Calendar Mindset: Scheduling Takes the Fun Out and Puts the Work In

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Consumers often schedule leisure activities to more efficiently use their time. We demonstrate that concretely (but not roughly) scheduling leisure activities on one's calendar makes such activities feel more like work, which leads to lower excitement and greater desire to cancel. This effect is unique to leisure (vs. work) activities.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While scheduling is often recommended to aid individuals in time management, we propose that there may be a dark side to scheduling in the realm of leisure activities. Specifically, we show that scheduling leisure activities by placing them on one’s calendar can increase the degree to which they are construed as work, leading to lower anticipation utility and greater desire to cancel.

According to temporal organization theory (Fine 1996, Southerton 2006), time is organized around 5 dimensions: (1) duration, or the amount of time allocated to activities, (2) sequence, or the order of activities, (3) synchronization, or coordinating with others, (4) periodicity, or the frequency and repetition of activities, and (5) tempo, or the pace of activities. Scheduling specifically alters one of these dimensions, duration, by setting specific start and end times. We argue that by doing so, scheduling, treats leisure in a manner generally preserved for work tasks, leading these otherwise leisurely activities to take on qualities of work. Furthermore, we propose that through increased work construal, scheduling decreases the anticipation utility of leisure activities, manifested as less positive anticipatory emotions.

Studies 1A–1G. We first establish the relationship between scheduling and the work qualities of leisure activities (all tests reported are significant at .05 level). As such, participants in studies 1A–1E prospectively evaluated a leisure activity that was either scheduled or spontaneous. We find that scheduling leisure increases work construal when the calendar is busy (1A: M_{Scheduled} = 5.04, M_{Spontaneous} = 3.44) or not busy (1D: M_{Scheduled} = 3.64, M_{Spontaneous} = 3.10), and when the activity is recurring (1E: M_{Scheduled} = 3.70, M_{Spontaneous} = 3.14), with a friend (1A), solitary (1C: M_{Scheduled} = 4.25, M_{Spontaneous} = 3.31), and self-initiated (1B: M_{Scheduled} = 4.17, M_{Spontaneous} = 3.42). Finally, we demonstrate that the effect holds for a currently experienced leisure event (1F: M_{Scheduled} = 3.12, M_{Spontaneous} = 2.35) and for recalled activities that have actually been taken part in (1G: M_{Scheduled} = 3.40, M_{Spontaneous} = 2.73). These studies establish the robustness of our effect, while providing evidence against the other four dimensions.

Study 2. In study 2 we sought to demonstrate the negative downstream consequences of scheduling and work construal on anticipation utility, while simultaneously testing the robustness of our findings to varying specialness of the activity and changes in the calendar considered. To that end, we manipulated how special the event was and used a calendar compromised only of leisure activities. We find that scheduling led to greater work construal both when the event was special (M_{Scheduled} = 3.47, M_{Spontaneous} = 2.53) and more mundane (M_{Scheduled} = 3.33, M_{Spontaneous} = 2.39). Scheduling also led to less positive anticipatory emotions both when the event was special (M_{Scheduled} = 4.80, M_{Spontaneous} = 5.66) and more mundane (M_{Scheduled} = 4.65, M_{Spontaneous} = 5.47). Bootstrapped mediation revealed that the effect of scheduling on emotions was mediated through work construal (3B).

Participants in the rough plans condition made a plan with a friend for some time during a gap in their schedule (i.e., between class and a meeting) and marked their plans on a hypothetical calendar in study 3A. In study 3B, participants saw a shaded area of a few hours blocked off on their calendar and marked with “coffee sometime here.” We found in both studies that scheduling only led to lower anticipation utility when duration was specifically set (3A: M_{Scheduled} = 4.92, M_{RoughPlans} = 5.28, M_{Spontaneous} = 5.42; 3B: M_{Scheduled} = 4.75, M_{RoughPlans} = 5.43). Furthermore, work construal mediated this effect in study 3B (M_{Scheduled} = 3.68, M_{RoughPlans} = 2.88).

Study 4. The purpose of study 4 was to demonstrate that the negative influence of scheduling is unique to leisure (vs. work) tasks. The study followed a 2 (task: work vs. leisure) × 2 (scheduled vs. spontaneous) between-subjects design. As predicted, when considering a leisure task, those who scheduled (M_{Work} = 3.75, M_{Emotions} = 4.97) construed the task more as work and had less positive anticipatory emotions than those who engaged in the task spontaneously (M_{Work} = 2.67, M_{Emotions} = 5.60). No such difference emerged for those who considered a work task. Finally, bootstrapped mediation analysis revealed that for the leisure activity, the effect of scheduling on attitudes was mediated through work construal.

Study 5. The purpose of this study was to test whether the effect of scheduling on anticipatory emotions would hold for retrospective evaluations. Participants considered the last movie they saw, indicated whether it had been scheduled or spontaneous, and rated how positive the movie was and how long ago it occurred. In line with prior work demonstrating that anticipation and memory may be divergent initially following the experience but converge over time (Wood and Bettman 2007), we found the predicted interaction between scheduling and time since the movie such that initially, scheduled leisure was recalled more positively, but over time, this reversed and scheduled leisure was recalled less positively. We conjecture that this initial divergence may result from the motivation to see scheduled leisure as more positive, due to the greater effort associated with such activities as well as the salient alternative of missing out on the activities entirely. Over time, however, such motivations fade, revealing lower memory utility for scheduled leisure.

Supporting our predictions, across twelve studies, we demonstrate that (1) scheduling leisure activities makes them feel more like work, leading to lower anticipation utility, (2) this effect is driven by setting beginning and end times, thus setting duration, (3) is unique to leisure activities, and (4) manifests for memory utility once enough time has passed since the activity.

REFERENCES

