Affective forecasting: Improving habitual car users' predictions about future satisfaction with public transport

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Abstract
Previous studies into affective forecasting have disclosed that people generally make too extreme predictions about the intensity and the duration of anticipated future emotions as a response to future events. Such biased predictions are often caused by a psychological mechanism termed the focusing illusion, whereby people focus disproportionately either on a limited range of features related to the event itself or on the event as a whole, disregarding the larger context in which the event takes place (e.g. Schkade & Kahneman 1998; Wilson & Gilbert 2003). In line with this research we have studied habitual car users' predictions of future satisfaction with public transport, and found that habitual car users in fact make biased predictions about their future satisfaction with public transport as they, after actually experiencing public transport, become significantly more satisfied with the service than they predicted that they would be (Pedersen, Friman & Kristensson, submitted). We suggest that these inaccurate predictions are in fact caused by a focusing illusion, and that actual experience with public transport causes people to make more accurate predictions. However, it is both a difficult and costly task to recruit habitual car users in order to aid them in a travel mode shift, i.e. from using the car to using public transport more often. Recent research have identified specific techniques that moderate people's undue focus on a limited range of features, by introducing either a broader range of features or a wider context, thereby improving people's predictions so that they become more accurate. Such techniques are termed defocusing techniques (e.g. Wilson et al 2000, Ubel et al 2001; Ubel et al 2005; Ayton et al 2007). In accordance with this, we have designed a new study aiming to defocus habitual car users' undue focus on presumably negative features of public transport. 120 habitual car users participated in the present study, in which we, by assigning the participants randomly to one out of four varied treatments of a defocusing technique, aimed to moderate the habitual car users' predictions about future satisfaction with public transport, and thereby aiding them to make more realistic predictions. Combining, on the one hand a framework from the research area of affective forecasting, and on the other hand incidents contributing to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with public transport, we adapted and adjusted a successful defocusing technique constructed by Ayton et al (2007), in which we incorporated actual and realistic incidents from the domain of public transport as reported by Friman (2000). The effect of these defocusing techniques on habitual car users' predictions about future satisfaction with the public transport service is reported. The results of the study also have important managerial implications; by taking into consideration the way habitual car users' perceive information about the public transport service, both public transport planners and marketers may be aided in their designing of information campaigns that can improve habitual car users' predictions about future satisfaction with the service. This in turn might possibly facilitate a travel mode shift for habitual car users, i.e. from using the car to using public transport more often.