Looking Ahead Or Looking Back: Current Evaluations and the Psychological Connectedness to a Temporal Self

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Building on research showing consumers evaluate products they own more favorably, across three studies we find that consumers’ evaluation of a product they will own in the future or had owned in the past depends on the extent to which they feel connected with their future or past self respectively.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A quick scan on Youtube shows that there are innumerable examples of ads where marketers use a conceptual “time machine” to transpose consumers to the past or future to sell their products in the present. The underlying idea seems to be that if consumers can see the relevance of the product or the brand to the self at the point of time when the experience occurs, they may also be positively influenced now and thus be more likely to buy it. An implicit assumption is that consumers’ self-concept is always continuous such that an experience for self in the past or future may spill over to influence one’s present judgment. Our paper challenges this assumption. We predict and find that consumers’ current evaluation of a product or a brand associated with them at a different point in time is a function of how connected they feel psychologically to this distant temporal self. When the degree of connectedness between the current self and the temporal self is high (low), the product and brand may seem more (less) connected to the self in the present, resulting in current evaluations being influenced accordingly.

A person can be viewed as a succession of overlapping yet different selves (Parfit, 1971; 1984). What really matters is the relative degree of connectedness among these different selves (as exemplified by continuity in, for example, temperament, values, goals, likes and dislikes). Past research suggests that consumers are more likely to behave impatiently (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011), save less for retirement (Hershfield et al., 2011), and engage in unethical decision-making (Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012). The current paper draws on prior studies showing that people may perceive their future or past selves as a different individual. However, unlike prior work which has primarily focused on inter-temporal tradeoffs, we are interested in consumers’ current evaluations of products or brands that are associated with them at a different point of time. Further, we look at temporal perspectives that straddle the past and the future and find that the effects mirror each other in these two perspectives.

Our theory predicts that when consumers are strongly connected to the self who owned or will own the particular product at a different point in time, they would be more likely to treat this temporal self as their current self, and consequently their current evaluation of this product will be more favorable than when they are weakly connected to this temporal self. Study 1 employs a 2 (temporal self: past, future) × 2 (connectedness: high, low) design. 170 undergraduate students participated, and read a description about a life-changing scenario (e.g., converting to a new religion) occurring either four years or six years from now (in the past or the future). Subsequently, they saw a picture of a T-shirt and imagined owning it in five years (future condition) or five years ago (past condition), and evaluated it using three items (good, favorable, positive). As predicted, results showed that current evaluations were higher when the life-changing event occurred 6 (high connectedness to the current self) rather than 4 years (low connectedness to the current self) from the present moment for both future ($M_{\text{years}} = 5.83; M_{3\text{years}} = 5.05)$ and past conditions ($M_{\text{years}} = 5.63; M_{3\text{years}} = 4.94; p < .05$).

To enhance the applicability of our predictions, Study 2 measures rather than manipulated perceived connectedness to a future or past self. Furthermore, we utilize the context of a brand interaction rather than product ownership. As a potential moderator of the effect, two kinds of consumer-brand relationships were employed: exchange versus communal. The study had a Connectedness (continuous) × 2 (temporal self: past, future) × 2 (brand relationship: exchange, communal) between-subjects design. 322 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers participated. Participants were presented with a description of their interactions with a hypothetical coffee shop brand (Mike’s Coffee Shop: “own brand”), either in the past or future, presented as a communal or an exchange relationship partner (Aggarwal, 2004). The participants then reported their current evaluation of this brand as well its key rival on the same three items as in Study 1.

We expected that when consumers have positive interactions with their own brand at a different temporal point, a high level of connectedness with that temporal self would result in greater preference for that brand in the present moment too – for both communal and exchange relationships. As expected, participants’ current evaluation of the focal brand was more (less) favorable when they perceived a high (vs. low) connectedness, irrespective of whether they had an exchange ($\beta = .01, t = 2.08$) or a communal relationship ($\beta = .011, t = 2.44, p < .05$) with the brand. The story for the rival brand, however, is somewhat different. Prior work shows that people in a close relationship tend to devalue attractive alternatives if they are satisfied with their current relationship partner (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Given this, we posit that consumers in a communal but not the exchange relationship would be motivated to devalue the attractive alternative (the rival brand). Further, such a pattern should be more likely to occur when the perceived connectedness with the temporal self is high (vs. low). The results were as we expected. Specifically, a significant interaction of connectedness and relationship was observed ($\beta = .02, t = 2.83, p < .01$) such that those in an exchange evaluated the rival brand more (less) favorably when perceived connectedness was high (low) ($\beta = 1.16, t = 2.74, p < .01$), whereas those in communal condition evaluated it less (more) favorably when perceived connectedness was high (low) ($\beta = -.01, t = -1.84, p = .07$).

This research shows that connectedness with one’s temporal self affects one’s current evaluations. We observe this effect for products as well as brands, and both when connectedness is manipulated and measured.

REFERENCES


