

WHO IS IN CONTROL OF OUR HAPPINESS?  
HOW SMALL REMINDERS OF AGENCY CAN LEAD  
PEOPLE TO BETTER ENJOY THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES

by

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Professor Troy Campbell

People often do not enjoy their experiences as much as they should, leaving them unfulfilled and, ultimately, less happy than they could be. This is harmful to individuals because it means they are not living life to the fullest, and this is harmful to businesses because it means people do not return to unfulfilling experiences. This thesis suggests that people do not maximize the potential enjoyment of their experiences because they fail to recognize the things they could do to improve them. In the following research, I find that people expect to enjoy their experiences more when they are reminded of their sense of agency. Agency is the subjective awareness that the individual is in control of their actions and, subsequently, their outcomes. People can, therefore, enjoy their experiences more when they are aware of the decisions available to them, and businesses can help people enjoy their experiences more by sending people reminders of their agency through marketing efforts. This research includes several studies that support this hypothesis and a couple of suggestions that could help businesses best maximize their customer lifetime value.

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## Introduction

Aristotle said, “Happiness is the meaning and the pursuit of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.” If you asked someone what they wanted most out of life, more likely than not, that person would say happiness. Happiness, by definition, is the state of being happy, which is a way of saying that happiness is really difficult to define. People spend their whole lives in pursuit of happiness, something they don’t even know how to describe, and unfortunately not many people find it. According to the Harris Poll’s Happiness Index, only 31% of Americans reported being happy in 2016. This percentage continues to decrease from year to year. If happiness truly is the pursuit of life that gives meaning to our existence, as Aristotle suggests, why do so few people achieve it? The answer to this question is complex and inconclusive, but this thesis attempts to tackle part of it.<sup>1</sup> (<http://time.com/4389726/harris-poll-happiness-index-2016/>)

People, by nature, are consumers. People enjoy consuming the latest and greatest products, Oscar award winning movies, one-star Adam Sandler movies, foods that look too pretty to eat, and the experience of getting to share photos of foods that look too pretty to eat. Whatever everyone’s preferences might be, everyone enjoys consuming because it provides a sense of identity and belonging in the world. People sometimes believe that consuming more leads to happiness, but this has been found to be not true in many instances. In her book *The Pursuit of Happiness: An Economy of Well-Being*, Carol Graham researches varying happiness levels in different parts of the world. What she finds is that people living in poorer parts of the world, with little

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<sup>1</sup> Lily Rothman, "American Happiness Index 2016: Exclusive Data on Mood in USA," Time, July 1, 2016, , accessed April 10, 2017, <http://time.com/4389726/harris-poll-happiness-index-2016/>.

opportunity and material wealth, exhibit significantly higher rates of happiness over people living in much better means of wealth. “Humans have an amazing capacity to adapt to both prosperity and adversity and maintain relatively similar levels of happiness,” she concludes.<sup>2</sup>

When people consume experiences and products that fail to fulfill them, they experience a feeling of loss not only in happiness but also identity. As a result, people embark in an endless pursuit of new experiences to fill these voids with fleeting feelings of happiness instead of creating a sustainable one. People, often, do not create their own happiness because they lack the awareness that they can. In life, it is easy to feel like happiness is out of the individual’s control. People run into situations everyday that makes them feel fixed in a world that is constantly moving. We get stuck in traffic at the end of a long workday. We wait in line for what seems like forever at the DMV. It rains even though the weather said it wouldn’t. There are so many forces beyond the individual’s control that we often lose track of what is within our control: ourselves.

The fact that people underestimate their sense of agency over their lives is problematic because their experiences and happiness suffer from it. Agency is an individual’s subjective awareness that they are in control of their actions and, to an extent, their outcomes. It is a person’s capacity to ask themselves, “How can I make the best of this situation?” or, “What specific actions can I take to lead to desirable outcomes?” and recognize that their mindset can be an agent of change in seemingly

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<sup>2</sup> Graham, Carol. "What We Mean By Happiness: A "Theory" of Agency and Well-Being." *The Pursuit of Happiness - An Economy of Well-Being*. Washington: Brookings Institute, 2012. 27-61. Ebrary Academic Complete. Web. Sept. 2016.

fixed scenarios. Everyone has the capacity to be agentic- we all make decisions that impact the quality of our experiences- but not everyone is fully aware of how their actions can or do affect their outcomes. People too readily believe they are powerless to the situations they experience and, as a result, don't put effort into making them better. Because people don't think about how they can improve their experiences, they often do not maximize the enjoyment they can gain from them.

The implications of lack of agency on the individual are clear: people don't enjoy their lives as much as they would like to, which poses a huge problem in humanity's overarching goal of achieving happiness. When people lose track of their sense of agency, they quit wanting things such as job promotions, weight loss, or even the latest and greatest product. As Carol Graham says in *The Pursuit of Happiness: An Economy of Well-Being*, "Wants depend on agency: you want because you can want. That requires knowledge of what is available and some sense that what you want could be in your grasp (43)." Agency is important because it drives people to want things like happiness, achievement, and growth, and that is fulfilling to both the individual and to the environment they exist in.

From a business perspective, the absence of agency in people is challenging because it means that consumers don't return to experiences when they are unfulfilling. People often don't think about how their experiences can change, whether by their actions or by the environment's, so they don't return to experiences when they feel that they have seen it all. This is extremely problematic for businesses because it means that they lose a lot of value that those one-time-customers could have brought to their company. Customer lifetime value is a marketing term used to describe the net profit a



company can predict from the entire future relationship with a customer. Customers bring value to companies not only in the form of revenue but also in the form of word-of-mouth marketing to their social networks, brand loyalty, and various other measures. Businesses thrive off of retaining and maintaining a large base of customers with large customer lifetime values because businesses need consumers to succeed. When consumers don't return, businesses lose a lot of value and have a more difficult time making it.

It is no surprise that consumers choose not to return to negative experiences. However, consumers, also, tend to not return to their ok experiences. This occurs because people believe that once they have been somewhere once, they have experienced everything that place has to offer. Consumers do not think outside of what happened in their past experience for ways that a future one can change. For example, when people finish walking through a museum, they typically think they have seen everything that they wanted to see. As a result, their expectation of a future visit to the museum is low because they feel they have maximized the museum's potential enjoyment from their first experience. In actuality, people overlook a lot of what an experience has to offer, both in terms of how an experience can change and what they can do to change the experience. When people return to a place that they have already been, they see things they didn't see before and have the joy of indulging in the things that they loved the first time around. Businesses have the challenge of helping consumers realize this.

People do not think about how they can improve their experiences, but small reminders to do this can lead people to better enjoy their experiences, which is highly

useful for companies. In the studies that follow, I propose that people have better experiences when they are reminded of their sense of agency. Agency, again, is a person's awareness that they are in control of the decisions they make and the actions that result. Agency gives people an awareness of not only the actions they decide to take but also the opportunities available for them to act on.<sup>3</sup> In past work, many researchers have found that altering people's sense of efficacy changes their behavior. For instance, past research has used strong influencers like mastery tests and verbal compliments to motivate a behavioral change.<sup>4</sup> Instead of focusing on the influence of efficacy, the research that follows will focus simply on the role of the individual's agency and how that might affect efficacy. Ultimately, this thesis is designed to build an understanding of why people lose their sense of agency and how having reminders of agency can improve experiences.

In the following studies and subsequent discussion, I will explore several questions related to agency.

1. Does agency actually help people enjoy their experiences more and make them more likely to return to them?
2. How can businesses practically apply reminders of agency to increase the rate of customer return?

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<sup>3</sup> Wen Wen, Atsushi Yamashita, and Hajime Asama, "The influence of action-outcome delay and arousal on sense of agency and the intentional binding effect," *Consciousness and Cognition* 36 (2015): , accessed April 22, 2017, doi:10.1016/j.concog.2015.06.004.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Bandura, "Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change.," *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2 (1977): , accessed May 15, 2017, doi:10.1037//0033-295x.84.2.191.

3. Does flexibility in a situation lead to people having a stronger sense of agency?
4. I will explore what other factors might drive people to lose their sense of agency and suggest areas where this topic would benefit from further research.

My goal in writing this thesis is to help people better understand themselves, and businesses better understand people, in the hopes of improving people's experiences and feelings of happiness. This body of work will make several discoveries useful for both consumers and businesses, but it is in no way all-encompassing. This thesis will make leaps towards better understanding the topic of agency by answering the questions listed above and suggesting where future research might be useful.

## **Study 1: The Effect of Agency on Enjoyment**

I have suggested that people often do not think about how they can change things within their control to better enjoy their experiences. In other words, many people lack an agentic mindset, and their experiences can suffer from this. When people are made aware of their agency, however, I have suggested that they expect to better enjoy their future experiences. I tested this hypothesis in Study 1 with the help of Professor Troy Campbell, PhD student Nate Warren, and the Lundquist College of Business Marketing Research Lab.

We surveyed a group of participants taken from an online sample about a mediocre experience they had in a city they listed. Participants were asked to rank their experience on a scale of 1 to 9. This provided a base point for us to compare their rankings to before and after the manipulation. Participants were then randomly placed into one of three conditions for the remainder of the survey: control (no manipulation), positive manipulation, or agency manipulation.

The control group was asked to rank how much they expected to enjoy or not enjoy a future experience in the city they initially provided. The positive manipulation group was prompted to think about the positive aspects of their first experience in the city before being asked to rank their future expectation of it. The agency manipulation group was prompted to think about the things that they could have done differently during their first experience to improve it. Then, they were asked to rank how much they expected to enjoy a future experience in that city.

We predicted that all conditions, on average, would rank their first experience of the cities almost identically given that this part of the survey was consistent across the

three groups. We, also, predicted that the agency manipulation group would expect their future experience in the cities to improve more than both the control and positive manipulation groups, with bigger differences in expected enjoyment compared to the control condition and smaller differences in expected enjoyment compared to the positive condition.

### **Method.**

**Participants.** In this experiment, we used a recruitment database (Amazon Mechanical Turk). We surveyed 194 participants (male = 68, female = 125, Mean Age = 36.64, SD = 11.37) online using Amazon Mechanical Turk. We had 64 participants in the control group, 65 in the positive manipulation group, and 64 in the agency manipulation group. This left us with a target number of 64 participants per experimental condition. Participants were paid \$0.10.

**Materials and Procedure.** All participants were asked to list a city that they had visited in which they had an “okay-not good, not bad-experience.” The participants were then asked to rate that city on a scale of 1 to 9, 1=not at all enjoyable and 9=extremely enjoyable. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the three conditions after these two baseline questions. Participants were randomly placed into a condition and were unaware that the others existed while taking the survey. The remainder of the experiment asked participants to rank how enjoyable they would expect a future experience to be in the city they listed.

In the control (no manipulation) condition, participants were asked to list one thing that might be enjoyable about the city or what they might enjoy if they returned.

Then, we asked participants to rank on a scale of 1 to 9 how much they expected to enjoy the city if they returned again (1=not at all enjoyable, 9=extremely enjoyable).

In the positive manipulation condition, participants were asked to think about the positive aspects of the city from their first experience. They were then asked to list one thing they might enjoy about the city upon returning for a future experience and rank the city on a scale of 1 to 9 (1=not at all enjoyable, 9=extremely enjoyable).

In the agency manipulation condition, participants were asked to think about what they would do differently if they returned to the city. We asked them to consider what changes in their choices they would make and what different actions they would take to make their experience of the city more enjoyable. Participants listed one thing they would do differently to make their experience more enjoyable, and then they were asked to rank the city on a scale of 1 to 9 (1=not at all enjoyable, 9=extremely enjoyable).

Because all participants answered the first two questions, forming a basis point, we were able to clearly measure the effect of each condition on their expected enjoyment in their future experiences. This allowed us to draw cause and effect conclusions related to each condition.

## **Results.**

To test our hypothesis, we compared the differences in each condition's initial enjoyment with the expected enjoyment of a future experience. There was a significant main effect of the three conditions on participants' expected future enjoyment in their cities. All participants expected to enjoy their future experience in cities they listed more than they had during their first "okay-not good, not bad" visit. How much

participants expected their experience to improve, however, varied based on the condition they fell into.

To test the agency, we conducted a one-way ANOVA with three levels: control, positive and agentic controlling for the covariate first time enjoyment. This revealed a significant model,  $F(2, 190) = 40.90, p < .001$ . Specifically, the comparison between the agentic and control condition resulted in significant model  $F(1, 127) = 41.97, p < .001$ . The comparison between the agentic and positive condition resulted in significant model  $F(1, 124) = 11.99, p = .001$ . Lastly, the comparison between the positive and the control condition did not result in a significant model, as predicted, with  $F(1, 128) = 4.24, p = .042$ . These models support our hypothesis that agency has a significant effect over a person's expected future enjoyment in comparison to a control condition (doing nothing at all) or a positive condition (having participants think about the positives).

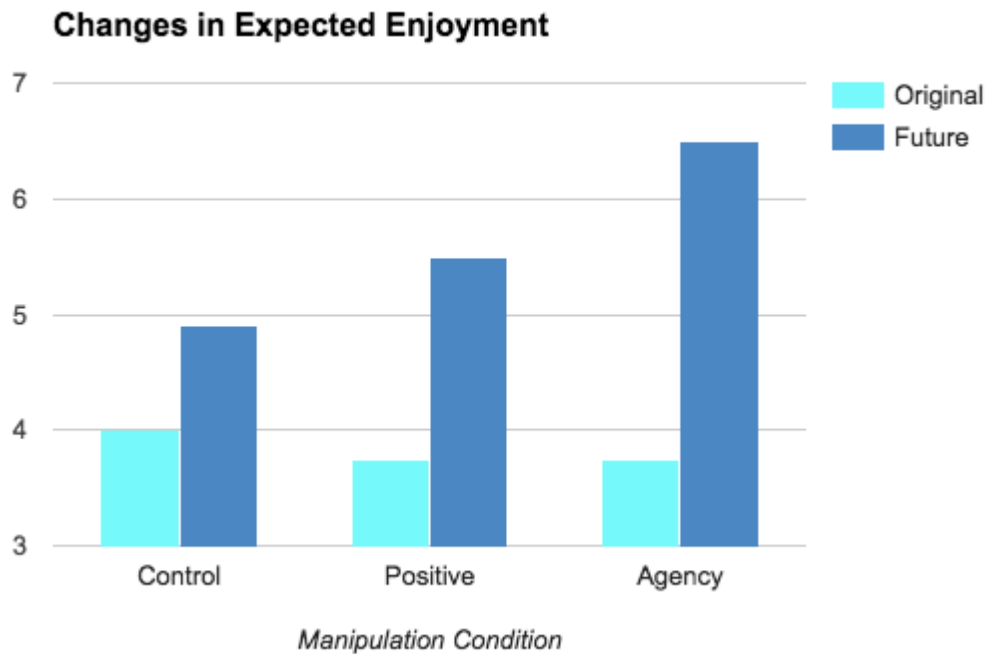
On average, participants ranked their initial mediocre experience between a 3.5 and a 4 on our enjoyability scale. Participants from the control condition expected their returning experience to improve to roughly a 5, on average, for a total improvement of less than a full point on our enjoyability scale. Participants in the positive condition expected to enjoy their future experience more than participants in the control condition, but not by a very significant amount. Participants in the positive condition expected their returning experience to improve to roughly a 5.5, on average, for a total improvement of about a point and half on the enjoyability scale.

Participants in the agency condition, on the other hand, expected their experience to be significantly more enjoyable than not only their previous visit but also

the control and positive condition's expectation of their future experience. Participants in the agency manipulation expected their returning experience to improve to roughly a 6.5, on average, for a total improvement of about 2.5 points on our enjoyability scale. The agency manipulation condition shifted participants' experiences and expectations of the city from the negative side of the scale (a 3.5 out of 9) to the positive (a 6.5 out of 9), showing a significant improvement in their perceptions of their listed cities. These results supported our hypothesis that people are more likely to enjoy their experiences when they are reminded of their agency.



Figure 1



The graph above illustrates how participants rated their first experience compared to a future one. Before participants rated their expected future experience, they were placed into one of three conditions: control, positive, or agency. As is demonstrated in the graph above, participants in the agency condition expected their future experience to improve significantly more than participants in the control or positive condition, thus supporting our hypothesis.

**Discussion.** These results show the power that feeling in control has over our experiences. When someone has a mediocre experience, people often tell them to think about the positives of the situation in an effort to help them better enjoy the experience next time. While thinking positively does result in people better enjoying their experiences, it does not have as much of an impact on a person's enjoyment as reminding that person of their agency.

People often do not enjoy their experiences because of things beyond their control, so when they are reminded of the things within their control, they undergo a

powerful shift in mindset. This shift is what we observed in our data. People expected to better enjoy their future experiences when they were asked to think about the things they could have done differently in their initial mediocre one. By reminding participants about decisions they could have made and actions they could have taken, agency opens up a world of options they might not have even considered within reach of the situation. These findings are significant because they are a reminder of the impact people have over their sense of happiness.

This information is valuable to businesses because it explains why consumers might not return to their experiences or why consumers might not have high expectations of their experiences. Because businesses would find difficulty reminding consumers of their sense of agency the way we did in this study, we designed Study 2 to provide a more practical application of these findings.

## **Study 2: Expertise as a Practical Application of Agency**

The results from our first study revealed that people expect to enjoy their experiences more when they are reminded of the things they can do to improve them. Although this is powerful information from the standpoint of the consumer, it is not particularly practical for businesses. When consumers leave a store, for instance, employees don't have the chance to ask them what they will do to improve their experience the next time they come. We designed this study to provide a more practical application of the data we found in study 1 for businesses to use.

We surveyed a group of participants from an online sample about a mediocre experience they had in a place they visited recently for the first time. Participants were asked to list the name of the place and rate their experience on a scale of 1-Not at all enjoyable - to 9 - extremely enjoyable. Examples of places that participants listed included a local museum, farmer's market, and small zoo. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the control condition or the expertise condition.

In the control condition, participants were asked to rate how much they would expect to enjoy the place they had listed if they were to return again. In the expertise condition, participants first read the statement, "Now that you went to [the place listed] once, you know more about it than you did before your first visit. If you went back, you would know more, be more knowledgeable of many aspects about it, and come into the experience with more expertise." Participants in this condition were then asked to rate how much they would expect to enjoy the place they had listed if they were to return again.

We predicted that participants in both conditions will, on average, rate their first experience almost identically given that this part of the survey was consistent across both conditions. Between the two conditions, we hypothesized that participants in the expertise condition would expect to enjoy their future experience better than the control condition because of the manipulation effect we used on them.

### **Method.**

**Participants.** In this experiment, we used a recruitment database (Amazon Mechanical Turk). We surveyed 114 participants (male = 39, female = 74, Mean Age = 35.48, SD = 10.42) online using Amazon Mechanical Turk. We had 38 participants in the control group, 38 in the positive manipulation group, and 38 in the agency manipulation group. This left us with a target number of 38 participants per experimental condition. Participants were paid \$0.10.

**Materials and Procedure.** All participants started the survey by answering a reading test to ensure that the data we collected was accurate. Next, all participants were asked to list a place they had visited for the first time recently where they had an “okay” time. Participants were then asked to indicate how enjoyable their experience was on a scale of 1 to 9, 1=not at all enjoyable and 9=extremely enjoyable. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions after answering these first two questions. The remainder of the experiment asked participants to rate how enjoyable they would expect their future experience to be in the place they listed.

In the control condition, participants were asked to indicate how enjoyable they expected a second returning visit would be to the place they listed. No manipulation was used on this group in order to provide a basis to compare the two conditions.

In the expertise condition, participants first read a couple of statements describing the expertise they gained from their first experience in the place they listed. The statements reminded participants that they knew more about the place than they did prior to their first visit, and the statements suggested that if participants returned, they would be more knowledgeable than they were the first time. Participants were, then, asked to indicate how enjoyable they expected a second returning visit would be to the place they listed.

Because all participants answered the first two questions, we were able to clearly measure the effect of the expertise manipulation on participant's expected enjoyment of the place compared to the no manipulation control condition.

## **Results.**

To test our hypothesis, we compared the results in the control condition to the results in the expertise condition. As predicted, participants in both the control condition and the expertise condition rated their first experience more or less the same with a score of 5.35 out of 9 on our enjoyability scale. This result indicated that we could accurately measure the effect of the expertise condition on participants expected enjoyment.

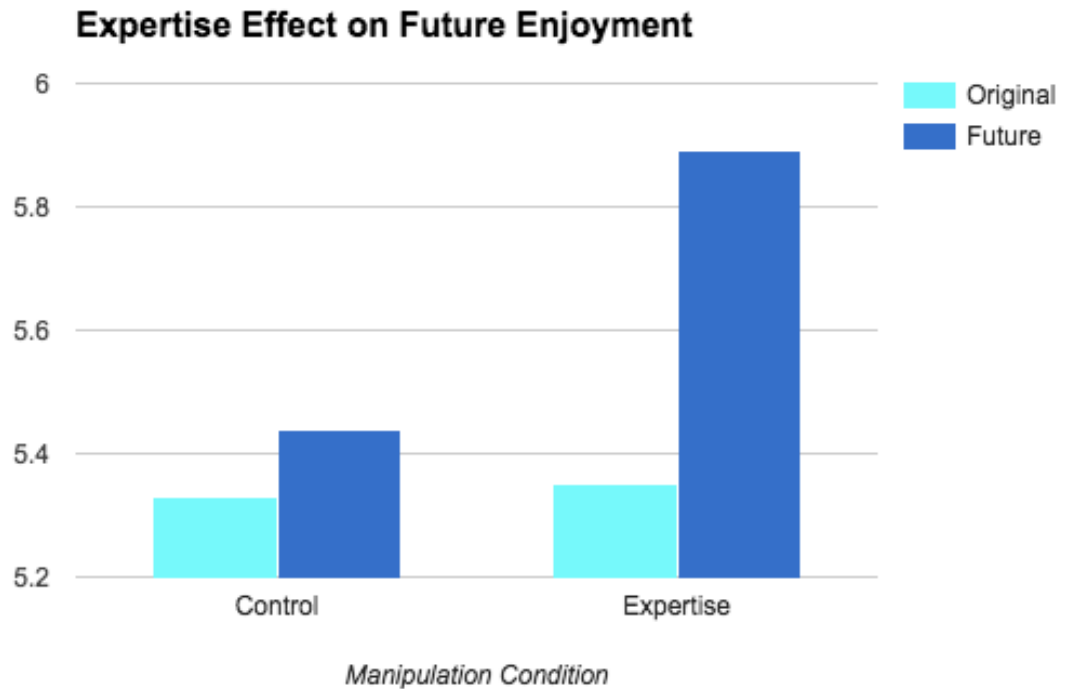
To test the agency hypothesis, we conducted a one way ANOVA with two levels, control and expertise, controlling for the covariate of first time enjoyment. This

revealed a significant effect model  $F(1, 111) = 4.30, p = .04$ , supporting our hypothesis that participants would anticipate enjoying their future experience more when reminded of the knowledge they gained from their initial one.

Participants in the control condition expected their return experience to improve to roughly a 5.44 out of 9 on our enjoyability. A 0.09 point increase in expected enjoyment indicates that participants in the control condition expected their experience to improve, but not by much.

Participants in the expertise condition expected their return experience to improve to roughly a 5.9 out of 9 on our enjoyability. This .55 point increase in expected enjoyment indicates that the expertise manipulation on participants had a significant effect on their expected future enjoyment of the place. Although the expertise manipulation shifted participants' experiences and expectations of the place they listed slightly from 5.35 to 5.9, this effect was significant in improving their anticipated enjoyment compared to the control condition.

Figure 2



The graph above illustrates how participants rated their first experience compared to an anticipated future one. Before participants were asked to rate their future experience, they were placed into either the control or expertise condition. As is demonstrated in the graph, participants in the expertise condition expected their experience to improve significantly more than participants in the control condition.

**Discussion.** These results show how expertise can positively change a person's experience. Many people choose not to return to experiences because they expect them to be the same as the first time they visited or because they believe they experienced all of the potential of the situation. This occurs when experiences are both good and bad. The results of this study suggest that people are more likely to return to an experience if they are made aware of the expertise they gained from their first one.

The purpose of this study was to provide businesses with a more practical application of the results we found in Study 1. Study 1 tested participant's expected

enjoyment of a return visit to a mediocre city they visited recently. We hypothesized that participants in an agency condition would expect to enjoy their returning visit significantly more than participants in the control condition or positive condition. Our results supported our hypothesis, leading us to conclude that reminding people of the actions they can take to improve their experiences results in them better enjoying those experiences.

While it is difficult for businesses to tell consumers how they should change their actions to improve their experiences, this study shows that businesses can use certain tools to help consumers improve their experiences. This study demonstrated that consumer awareness of their expertise leads to improved future experiences, thus providing businesses with a tool to improve consumer experience and increase the likelihood of customer return. Businesses have the ability to tell consumers that they can come into their next experience with more knowledge and expertise from their first one that can lead to increased enjoyment and an overall improved experience.

The tool this study provides is practical in use and leads to similar results to directly asking consumers to think about ways they can better their experience. This occurs because by making people aware of their own expertise, they become aware of more things that the experience has to offer. As previously stated, people often do not return to experiences because they expect them to be the same. Applying the expertise effect in practice results in people thinking more critically about what the experience has to offer and what they can do to captivate it.

In order to suggest more practical means of using our results from Study 1, we designed Study 3 in addition to this study. Study 3 tested the impact that the element of



flexibility had on participant's sense of agency. Although the results of this study are inconclusive because of our small sample size, they do provide evidence worth noting in this body of research, as it both supports my hypothesis and offers future avenues of research to be taken.

### **Study 3: The Effect of Flexibility on Agency**

We designed this study in an attempt to replicate our results from Study 1 while testing for flexibility. Although our results did not end up being significant because of a power fail in our sample size, we still find that these results support my hypothesis and provide an opportunity for future research.

The previous studies confirmed that agency has a significant positive effect on the enjoyment people expect to experience when they return to a place. This study attempted to build off of that finding and test for the effect that flexibility has on people's enjoyment of their experience.

We surveyed a group of participants from an online sample about a hypothetical experience in an ice cream shop. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two ice cream shop conditions to start. Half of participants were asked to imagine they visited an ice cream shop with 2 flavors, while the other half of participants were asked to imagine they visited an ice cream shop with 28 flavors. These conditions were designed to test for the effect of flexibility on agency.

The remainder of the survey very closely resembles the experiment design in Study 1. In both conditions, participants were asked to imagine that they got an ice cream cone that wasn't very good. They were asked to indicate their level of enjoyment of the ice cream cone on our 9 point enjoyability scale. Next, participants were randomly assigned to the control condition, the positive condition, or the agency condition. The control condition used no manipulation, and while the positive and agency conditions used the same manipulations as in Study 1. Then all participants in

the three conditions were asked to indicate their expected enjoyment from a return experience to conclude the survey.

We hypothesized, again, that participants in the agency condition would expect to enjoy their future experience more than participants in the control condition or the agency condition. We, also, hypothesized that participants in the 28 flavor ice cream shop would expect to enjoy their experience significantly more than participants in the 2 flavor ice cream shop, thus indicating that more flexibility leads people to be more agentic.

### **Method.**

**Participants.** In this experiment, we used a recruitment database (Amazon Mechanical Turk). We surveyed 213 participants (male = 80, female = 116, prefer not to say = 5, Mean Age = 38.4, SD =11.47) online using Amazon Mechanical Turk. We had 71 participants in the control group, 71 in the positive manipulation group, and 71 in the agency manipulation group. This left us with a target number of 71 participants per experimental condition. Participants were paid \$0.10.

**Materials and Procedure.** All participants started the survey answering a reading test to ensure that the data we collected was accurate. Next, all participants answered the questions “Do you like ice cream?” and “Do you have any dietary restrictions around ice cream?” Participants who answered “no” to the first question were removed from the survey, and participants who responded “yes” to the second question were removed from the survey if they responded “no” to the first question.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two ice cream shop conditions: 2 flavors or 28 flavors. Participants in both conditions were asked to imagine they got a scoop of ice cream that was not very good. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of our three manipulation conditions: the control condition, the positive condition, and the agency condition.

Participants in the control condition were asked to rate how much better or worse their experience would be if they returned to the shop on a scale of -4 (much worse) to +4 (much better). No manipulation was used on these participants. The control condition provided us with a basis point to compare the other two manipulations to, especially in relation to the effect of flexibility.

Participants in the positive condition were asked to think about what things, if any, would be enjoyable if they returned to the shop. They were asked to name one thing and then rate how much better or worse their experience would be if they returned to the shop on a scale of -4 (much worse) to +4 (much better).

Participants in the agency condition were asked to think about the things they could have done differently in terms of the choices they could have changed and the different actions they could have made to make their experience more enjoyable. They were asked to list one thing they could have done that would make their experience more enjoyable. Then, participants were asked to rate how much better or worse their experience would be if they returned to the shop on a scale of -4 (much worse) to +4 (much better).

Because all participants in each of the three manipulation conditions answered the same set of questions, regardless of the ice cream shop having 2 or 28 flavors, we were able to measure the effect of flexibility on agency.

## **Results.**

In our results, we only included participants who liked ice cream and did not have any dietary restrictions around it. To test our first hypothesis, we compared the results in the control conditions to the positive conditions and agency conditions. We conducted a 2 (flexibility: high vs. low) x 3 (control, positive, agentic) ANOVA between subjects on their second time enjoyment of the ice cream shop. This did not reveal a significant interaction, however the patterns were in line with our hypothesis and some were significant. Consistent with our findings in Study 1, we found that participants in the agency condition expected to enjoy their return experience better than participants in both the control condition and the positive condition. Although exact numbers varied based upon ice cream shop condition, this result remains consistent in supporting our hypothesis that agency leads people to better enjoy their experiences.

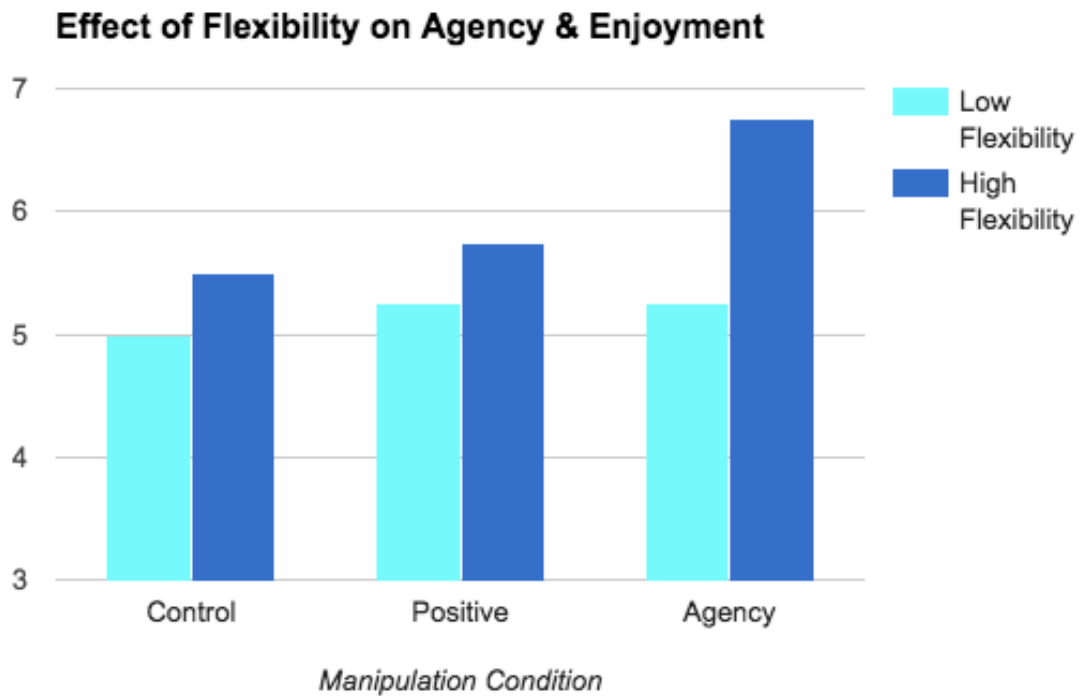
To test our second hypothesis, we compared the results of the three conditions in the 2 Flavor Ice Cream Shop condition to the results in the 28 Flavor Ice Cream Shop condition. In the control condition, we found that participants expected their return experience in the 28 flavors store to be better than the 2 flavors shop, but only by an average of roughly half of a point. This result indicates that people, in general, expect to enjoy their experiences better when they have more flexibility.

In the positive condition, we found almost the same relationship between the 2 flavor shop and the 28 flavor shop as in the control condition. Participants in the 28 flavor shop expected to enjoy their return visit better, on average, than participants in the 2 flavor shop, but they only expected to enjoy their return experience more by half a point on our nine point scale. This result indicates that people expect to enjoy their experiences more when they have more flexibility, but not by a significant amount when prompted to think positively.

In the agency condition, participants expected to enjoy their return experience in the 28 flavors ice cream shop more than the 2 flavors ice cream shop by a staggering one and a half points on our nine point enjoyability scale. While the positive condition followed the same linear relationship as the control condition, the agency condition did not. These results are significant because they demonstrate that flexibility had a strong effect on the agency manipulation and participants' anticipated enjoyment.

Although our study failed to pool a large enough group of participants for the results to be statistically significant, we still find this data to be supportive of my thesis. The results offer room for future research to be conducted and for businesses to implement in a practical way.

Figure 3



The graph above illustrates the effect of flexibility on the agency condition and its correlating expected enjoyment results. The control and positive conditions experience the same pattern with flexibility, indicating that no strong relationship exists. However, the agency condition is significantly affected by the flexibility condition, demonstrating that agency is stronger in the presence of flexibility.

**Discussion.** These results demonstrate how flexibility affects the power of agency. People, in general, enjoy being in situations where they have more choices. Flexibility gives people more freedom and control over how their experiences turn out, and people typically like to have this sense of control. This explains why people have an increased sense of agency in flexible situations over fixed ones. People can think of more actions they could take to improve their experience when there are more choices available to them (like at the 28 Flavors Ice Cream Shop).

These results suggest that businesses could enhance people's sense of agency simply by giving them more options. Because flexibility gives individuals more choices and, therefore, more control, they tend to enjoy their experiences more and have a higher likelihood of return. Businesses with low customer lifetime values might want to consider either giving customers more options in order to satisfy more of their demands or perfecting the options they already have for customers. These applications could be very valuable to businesses trying to improve customer experience.



## Summary of Findings

People do not enjoy their experiences as much as they could because they do not think of ways that they can improve them, so when people are reminded of ways they can improve their experiences, they expect to enjoy them more. I conducted three studies to test this hypothesis. Study 1 directly supported my hypothesis by demonstrating how people expected to enjoy a returning experience to a mediocre city significantly more when they were reminded of their sense of agency. We recalled participant's sense of agency by asking them to think about specific decisions they could have made and actions they could have taken to improve their first experience. This manipulation resulted in participants' expected enjoyment to almost double from their initial experience, compared to participants' expected enjoyment only raising a fraction of a percent in the control condition.

In addition to testing the effect of agency on participants' experiences, we tested for the effect of positivity on participants' expected enjoyment in study 1. People often believe that reminding people to think positively helps them enjoy their experiences more. This portion of the experiment tested that assumption against our hypothesis that reminding people of their agency increases overall enjoyment. We primed the positive condition by asking them to think about positive aspects of their first experience before asking them to rate how much they expected to enjoy a second one. Although their expectations were higher than those in the control condition, participants in the positive condition did not expect to enjoy their return experience nearly as much as people in the agency condition. These results suggest that people's experiences benefit more when people are reminded of their agency than when people are reminded to be positive,

which is a useful finding from the standpoint of interpersonal relationships and recommendations.

These findings are less applicable, however, in a business setting. Businesses will have a hard time being successful asking consumers to think about the different things they could have done to improve their initial experience because they risk consumers feeling blamed for having subpar experiences. This could ultimately decrease their likelihood of return instead of increase it. In order to provide businesses with more practical applications of the discoveries made in Study 1, we conducted Study 2.

Study 2 was designed similarly in that we asked participants to rate an initial mediocre experience and an expected future one in a place. Instead of directly testing for agency, however, we tested for the effect of expertise. This test of expertise is similar to the test for agency because both make individuals aware of ways that they can improve their returning experiences. The experiment design was similar in that we compared participants' ratings of initial mediocre experiences with anticipated future ones. Instead of prompting people with the agency condition, however, we asked participants in the expertise condition to think about the knowledge they gained from their initial experience before having them rate their future one.

The results revealed that people in the expertise condition expected to enjoy their future experience far more than participants in the control condition. These findings are incredibly useful to businesses because though they cannot feasibly ask people to think about ways that they could improve their experiences the way we did in Study 1, businesses can realistically remind people of the knowledge they gained from

their first experience. A reminder of expertise illuminates people's sense of agency because it prompts them to think about the things that they liked and didn't like from their first experience, which leads to a more critical evaluation of ways that they could improve a future one.

The final study we conducted tested how the flexibility of a situation affected sense of agency. The point of this study was to determine whether or not agency is worth pointing out to consumers if businesses are too fixed. Study 3 followed the design of Study 1 in the use of the control condition, positive condition, and agency condition. Instead of having participants provide a place where they had a mediocre experience, however, we told participants that they had a subpar experience in either a flexible or inflexible situation. We had participants rate their first experience and anticipated second experience on the same enjoyability scale and compared the two for our results.

We found that flexibility had a significant impact on the effect of the agency condition. Participants in the flexible, agency condition expected to enjoy their experiences significantly more than participants that fell into any of the other conditions. Their expected enjoyment, also, did not follow the pattern exhibited in the control and positive condition between the flexible and inflexible conditions, thus indicating that agency had a greater effect when participants were in a more flexible situation. We suggest that flexibility might cause this kind of effect because people are more aware of ways they could improve situations when they have more options.

Although these results were not significant because of having too small of a pool of participants, we suggest that these results are still useful to businesses because it

provides evidence that increasing the flexibility of an experience might lead to higher levels of enjoyment. This study, also, supports my hypothesis that people enjoy their experiences more when they are reminded of their sense of agency over them. In both the flexible and inflexible conditions, participants in the agency condition expected their future experience to improve more than participants in the positive or control condition.

While these studies provide useful information to both businesses and consumers about how reminders of agency can increase people's experiential enjoyment, these results are only a foundation for additional research that should be done on the topic. The remainder of my thesis will explore different avenues that future researchers could take to expand on the the subject of agency to provide more fruitful recommendations to people and businesses.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

In order to provide useful recommendations for future research, I investigated several well-researched psychological theories related to agency. The psychological frameworks I will specifically focus on include temporal orientation, the unpacking effect, and the intentional binding effect. These theories contribute substantial background information about why people might lack agency in the first place, which offers opportunities for me to make suggestions about how marketers might handle people who fall on different sides of the spectrum. Although this research is well-understood in the field of psychology, most of it has not been delved into in the field of business. This assessment is designed to give market researchers an idea of the theories that might be valuable to them as they dive further into the topic of how agency affects people's experiences.

### **Temporal Orientation**

Temporal orientation is one of the essential psychological bases that affect a person's sense of agency. Time orientation is the habitual non-conscious process in which events and experiences are assigned to temporal frames to help give order, coherence and meaning to events.<sup>5</sup> It is a person's tendency to think about (or orient) their lives around the past, present, or future, thereby driving their decisions and actions. Everyone is a mix of temporal orientations-no one is purely past oriented, present oriented, or future oriented-but each person's dominant perspective plays a huge

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<sup>5</sup> Richmond, Jill, J. Clare Wilson, and Jörg Zinken. "A Feeling for the Future: How Does Agency in Time Metaphors Relate to Feelings?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42.7 (2012): 813-23. Wiley Online Library. Web. Sept. 2016.

role in how they perceive their experiences. For example, a person's dominant temporal orientation plays a large part in determining how intrinsically or extrinsically motivated they are. Much research argues that agency can only be understood when situated within the flow of time, which is why understanding this concept is central to my recommendations.<sup>6</sup>

To start, I will analyze the five types of time orientations, providing examples about how their archetype would interact as a consumer and suggestions for how businesses might best handle them. Past-oriented people base their judgment and decision making off of similar experiences from their pasts with the expectation that it will go the same the second time around. Past oriented people are able to resist immediate temptations of situations that they have already experienced because they have an understanding of the cost those temptations come at. This will-power, though beneficial at times, comes at the expense of extreme hesitancy and a preference for the status quo. The past perspective intrinsically generates a fixed mindset where people believe that they are fixed the way they are and there is nothing they can do about it. This mindset is particularly damaging to a person's sense of agency because it creates an expectation that the person cannot make themselves or their experiences better, which distances them from the awareness that they are in control of their actions and outcomes.

In a study on young people's transition into adulthood, researchers focused specifically on how time-oriented agency affected participants' thought processes and

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<sup>6</sup> Kaori Kitagawa and Mabel Encinas, "Young people's transitions in London and temporal orientations of agency," *London Review of Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): , accessed April 24, 2017, doi:10.18546/lre.12.1.08.

decision making. The paper refers to the past orientation as “the iterational element,” which was described as “the selective reactivation of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time.”<sup>7</sup> When asked about their future, roughly a third of participants fell into this category, stating that they based their decisions around the connections they already had and what previous experiences had to offer. Although past-oriented people tend to make fairly smart and safe decisions, this study demonstrates how the past perspective limits a person’s likelihood to set and achieve goals. This study provides an example of where past oriented people would benefit from being more agentic because goal-directed thinking requires an awareness that deliberate choices and actions lead to progress.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to the research presented in the previous studies, people who are more past-oriented would be less likely to return to mediocre experiences because of their expectation of them being the same. Businesses who fail to deliver great first impressions, therefore, might struggle to maximize the customer lifetime value of people who are more past-oriented. In order to break the fixed mindset exhibited in past orient dominant consumers, businesses could benefit from reminding them of their expertise as explored in Study 2. When participants were reminded of the knowledge they gained from their initial mediocre experience, they expect their subsequent one to

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<sup>7</sup> Richmond, Jill, J. Clare Wilson, and Jörg Zinken. "A Feeling for the Future: How Does Agency in Time Metaphors Relate to Feelings?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42.7 (2012): 813-23. Wiley Online Library. Web. Sept. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Latinjak, Alexander T., Nikos Zourbanos, Víctor López-Ros, and Antonis Hatzigeorgiadis. "Goal-directed and undirected self-talk: Exploring a new perspective for the study of athletes' self-talk." *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 15.5 (2014): 548-58. Web. Oct. 2016.

improve significantly. Past oriented people might benefit compellingly from the expertise effect because it sheds light on how they have grown intellectually from their first experience, thus giving them more room to break their fixed mindset and improve their future experience.

Moreover, the present perspective is divided into three sub-orientations: present-hedonism, present-fatalism, and present-active. Present-hedonistic people focus on immediate pleasures while neglecting their past experiences and future consequences.<sup>9</sup> Hedonistic people tend to impulsively make decisions, which leads to a risky, exciting lifestyle full of highs and lows. They tend to forfeit stability for immediate happiness, making them good at acting agentic in real time but poor at using their agency to achieve long-term goals. Scholar Bruce Wallace describes hedonists as cognitive misers, saying,

“Confronted with situations in which most people would think long and hard, [cognitive misers] engage in very little reflection. Cognitive misers have little intrinsic motivation to engage in careful cognition, they do not enjoy it, and are generally less practiced and less effective at it.”<sup>10</sup>

Wallace suggests that hedonists embody the fight or flight instinct, meaning that they do not invest much time or effort into thinking through their decisions.

From a consumer perspective, hedonists are like fish - hard to hook, but easy to reel in once they have already bitten. These consumers are easy for marketers to keep around and entertain if they can capture their attention in the first place because their

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<sup>9</sup> Spink, Kevin S., Kathleen S. Wilson, Lawrence R. Brawley, and Patrick Odnokon. "The perception of team environment: The relationship between the psychological climate and members' perceived effort in high-performance groups." *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 17.3 (2013): 150-61. Web. Dec. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Waller, B. N. "Deep thinkers, cognitive misers, and moral responsibility." *Analysis* 59.4 (1999): 223-29. Web. Jan. 2017.



agency is easy to trigger; they are already stuck in the here and now. Marketers, however, have to motivate the hedonistic consumer to act agentic in the first place and seek out their products for themselves, which can be difficult because hedonists are hard to predict. In a study with over 28,000 people, researchers found that hedonists are more likely to engage in mood-enhancing behaviors when they feel bad and unpleasant behaviors when they feel good.<sup>11</sup> This behavior offers both opportunities and issues from a business perspective.

When hedonists feel happy, they are more likely to tolerate inconveniences built into certain situations. This tendency is good for businesses because the happy hedonist will be more forgiving of some of the unfortunate necessities of business such as waiting in lines, filling out paperwork, etc. On the other hand, when hedonists are unhappy they are unlikely to return to experiences unless they were great in the first place. Businesses that fail to make top notch first impressions have the challenge of regaining hedonists desire to return. However, they might be able to do so by making consumers feel good about themselves and their ability to improve upon their first experience. Hedonists, like past-oriented people, could exhibit strong shifts in mindset when reminded of their expertise because they would feel knowledgeable and recognize options for them to act on. Businesses would benefit from enhancing hedonists sense of agency because they would more likely to return, but more research is necessary to discover the best strategy to do so.

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<sup>11</sup> Maxime Taquet et al., "Hedonism and the choice of everyday activities," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 35 (2016): , accessed April 2017, doi:10.1073/pnas.1519998113.

The second type of present orientation is fatalism. Present-fatalists attempt to minimize their fear of, in their minds, the pre-ordained by simply not thinking about it at all. They are bad at making and following through with plans because they don't believe planning has an effect on their future.<sup>12</sup> Similar to past-oriented people, fatalists perceive their lives as controlled by external forces and not themselves. Both past and present-fatalist orientations perceive time as moving all around them instead of themselves moving through time.<sup>13</sup> In their minds, they are statues planted, fixed in an unfair, predestined world that offers no room for growth. Previous studies have negatively correlated fatalism with agency, which shows in fatalists' tendency to exhibit stronger feelings of sadness and anxiety.<sup>14</sup>

For future consumer behavior studies, it might be beneficial to consider past and present fatalism perspectives as largely the same in relation to agency. The fixed nature of these temporal orientations makes both of these types of consumers difficult to motivate agency in because they are either too weary of the future or hesitant from the past. Because hedonists feel like their lives are out of their control, they will especially benefit from reminders of agency we have suggested could lead them to improving their experiences. Businesses might be able to produce a more agentic mindset in fatalists simply by giving them options, as was discussed in Study 3. Options help people feel

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<sup>12</sup> Sobol-Kwapinska, Malgorzata. "Forms of Present Time Orientation and Satisfaction with Life in the Context of Attitudes toward past and Future." *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal* 37.4 (2009): 433-40. Proquest Sociology. Web. Sept. 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Richmond, Jill, J. Clare Wilson, and Jörg Zinken. "A Feeling for the Future: How Does Agency in Time Metaphors Relate to Feelings?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42.7 (2012): 813-23. Wiley Online Library. Web. Sept. 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Richmond, Jill, J. Clare Wilson, and Jörg Zinken. "A Feeling for the Future: How Does Agency in Time Metaphors Relate to Feelings?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42.7 (2012): 813-23. Wiley Online Library. Web. Sept. 2016.

more responsible and in control of their decisions, which are feelings that fatalists lack to a large degree. Providing fatalist consumers with more choices might help businesses significantly in maximizing their value. Ultimately, uncovering additional methods of making past oriented and fatalist consumers feel in control of their purchasing decisions is necessary for marketers to successfully reach them. Future research is required to discover these methods or conclude that these consumers prove more difficult for businesses to reach than is worth their efforts.

Furthermore, the final present perspective is called active concentration. Active concentration, unlike hedonism and fatalism, is the full focus on the present without fear or impulse taking over. This form of present orientation allows people to attribute value to moments as they are occurring, instead of searching their memories for expectations or looking for future consequences. For this reason, actively present individuals have been found to feel more life satisfaction and, to a lesser degree, success in achieving their goals. “Thanks to focusing on the present, negative emotions associated with the past (grief, longing) and with the future (anxiety), can be eliminated.”<sup>15</sup> In the study about the transitions of young people into adulthood, active concentration is referred to as “the practical element.” Participants who exemplified practicality made choices in response to their awareness of immediate conditions, evaluating different demands and dilemmas associated with it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sobol-Kwapinska, Malgorzata. "Forms of Present Time Orientation and Satisfaction with Life in the Context of Attitudes toward past and Future." *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal* 37.4 (2009): 433-40. Proquest Sociology. Web. Sept. 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Kaori Kitagawa and Mabel Encinas, "Young people's transitions in London and temporal orientations of agency," *London Review of Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): , accessed April 24, 2017, doi:10.18546/lre.12.1.08.

As consumers, actively-present people tend to have a good sense of agency because they are able to focus on the future and the past, without letting it consume them, and formulate intentional actions to maintain or improve their current state.<sup>17</sup> This is beneficial for marketers because it makes this orientation a psychographic market that requires less attention. The present-activism concentration is, however, important to study because they exemplify the kind of behavior that marketers wish to inspire in the previously discussed temporal orientations. Understanding people who are actively concentrated on the present provides marketers with a framework of how and why the other orientations differ and what strategies they can implement to change their perspectives. Future research may be required to understand how the mindsets of presently active people differ from those previously mentioned in consumer settings. This knowledge would provide businesses with a better idea of the kinds of emotions they should aim to evoke from hedonists, fatalists, and past-oriented consumers.

The last of the temporal orientations is the future perspective. The prototypical future oriented person makes their decisions based off of what lies two steps ahead. They are willing to sacrifice immediate pleasures for their long-term goals, making them good dieters and teammates for example in sport and work settings. In a study performed with people who had just achieved significant weight loss, researchers found that participants who exhibited a stronger future orientation had a greater chance

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<sup>17</sup> Sobol-Kwapinska, Malgorzata. "Forms of Present Time Orientation and Satisfaction with Life in the Context of Attitudes toward past and Future." *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal* 37.4 (2009): 433-40. Proquest Sociology. Web. Sept. 2016.

of maintaining their weight loss than participants lacking a future orientation.<sup>18</sup> These results can be attributed to their strong goal-directed thinking and intrinsic motivation. Similar to the active concentration mindset, future orientation drives people to perceive themselves moving through time, instead of time and events moving around them.<sup>19</sup> This “ego-moving” attitude results from engaged, goal-oriented thinking that establishes a clear link between controllable current states and future desirable ones.

The future-oriented person is very agentic and enjoys feeling in control of their flaws and emotions. As consumers, they demand the most minimal amount of motivation to commit to, for example, making a purchase or reading an article, etc. If the future-oriented consumer has to wait in line, they are not thinking about how long the line is but, rather, how satisfied they will be once they get what is at the end of it. The future perspective, like active concentration, is what marketers would like to inspire in consumers when put in unideal, seemingly fixed situations because these consumers try to make the best of them. They are more likely to thrive in situations with low flexibility than the other orientations because they feel a sense of purpose and control by being there in the first place.

One important caveat to note, however, about future orientation is that brands and businesses need to deliver a great customer service experience to make their patience worth it. Because the future-minded person builds up an expectation that they

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<sup>18</sup> Anastasiou, Costas A., Evaggelia Fappa, Eleni Karfopoulou, Anastasia Gkza, and Mary Yannakoulia. "Weight loss maintenance in relation to locus of control: The MedWeight study." *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 71 (2015): 40-44. Web. Dec. 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, Carol. "What We Mean By Happiness: A "Theory" of Agency and Well-Being." *The Pursuit of Happiness - An Economy of Well-Being*. Washington: Brookings Institute, 2012. 27-61. Ebrary Academic Complete. Web. Sept. 2016.

will savor their experiences ahead, failing to meet those anticipations will elicit a feeling of deception in these consumers and make them unlikely to return. Businesses, again, might benefit from communicating how the knowledge these consumers gained in their first experience might improve upon their future ones. They might, also, might successfully motivate future-oriented consumers to return by recognizing their own downfalls and making it up to the consumer in the form of great customer service or even discount promotions.

This analysis clearly states how different time orientations influence people's sense of agency. Although much research has already been done to decipher between these different perceptions, there is an abundance of opportunities for market researchers to expand upon these factors in a consumer setting. Additional research might include various behavioral scales that indicate participants' dominant time orientations and how that influences their decision to return to certain experiences. Researchers could, then, provide more fruitful recommendations to businesses on how to best approach each orientation and which ones specifically might be best to focus their efforts on.

### **The Unpacking Effect**

The following section will explore how differences in the way information is presented has a significant effect on agency. Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka came up with the famous theory, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Koffka's theory suggests that things have more value when they are put together than they do when they stand individually. This thesis, for example, follows Koffka's theory because the body as a whole is more valuable than merely this section or any other

section on its own. Koffka's theory, however, does not necessarily hold true when focusing on the subject of agency. In a study challenging this Gestalt psychology, Leaf Von Boven and Nicholas Epley argue that the details do matter when it comes to people making evaluative judgements and decisions.<sup>20</sup> "Like the measured length of a coastline, which increases as a map becomes more detailed, the perceived likelihood of an event increases as its description becomes more specific," they write. They call this idea the unpacking effect: breaking down broad categorical descriptions to produce stronger evaluative judgements.

The unpacking effect affects agency and mindset in several ways. First, it motivates a stronger sense of empathy. In an experiment where students read a packed or unpacked description of oil refinery workers suffering from respiratory diseases, the participants who read the unpacked description were more likely to, hypothetically, give more in charity to the workers than those who read a more general description.<sup>21</sup> Their empathy and willingness to give back shows their awareness of what they can do to help people stuck in terrible situations. This awareness is agency, though it is framed in a different way. Understanding how the unpacking effect elicits empathy and, as a result, agency is especially valuable to nonprofits and charitable organizations.

The unpacking effect looks similar to flexibility in application. Businesses that create more flexible environments basically unpack the opportunities available to

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<sup>20</sup> Boven, Leaf Van, and Nicholas Epley. "The unpacking effect in evaluative judgments: When the whole is less than the sum of its parts." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39.3 (2003): 264. Web. Dec. 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Boven, Leaf Van, and Nicholas Epley. "The unpacking effect in evaluative judgments: When the whole is less than the sum of its parts." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39.3 (2003): 265. Web. Dec. 2016.

consumers, thus making them more likely to act on them. The results from our flexibility study suggest that consumers feel a stronger sense of agency in situations that have options, and this potentially makes them more likely to return. Because our results were inconclusive due to sample size, additional research is needed to fully support the argument that agency increases with flexibility. This kind of future research will be especially beneficial to businesses trying to improve customer experiences.

Unpacking information, also, allows people to make plans better and take responsibility for the tasks they take on. Because unpacking breaks down information, it gives people a better understanding of how much effort a task will take. This allows people to better gauge how much of a workload they can handle, giving them greater control over their time and happiness. People tend to overcommit to tasks and responsibilities because they don't fully think through how much time and effort they require. Overcommitment, as a result, overwhelms people into believing that they have lost complete control over the situation when faced with time constraints. The unpacking effect helps people assert agency over their responsibilities because it makes the workload more transparent, which leads people to feeling in control of their commitments.

In relation to the temporal framework, actively-present and future oriented people are most likely to unpack situations on their own. Because they exhibit a stronger sense of agency and evaluative thinking, these consumers are able to identify and seek out opportunities that different experiences have to offer. They are more likely, for example, to return to a city where they had an "ok" experience because they can unpack what that city has to offer. Hedonism, fatalism, and past orientation, on the



other hand, convey a lesser ability to dissect information beyond what is readily available to them. Past oriented consumers put too much emphasis on previous experiences to unpack opportunities in future ones, hedonists lack the focus to break down what is presented to them, and fatalists simply lack the desire to unpack situations at all.

Although these three orientations present a challenge to marketers, the unpacking effect provides an opportunity for them to capture this audience. In the above example, emphasizing the great things about a city with specific recommendations for restaurants, excursions, and lodging might make the fickle past, hedonistic, and fatalistic orientations likely to give a mediocre city a second chance to become an awesome one. Further research is needed to quantify the effect that unpacking experiences has on a person's sense of agency and resulting enjoyment, but the unpacking effect presents an exciting avenue for future studies to explore.

### **The Intentional Binding Effect**

The intentional binding effect is another theory constructed around a person's sense of time that affects agency. Unlike the temporal orientation framework, however, the intentional binding effect looks at how people perceive timing in reaction to the hastening or delay of events. The intentional binding effect refers to the psychological phenomenon whereby a voluntary action followed closely by an outcome become bound in perception because the awareness of the action shifts toward the outcome that

follows.<sup>22</sup> The amount of time that exists between action and consequence, therefore, has a strong effect on a person's sense of agency.

Numerous studies have suggested that the shorter the interval of time between an action and outcome, the more likely people are to feel that their action had a sense of control over the outcome.<sup>23</sup> This occurs because people strive to link cause with effect, and vice versa, to make sense of the world around them. The binding of action to consequence can be a positive for individuals if they are able to accurately assess the effect of their actions; however, this intentional binding effect runs the risk of creating a false sense of agency in the individual. Although too much false agency can be extremely damaging to individuals, manifesting into schizophrenia at its worst (source 20, 88), marketers can actually use false agency in harmless ways to their advantage. "When people believe that they are the author of an upcoming sensory event, predictive signals are considered reliable."<sup>24</sup> By crafting positive signals that the individual perceives as the result of their own agency, businesses can actually build better experiences for individuals.

Conversely, when too much time passes between action and outcome, people form weaker links, if any, between the two. This results in individuals losing their sense of agency over their action and its subsequent effects, if they were in fact caused

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Desantis, Cédric Roussel, and Florian Waszak, "On the influence of causal beliefs on the feeling of agency," *Consciousness and Cognition* 20, no. 4 (2011): , doi:10.1016/j.concog.2011.02.012.

<sup>23</sup> Wen Wen, Atsushi Yamashita, and Hajime Asama, "The influence of action-outcome delay and arousal on sense of agency and the intentional binding effect," *Consciousness and Cognition* 36 (2015). 93. : , doi:10.1016/j.concog.2015.06.004.

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Desantis, Cédric Roussel, and Florian Waszak, "On the influence of causal beliefs on the feeling of agency," *Consciousness and Cognition* 20, no. 4 (2011): , doi:10.1016/j.concog.2011.02.012.

by the action. Delayed effect timing has a stronger impact on people's abilities to link effects to causes than vice versa. While this occurs for obvious reasons, it is easy to forget how a past action could result in present consequences, solving this tendency is not so obvious. When people fail to connect their deliberate actions to subsequent outcomes, they lose the enjoyment of being in control, thus diminishing their enjoyment of the outcome. This can be problematic from a consumer standpoint because people do not enjoy their experiences as much as they could.

Future research might explore how businesses can use the intentional binding effect to create harmless senses of false agency in consumers to help them better enjoy their experiences. This research would require an understanding of the length of time between action and outcome that actually creates a sense of agency in order for businesses to apply it in practice. Businesses would, also, have to carefully craft situations where they prompted consumers to act in specific ways in order for them to reward those actions with desirable outcomes. Furthermore, future research might analyze the length of delay that disassociates action from outcome in the mind of the consumer. This information might prompt businesses to reward consumers sooner when they do something beneficial to the company in order to recall their sense of agency and maximize their enjoyment of the experience.

## Conclusion

Although the body of research I presented is not entirely conclusive, it does provide powerful insights into the way people think and how businesses can motivate people to think in ways that are beneficial to them both. In the introduction, I suggested that people often do not maximize their potential enjoyment of situations because they don't think of ways to improve them. As a result, I hypothesized that reminding people of the agency they have over their experiences can significantly improve them. This hypothesis led me to conduct three studies that led to the following insights:

- People do enjoy their experiences more when they are reminded of their sense of agency and prompted to think of ways to improve them, as demonstrated in Study 1.
- People enjoy their experiences more when they are reminded of their sense of agency than when they are prompted to think about the positives, as demonstrated in Study 1.
- People expect to enjoy future experiences more when they are reminded of the expertise they gained from their initial experience, as demonstrated in Study 2. This provides a practical application for businesses to prompt consumers to be more agentic by reminding them of how the knowledge they gained from their first experience creates opportunities to take control of their future experiences.
- Flexible environments likely enhance people's sense of agency because they give people more options to act on, as demonstrated in Study 3. Though this study lacked the applicant pool to make these statistics significant, the results

still provide a powerful insight into how businesses might prompt agency in consumers.

My goal for this body of work was to provide both consumers and businesses with the tools to maximize people's enjoyment. This thesis demonstrates how reminding people of their sense of agency can lead to them better enjoying their experiences. Although future research is needed to make these results more conclusive and to provide more useful recommendations to businesses, these findings are one step in the right direction of giving people a better sense of control over their happiness and increasing happiness overall.

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