behavior). Furthermore, we provide support that the observed effects are due to a “consistency” mechanism whereby individuals strive to be consistent with thoughts they have about a behavior and their actual behavior.

Although our focus was on asking about the past, these findings raise the broader issue of how mental travel has consequences for what thoughts are made salient in the mind and ultimately actual behavior. As theorized by construal level theory (Liberman and Trope 2008), an event, object, or target of any sort can be removed from one’s sense of immediate experience through psychological distance, with time being one dimension. Thus, an event that is to occur in the far future is experienced differently than one that is to occur in the near future. It would be interesting to test whether psychological distance from an event (near future vs. distant future) would alter behavior differently. One possibility is that asking about the distant future is construed in an abstract manner and corresponds more to abstract information, such as social norms, ultimately leading to behavior aligned with social norm. In contrast, asking about the near future may be construed in a concrete manner and correspond more to concrete information, such as behavior one normally engages in (what is personally typical), eventually leading one to engage in personally typical behavior.

In sum, the present findings contribute to the literature on how asking questions has behavioral consequences by identifying that the tense of the question matters: Asking about the past leads to personally typical future behavior. Importantly, providing feedback that one’s
personally typical behavior is not the social norm and providing information on the social norm, alters behaviors to be aligned with social norms. More broadly, this research provides a unique perspective on the power of social influence.

REFERENCES


Don’t Lose Your Edge: The Subculture Hard-Core as Prevention-Focused Consumers

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Western society no longer revolves around town hall meetings and church socials (Belk, 1985). In the modern consumer society, instead, those in need of social interaction self-select into identity subgroups that become part social, part image-projection, and at their base, material-driven. In a subculture of consumption - formed around any brand or consumption activity, from riding Harley Davidson motorcycles and skateboarding to quilting bees, rock-climbing, kayaking, and listening to heavy metal - the “hard-core” members at the center of the subculture are the opinion leaders. They are the cultural disseminators who strictly set, maintain and adhere to a code of conduct for their group and enforce its upkeep among junior members (Fox 1987). As keepers of the faith, the hard-core are role models for the aspirant peripheral culture and probationary soft-core members who revolve around their leadership (Schouten & McAlexander 1995).

Aspiring, fringe members and those among the mainstream who are lured into the periphery of any subculture of consumption are hopeful about their possible entry into the hard-core. Their reverence and adulation of the hard-core supports the concentric structure of the subculture (Fox 1987). In this way, hard-core members operate with a prevention focus in their subculture (Higgins 1998) are sensitive to the duties and obligations of maintaining values, are on guard for negative outcomes for themselves, and may eject non-followers formally or via social ostracizing. Their role is of vigilant avoidance, which Semin, Higgins, Gil de Montes and Valencia (2005) associate with regulatory focus. Fringe members and peripheral aspirants flirting with the subculture of consumption are by definition hopeful and aspiring, sensitive to what Semin et al. (2005) note is the positive outcome orientation and eager approach of the promotion-focused strategy. Semin et al. chart responses to the different goals-based language strategies of prevention- and promotion-focused individuals that sheds insight into research on consumption subcultures and brand communities.

Prevention-focused consumers are more responsive to concrete, avoidance language, whereas promotion-focused consumers are more responsive to abstract, approach-oriented language.

Since individuals speak in different ways depending on their goals, consumers are more influenced by wording that matches their goal-focus. This is especially the case in a subculture formed around a particular brand or an activity dominated by a few specialty brands. Those in the outer rings of membership are hopeful, and need encouragement from brands to pursue those hopes and rise to the ideals of the subcultures. Those in the hard-core inner circle no longer need such encouragement to stay with the brand or consumption activity, but instead are focused on the penalties of losing touch with the group or their responsibilities now that they are at the top of their game.

In this research, we hypothesize that advertising must reflect prevention language to achieve the most influence among the hard-core in any consumption subculture. Advertisements must also reflect promotion language for beginner-level products to gain market share with new converts.

Is abstract, aspiration language enough to influence all members of the subculture—especially if advertising is framed to evoke the wonderment peripheral parties have for the endurance, uniqueness, or values displayed by the subculture (Schouten & McAlexander 1995)? The literature shows further evidence to support our prediction that abstract language is not enough for members of the hard-core inner circle. Maheswaran, SterntHAL, and Gurhan-CalH (1996) find that experts only lend higher evaluations to advertisements that catalog both benefit and attribute features. Only novices, like Adidas’ enthusiastic new running converts, respond positively to broad, unsupported statements like “cushioning for an amazingly smooth ride.”

Thus, we predict that while abstract language may have a positive influence on the hard-core, concrete language with specific prevention orientation will engender the most favorable response from the hard-core.

In fall 2010, we assessed how members of the “gym rat” campus recreation center subculture— those who report going the most to the center and taking advantage of the machines, basketball courts, classes, and outdoor trips— respond to advertisements for a new fitness class. The 196 lab respondents (55% male, mean age=23.4) were randomly assigned to the abstract-language (i.e., “the new class works all your muscles to tone and sculpt your physique. Feel better, look better. Guaranteed”) or the concrete-language (i.e., the class “combines CrossFit training with powerlifting...