

Synchronized Scheduling: Choosing to Experience Different Events in Different Places at the Same Time as Others

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ABSTRACT This research documents a preference for *synchronized scheduling*—when people choose to experience different events in different places at the same time as others. We find that people are willing to incur costs—for example, by scheduling negative events sooner or positive events later—to synchronize their schedules. Thus, when unable to share physical space, people can nevertheless share “temporal space” by choosing to schedule separate experiences at the same time. Eight studies ($N = 3,075$) explore this preference, which does not extend to disliked others and persists even when only one person knows. We explain that this is because synchronized scheduling acts as “social glue,” increasing feelings of not only person-to-person social connection but also solidarity, trust, and cohesion within the group. As a result, it counteracts experienced and anticipated physical disconnection. We highlight implications for individuals and organizations seeking to create psychologically connected experiences in an increasingly physically disconnected world.

Belonging is a fundamental human desire. So, when pushed apart, people will find new ways to come together. Consider, for example, that in the summer of 2020, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, many running events switched to a “virtual” format: competitors started at the same time, on the same day—as in previous years—but they ran alone, in different locations. These virtual races have since exploded in popularity: even the world-famous Boston Marathon converted to a virtual format for its 2021 race (Boston Athletic Association 2021).

This is but one illustration of the many ways that consumers, faced with an inability to share physical space, will nevertheless find ways to share “temporal space”—that is, experience events at the same time. But what explains the appeal? A *New York Times* headline offers a clue: “Runners may be running alone, but they can still feel as if they’re part of a larger group” (Miller 2020).

In this research, we explore this preference for what we call *synchronized scheduling*—when people choose to experi-

ence different events in different places at the same time as others. And we predict that people are willing to incur costs—for example, by scheduling negative events sooner or positive events later—to synchronize their schedules. We furthermore highlight two sources of the desire for synchronized scheduling: First, it acts as “social glue,” increasing feelings of both social connection to other individuals and solidarity, trust, and cohesion at the group level (Bastian, Jetten, and Ferris 2014). Second, it counteracts experienced and anticipated physical disconnection. We conclude by suggesting novel strategies for consumers and firms seeking to create psychologically connected experiences in an increasingly physically disconnected world.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Feelings of connection and belonging are a vital source of happiness and meaning in daily life (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Diener and Seligman 2002; Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006). They bind people together as social glue, reinforced

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through shared reality (Levine and Higgins 2001; Clark and Kashima 2007), shared identity (Abrams and Hogg 1990; Van Vugt and Hart 2004), and shared experience (Schachter 1959; Lakin et al. 2003)—even when those experiences are traumatic (Elder and Clipp 1989; Whitehouse 1996; Turner and Wainwright 2003; Vezzali et al. 2016). For example, participants who submerged their hands in ice water together (relative to a group that did not similarly share a painful experience) reported feeling greater solidarity, trust, and cohesion with each other as a result (Bastian et al. 2014).

Consequently, people seek opportunities to deepen their bonds with others when given the opportunity. For example, most moviegoers or diners choose to see a film or enjoy a meal, respectively, with a close other, rather than alone (Ratner and Hamilton 2015). And when seeking interpersonal connection, people spend their discretionary income on social rather than solitary experiences (Caprariello and Reis 2013), opting for experiential as opposed to material purchases (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Chan and Mogilner 2017; Goodman and Lim 2018). Social engagement builds social glue.

But opportunities like these to physically interact with members of our social groups—already shrinking due to the rise of various communications technologies (e.g., email, social media, video chat, etc.)—have only further deteriorated during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Preventing transmission of the virus has required an unprecedented level of social distancing, some form of which is expected to last for years (Kissler et al. 2020). How then might people respond? In this research, we propose that even when people cannot physically share an experience with others in the same place, merely experiencing separate events *at the same time* as others can strengthen the bonds between them.

Recent work revisiting the hedonic editing hypothesis (Linville and Fischer 1991) lends initial support to our reasoning. Specifically, the hedonic editing hypothesis predicts that people “actively reframe events and outcomes in a systematic way” (Thaler and Johnson 1990, 648), such that they integrate losses and segregate gains. However, it turns out people prefer segregated framing for both gains and losses in nonsocial settings (i.e., for events that happen to just the self). Meanwhile, in social settings (i.e., for events that happen to the self and others), people prefer integrated framing for both gains and losses (when they desire greater social connection; Shaddy, Tu, and Fishbach 2020).

Yet people generally do not control the timing of the kinds of events tested in this literature (e.g., winning prizes, incurring fines). However, through *scheduling* decisions, people

(e.g., consumers, employees, volunteers) and organizations (e.g., companies, governments, nonprofits) generally do. Nevertheless, scheduling remains a relatively understudied topic. We thus explore whether consumers, when given the option, systematically choose synchronized scheduling, and, if so, whether they are willing to incur costs to enjoy it.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

What would it mean to incur costs in the form of scheduling? Here, we note that events occurring in the future (both positive and negative) are valued less than events occurring in the present (Frederick, Loewenstein, and O'Donoghue 2002). For example, most people would prefer receiving \$100 today than receiving \$100 in 1 year, because \$100 in 1 year is subjectively “worth” less than \$100 today. Consequently, for positive events, people generally prefer immediate, rather than delayed consumption (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Lynch and Zauberman 2006). The same reasoning, in the opposite direction, applies to negative events, which people generally prefer to delay (Loewenstein 1987; Hardisty and Weber 2020). For example, most people would prefer paying \$100 in 1 year than paying \$100 today, because \$100 in 1 year is subjectively “worth” less than \$100 today.

However, we propose that people will nevertheless choose synchronized scheduling, even when it would require experiencing negative events sooner (i.e., immediate vs. delayed losses), positive events later (i.e., delayed vs. immediate gains), or inconvenient timing. For example, consider two friends who have just enrolled in a wine-of-the-month club. Upon registering, they discover they can receive their separate shipments on the same day each month—say, every first Friday. But what if one friend could take delivery as early as Thursday, with the other on Wednesday? Delivery as soon as possible would still mean both friends have their wine by the later date. But now they have some additional flexibility. Nevertheless, we predict that due to their desire for synchronized scheduling, these friends would choose to incur the unnecessary delay and tolerate the inconvenience.

We explore two potential sources of the preference for synchronized scheduling. First, we explain that synchronized scheduling acts as social glue, increasing feelings of social connection between individuals, as well as promoting solidarity, trust, and cohesion in groups (Bastian et al. 2014). For this reason, consumers should desire synchronized scheduling even when only they themselves know about it. This would suggest that there is a purely psychological benefit that accrues to the individual from synchronized scheduling—feelings

that are valuable in and of themselves (Chartrand and Bargh 1999; Escalas and Bettman 2009; Newman, Diesendruck, and Bloom 2011). Additionally, the preference should not extend to disliked others, for whom there is no motivation to share reality, identity, or experience. People simply would not expect or allow synchronized scheduling to act as social glue in these contexts. As a result, we expect the well-established general preference to schedule negative events later and positive events sooner to prevail.

Second, we propose that synchronized scheduling serves to counteract experienced and anticipated physical disconnection. It thus allows individuals to share “temporal space,” offering another source of social engagement that builds social glue. Additionally, prolonged periods of physical disconnection may undermine or threaten group-level solidarity, trust, and cohesion, which synchronized scheduling may help restore. As a result, the preference for synchronized scheduling should be stronger when people have not seen each other in person recently or will not see each other in person soon.

We thus propose the following hypotheses, which conceptualize the basic effect, capture the underlying mechanism, and probe downstream implications:

H1: People choose to schedule positive experiences later and negative experiences sooner when (a) doing so facilitates synchronized scheduling; even when (b) only they know about it; but (c) not for disliked others.

H2: The preference for synchronized scheduling is mediated by the expectation that it will act as “social glue.”

H3: The preference for synchronized scheduling is heightened by experienced and anticipated physical disconnection.

Eight studies (six preregistered and four requiring sequential decisions; $N = 3,075$) test these hypotheses (table 1). Sample sizes were set a priori, and we report every measure and manipulation. For studies that included a preregistered instructional manipulation check (IMC; Openheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009), we excluded failures prior to analysis. All data, stimuli, and statistical code for reproducing analyses are publicly available (https://osf.io/r6dmv/?view_only=3c16d22635e94275a05c90c19194f7d3).

STUDIES 1A–1B: SCHEDULING POSITIVE EVENTS LATER

In study 1A (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=zp6kk5>), participants scheduled the actual delivery of a prize for either 2 weeks or 2 months in the future. We manipulated whether there was an opportunity for synchronized scheduling with a friend who would receive the same prize in two months. In study 1B (<http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=9r9vu8>), participants scheduled the actual delivery of a pair of gifts for either 4 or 6 weeks in the future. We manipulated whether there was an opportunity for synchronized scheduling with a prominent member of the campus community who would receive one of the gifts in 6 weeks.

Method

Participants. For study 1A, we recruited 202 students ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.12$; 147 women, 55 men) from the online pool at a university research laboratory. For study 1B, we recruited 206 students ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.02$; 154 women, 52 men) from the same pool. Both studies employed a single-factor (condition: baseline vs. other-[friend/president]), between-participants design.

Procedure. In study 1A, after completing an unrelated task, participants read: “To thank you . . . we will randomly select one person to receive a box of macarons from The Ma-karohn Bakery. You earned it!” In the other-friend condition, participants further read that they had earned another box of macarons for a friend and that “we will schedule delivery of your friend’s box of macarons for exactly 2 months from today.” In the baseline condition, we made no mention of a friend. All participants then answered the same question, making a “completely confidential” decision to schedule their delivery for “2 weeks” or “2 months from today.”

In study 1B, after completing an unrelated task, participants read: “To thank you . . . we will enter you into a lottery to win two gift baskets.” In the other-president condition, participants read they would receive a gift basket. They further read that the university had just appointed a new president and to “welcome him,” “we are planning to send him a gift basket.” In the baseline condition, participants read they would receive two gift baskets, and we did not mention the president. All participants then viewed a “pastry sampler” and “munchies collection” gift basket. In the baseline condition, participants chose between delivery of (a) each gift basket in 4 weeks and 6 weeks, respectively, or (b) both in 6 weeks. In the other-president condition, participants chose between delivery of (a) their and the

Table 1. Overview of Studies

Study	N	Hypothesis	Main finding	Willingness to schedule negative events sooner, schedule positive event later, or tolerate inconvenient timing			Significance	Effect size
				Synchronized scheduling possible	Synchronized scheduling impossible	Synchronized scheduling not desirable		
1A	202	1a	Participants made the consequential decision to delay receipt of a prize to facilitate synchronized scheduling with a friend	54%	19%	...	***	$\Phi_c = .37$
1B	206	1b	Participants made the consequential decision to delay receipt of a gift to facilitate synchronized scheduling with a university president	76%	33%	...	***	$\Phi_c = 0.44$
2A	195	1a	Participants scheduled positive events later and negative events sooner to facilitate synchronized scheduling with a friend	50%	30%	...	***	OR = 2.65
2B	404	1b	Participants scheduled positive events later and negative events sooner to facilitate synchronized scheduling with a celebrity	74%	47%	...	***	OR = 3.28
3	168	1c	Participants made the consequential decision to delay receipt of a bonus to facilitate synchronized scheduling with a liked, but not disliked partner	79%	...	35%	***	$\Phi_c = .47$
4	680	2	Participants made the consequential decision to delay receipt of a bouquet of flowers to facilitate synchronized scheduling with a liked, but not disliked U.S. Senator. This choice was mediated by the expectation that it would act as "social glue"	73%	...	27%	***	$\Phi_c = .39$
5A	631	3	Participants planned to donate blood at an inconvenient time to facilitate synchronized scheduling with friend that they had not seen in person recently	3.64	1.77	2.64	***	$\eta^2 = .13$
5B	589	3	Participants planned to donate blood at an inconvenient time to facilitate synchronized scheduling with friend that they would not see in person soon	3.68	1.67	2.94	***	$\eta^2 = .13$

*** $p < .001$.

president's gift baskets in 4 weeks and 6 weeks, respectively, or (b) both in 6 weeks. Finally, we explained both gift baskets had a "3-month shelf life."

Results and Discussion

Supporting hypothesis 1a, in study 1A, participants were more likely to postpone delivery to "2 months from today" in the other-friend condition (i.e., when it facilitated synchronized scheduling; 54%, 95% CI = [44%, 64%]) than in the baseline condition (19%, 95% CI = [12%, 27%]; $\chi^2(1) = 27.38$, $p < .001$, $\Phi_c = .37$). Supporting hypothesis 1b, in study 1B, participants were more likely to postpone delivery of the "munchies collection" gift basket to "six weeks" in the other-president condition (i.e., when it facilitated synchronized scheduling; 76%, 95% CI = [67%, 83%]) than in the baseline condition (33%, 95% CI = [24%, 42%]; $\chi^2(1) = 39.47$, $p < .001$, $\Phi_c = 0.44$).

Fairness may be a particular concern in study 1A, given that friends regularly communicate. Participants may have delayed their delivery not because they desired synchronized scheduling, but because they did not want to (unfairly) receive their gift earlier. However, this specific issue is much less applicable to someone participants knew they would never meet (e.g., a university president), as in study 1B. Together, these studies suggest greater willingness to delay a positive event (e.g., receiving a prize or gift) when it facilitates synchronized scheduling. These studies tested only positive events, though, and our theory should similarly extend to negative events.

STUDIES 2A–2B: SCHEDULING NEGATIVE EVENTS SOONER

In study 2A (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=sk9q84>), we asked participants whether they would schedule both positive and negative events sooner (i.e., in 1 month) or later (i.e., in 1 year). We manipulated whether a friend would experience the same positive events (in 1 year) and the same negative events (in 1 month). In study 2B, we asked participants whether they would schedule both positive and negative events sooner (i.e., in 1 week) or later (i.e., in 2 weeks). We manipulated whether participants' favorite celebrity would experience the same positive events (in 2 weeks) and the same negative events (in 1 week).

Method

Participants. For study 2A, we opened an Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) human intelligence task (HIT) for 200 assignments; 195 workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.43$; 79 women,

116 men) completed study 2A. For study 2B, we opened an MTurk HIT for 400 assignments; 404 workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.45$; 215 women, 189 men) completed study 2B.

Study 2A employed a 2 (condition: baseline vs. friend; between-participants) \times 2 (valence: positive vs. negative; within-participants), mixed design. Study 2B employed a 2 (condition: baseline vs. celebrity) \times 2 (valence: positive vs. negative), between-participants design.

Procedure. In study 2A, in the friend condition, participants first identified a nonromantic friend in a different city. We then presented eight events, four negative and four positive (table 2). For each positive event, participants read their friend had scheduled that same event for "1 year from today" (i.e., scheduled a positive event later). For each negative event, participants read their friend had scheduled that same event for "1 month from today" (i.e., scheduled a negative event sooner). In the baseline condition, we presented the same eight events but made no mention of a friend. All participants then indicated whether they would schedule their own corresponding event for "1 month" or "1 year from today."

In study 2B, in the celebrity condition, participants first identified their favorite celebrity. We then randomly presented one of four scenarios, two negative and two positive (table 2). For each positive event, participants read that their favorite celebrity had scheduled that same event for "2 weeks from today" (i.e., scheduled a positive event later). For each negative event, participants read their favorite celebrity had scheduled that same event for "1 week from today" (i.e., scheduled a negative event sooner). All participants then indicated whether they would schedule their own corresponding event for "1 week" or "2 weeks from today."

Results and Discussion

Supporting hypothesis 1a, in study 2A, participants were more likely to schedule negative events sooner and positive events later in the friend condition (i.e., when it facilitated synchronized scheduling; 50%, 95% CI = [47%, 54%]; table 2) than in the baseline condition (30%, 95% CI = [27%, 33%]), $z = 6.51$, $p < .001$, odds ratio = 2.65). And the simple effect of condition was significant for both valences, positive ($\chi^2(1) = 24.01$, $p < .001$) and negative ($\chi^2(1) = 42.41$, $p < .001$).

Supporting hypothesis 1b, in study 2B, participants were more likely to schedule negative events sooner and positive events later in the celebrity condition (i.e., when it facilitated synchronized scheduling; 74%, 95% CI = [68%, 80%]; table 2)

Table 2. Participants Scheduled Negative Events Sooner and Positive Events Later When It Facilitated Synchronized Scheduling with Friends (Study 2A) and Celebrities (Study 2B)

Scenario	Valence	Percentage scheduling a negative (positive) event sooner (later)		Significance
		Friend	Baseline	
Driving test at the DMV	Negative	67	35	***
Jury duty	Negative	58	28	***
Colonoscopy	Negative	46	33	+
Dinner with annoying relative	Negative	45	27	*
Weekend trip	Positive	51	27	**
Dinner at five-star restaurant	Positive	49	25	***
90-minute Swedish massage	Positive	35	33	NS
Wine/cheese/chocolate tasting	Positive	52	33	**

Scenario	Valence	Percentage scheduling a negative (positive) event sooner (later)		Significance
		Celebrity	Baseline	
Dentist	Negative	85	52	**
Jury duty	Negative	86	61	**
90-minute Swedish massage	Positive	50	30	*
Dinner at five-star restaurant	Positive	84	45	***

⁺ $p < .10$.

^{*} $p < .05$.

^{**} $p < .01$.

^{***} $p < .001$.

than in the baseline condition (47%, 95% CI = [40%, 54%]; $z = 5.52$, $p < .001$, odds ratio = 3.28). And the simple effect of condition was significant for both valences, positive ($\chi^2(1) = 15.27$, $p < .001$) and negative ($\chi^2(1) = 16.96$, $p < .001$).

Studies 2A–2B suggest that people are more willing to schedule negative events sooner and positive events later when it facilitates synchronized scheduling with friends, further corroborating our account. But this preference should not hold in all circumstances. In particular, it should not hold for disliked others (Shaddy et al. 2021).

STUDY 3: DISLIKED OTHERS

Study 3 (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=9vf6bk>) tests whether the preference for synchronized scheduling extends to disliked others. We manipulated liking in a trust game by pairing participants with an anonymous partner, who behaved either generously (yielding liking) or selfishly (yielding disliking). We then offered participants the opportunity to delay a \$10 prize in order to facilitate synchronized scheduling with their anonymous partner, predicting they would only do so for a liked other.

Method

Participants. We opened an MTurk HIT for 200 assignments; 168 workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.02$; 66 women, 102 men) participated. Study 3 employed a single-factor (condition: like vs. dislike), between-participants design.

Procedure. Participants read that they would be paired with an anonymous worker completing the same study and could earn a \$1.00 bonus. We presented a modified version of the “Investment Game” introduced by Berg, Dickhaut, and McCabe (1995), in which a first mover sends some amount of an endowment (e.g., \$10) to a second mover, who receives a multiple of the amount sent (e.g., $\$10 \times 4 = \40) and then decides how much to send back.

Unknown to participants, we assigned everyone to the first mover role. We endowed each investor with 25 points, which could be “invested” with their partner, the “investment advisor,” at which point the investment would be quadrupled. The investment advisor would then decide what portion of the quadrupled investment would be returned to the investor and that each point held at the conclusion of the study would be converted to a 1-cent bonus.

Participants in the like condition next read: “Your partner has chosen to keep 0% of your investment for himself/herself. He/she sent you back: 100%. You have thus earned a \$1.00 bonus.” Participants in the dislike condition next read: “Your partner has chosen to keep 100% of your investment for himself/herself. He/she sent you back: 0%. Your partner has thus earned a \$1.00 bonus.” We then explained: “Each investor and investment advisor pair (i.e., you and your partner) will be entered into a drawing for one \$20 partnership prize (e.g., \$10 for you and \$10 for your partner). If you and your partner win the \$20 partnership prize, your partner will receive his/her \$10 share of the bonus on May 1. You can receive your \$10 share of the bonus on either April 30 or May 1. Do you want to share your partnership prize on the same day?” After making a choice (“yes” or “no”), we sent all participants a \$1.00 bonus, irrespective of condition.

Results and Discussion

Most participants (91%) sent the maximum amount (25 points). And supporting hypothesis 1c, they were more willing to delay their \$10 bonus to experience synchronized scheduling in the like condition (79%, 95% CI = [69%, 87%]) than in the dislike condition (35%, 95% CI = [26%, 47%]; $\chi^2(1) = 30.55$, $p < .001$, $\Phi_c = .44$). Moreover, this pattern persisted when we analyzed all data (i.e., including participants who did not send the maximum amount; like condition: 82%, 95% CI = [72%, 89%]; dislike condition: 36%, 95% CI = [27%, 47%]; $\chi^2(1) = 35.85$, $p < .001$, $\Phi_c = .46$).

These initial studies reveal that consumers choose to schedule positive events later and negative events sooner when (a) doing so facilitates synchronized scheduling; even when (b) the other party does not know about it but (c) not for disliked others. Our final studies highlight two sources of the desire for synchronized scheduling.

STUDY 4: SYNCHRONIZED SCHEDULING AS “SOCIAL GLUE”

We predict that consumers desire synchronized scheduling because it preserves some of the benefits of physically sharing a single experience in the same place as others. That is, like shared experience, synchronized scheduling can act as social glue (Bastian et al. 2014). Study 4 tests the mediating role of these expectations.

Method

Participants. We opened an MTurk HIT for 1,000 assignments; 680 workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.42$; 252 women, 428 men)

participated, affirmatively answering two screening questions: “Do you follow politics?” and “If given a list of 100 current US Senators, would you be able to identify a Senator you like and a Senator you dislike?” Study 4 employed a single-factor (condition: like vs. dislike), between-participants design.

Procedure. All participants first identified a favorite and least favorite Senator by selecting a name from a drop-down list, reading “we plan to send a bouquet of flowers to the congressional office of a Senator in Washington, DC.” We presented a bouquet of “fresh white Asiatic lilies (\$39)” from a national flower delivery service, including an image of the actual calendar that customers use to schedule deliveries from this particular firm.

Participants then read: “One of the two Senators you selected on the previous page has been randomly chosen to receive the bouquet.” We reproduced the name of either the favorite or least favorite Senator selected by each participant and said: “We will schedule delivery of the bouquet for [Monday–10 days from the date of the study].” We then explained that we would randomly select “one participant from this study to receive the same bouquet” and that the winner could “choose delivery for the same day that [Senator] receives the bouquet or a different day from when [Senator] receives the bouquet.” Participants then chose one of three dates: Friday (3 days before Monday), Monday, or Tuesday (1 day after Monday). We included the Tuesday option to create a more conservative test of our prediction (i.e., offering delivery availability both before and after the target date).

Finally, on a separate page, participants reviewed six statements (presented in random order) designed to measure whether they expected synchronized scheduling to act as “social glue” (adapted from Bastian et al. 2014, study 1): “If you received the bouquet of flowers on the same day as [Senator], would you: (a) Feel connected to [Senator]? (b) Feel a sense of solidarity with [Senator]? (c) Feel that you can trust [Senator]? (d) Feel that there is unity between you and [Senator]? (e) Feel that you and [Senator] have a lot in common? (f) Feel part of a group with [Senator]?” Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*).

Results and Discussion

Participants were more willing to unnecessarily delay delivery of their bouquet to experience synchronized scheduling in the like condition (73% chose Monday, 95% CI = [68%, 77%]; 16% chose Friday; 11% chose Tuesday) than in the dislike condition (27%, 95% CI = [23%, 32%]; 50% chose Friday; 14% chose Tuesday; $\chi^2(1) = 104.16$, $p < .001$, $\Phi_c = .39$).

We next averaged the six scale responses ($\alpha = .98$). Participants anticipated that synchronized scheduling would act as “social glue” more in the like condition ($M = 3.58$, 95% CI = [3.48, 3.69]) than in the dislike condition ($M = 1.54$, 95% CI = [1.43, 1.65]), $t(678) = 26.05$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.42$). And supporting hypothesis 2, this difference mediated the effect of condition on scheduling decisions (20,000 bootstrapped resamples: indirect effect = .08, SE = .04, bias-corrected 95% CI = [.005, .150]).

In study 4, participants made the consequential decision to delay receipt of a bouquet of flowers to facilitate synchronized scheduling with and act as social glue for a liked US Senator. For a disliked US Senator, on the other hand, participants expressed the standard preference to schedule positive events later.

STUDIES 5A–5B: EXPERIENCED AND ANTICIPATED PHYSICAL DISCONNECTION HEIGHTEN THE DESIRE FOR SYNCHRONIZED SCHEDULING

We propose that synchronized scheduling counteracts physical disconnection. Thus, it should be more desirable when people have not seen each other in person recently or will not see each other in person soon. In studies 5A–5B, participants scheduled a blood donation for either a convenient or inconvenient time. We manipulated both whether a friend planned to donate blood during the inconvenient time (i.e., creating an opportunity for synchronized scheduling) or not. And also how recently participants had seen that friend (in person) in the past (study 5A; https://aspredicted.org/CCB_FMY) or how soon it would be until participants would see that friend (in person) in the future (study 5B; https://aspredicted.org/HRP_GD2). In both studies, we included a preregistered attention check (to increase the reliability of results), in addition to a preregistered IMC (Oppenheimer et al. 2009).

Method

Participants. For study 5A, we opened an MTurk HIT for 750 assignments; 631 workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.92$; 253 women, 373 men, 5 other) passed the attention check and IMC. For study 5B, we opened an MTurk HIT for 750 assignments; 589 workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.92$; 253 women, 373 men, 5 other) passed the attention check and IMC. Both studies employed a single-factor (condition: baseline vs. friend-day vs. friend-years), between-participants design. We note that fewer participants passed the attention check and IMC in study 5B

than in study 5A, though in neither study did failure rates differ by condition.

Procedure. In the friend-day and friend-years conditions, participants first identified a nonromantic friend in a different city (as in study 2A). All participants then read: “The American Red Cross has been reporting a severe blood shortage nationwide.” In the control condition, we wrote: “You have therefore decided to donate blood next week.” In the friend-day and friend-years conditions, we wrote: “You and [friend] have therefore each decided to donate blood in your respective locations next week.”

We then described two available time slots, either a weekday afternoon or weekend afternoon, and further explained: “However, donating blood during a weekday afternoon will be inconvenient for you. Donating blood during a weekend afternoon would be convenient for you.” In the control condition, participants learned nothing else. In the friend-day and friend-years conditions, participants learned that the friend had already chosen the (inconvenient) weekday option. In study 5A, we asked participants to imagine that “the last time you saw [friend] in person” was either “1 day ago” (friend-day condition) or “3 years ago” (friend-years condition). In study 5B, we asked participants to imagine that “the next time you will see [friend]” will be either “1 day from now” (friend-day condition) or “3 years from now” (friend-years condition). Finally, all participants indicated when they planned to donate blood: “Which time slot would you select?” (1 = *definitely during a weekday afternoon*; 7 = *definitely during a weekend afternoon*).

Results and Discussion

For both studies, we reverse-coded scheduling decisions for ease of explication. Supporting hypothesis 3, in study 5A, participants preferred the inconvenient weekday option (which facilitated synchronized scheduling) more in the friend-years condition ($M = 3.64$, 95% CI = [3.31, 3.97]) than in both the friend-day condition ($M = 2.64$, 95% CI = [2.36, 2.92]; $t(629) = 5.14$, $p < .001$, $d = .43$) and the baseline condition ($M = 1.77$, 95% CI = [1.60, 1.94]; $t(629) = 9.80$, $p < .001$, $d = .88$). The friend-day and baseline conditions also differed from each other ($t(629) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, $d = .49$). Supporting hypothesis 3, in study 5B, participants preferred the inconvenient weekday option (which facilitated synchronized scheduling) more in the friend-years condition ($M = 3.68$, 95% CI = [3.14, 4.04]) than in both the friend-day condition ($M = 2.94$, 95% CI = [2.62, 3.26]; $t(586) = 3.48$, $p = .001$, $d = .31$) and

the baseline condition ($M = 1.84$, 95% CI = [1.67, 2.01]; $t(586) = 9.08$, $p < .001$, $d = .84$). As in study 5A, the friend-day and baseline conditions also differed from each other ($t(586) = 5.34$, $p < .001$, $d = .60$).

Studies 5A–5B reveal that consumers are willing to tolerate inconvenient timing to facilitate synchronized scheduling as a response to physical disconnection, both experienced in the past and anticipated in the future. Interestingly, though the desire for synchronized scheduling was strongest in the friend-years condition, participants still preferred to synchronize their schedules more in the friend-day than in the baseline condition. This implies that synchronized scheduling provides utility even when considering moderate amounts of physical disconnection (i.e., 1 day of separation, which should not feel very threatening to group cohesion).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across eight studies (six preregistered and four requiring consequential decisions; $N = 3,075$), we documented a preference for synchronized scheduling, finding that consumers are willing to incur costs to achieve it. This preference persists even when only one person knows about it, but not for disliked others. We furthermore demonstrated that synchronized scheduling acts as “social glue.” It bolsters not only person-to-person social connection (Shaddy et al. 2021) but also solidarity, trust, and cohesion within groups (Bastian et al. 2014), which past work has demonstrated can improve cooperation (van Vugt and Hart 2004; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009). Synchronized scheduling is thus able to counteract both experienced and anticipated physical disconnection.

Theoretical Implications

These findings support our contention that at least some of the positive consequences of physically sharing a single experience in the same place as others (i.e., the benefits of shared experience) translate for experiencing separate events merely at the same time as others. Consequently, our work bridges research in marketing that explores scheduling decisions (e.g., Tonietto and Malkoc 2016; Huang, Yang, and Morwitz 2022) with literature from psychology that examines preferences for event timing (e.g., Abrams and Hogg 1990; Levine and Higgins 2001; Clark and Kashima 2007). We suggest that mere temporal proximity yields many of the same interpersonal benefits as actual physical propinquity.

Moreover, by comparing the preference to experience positive events sooner and negative events later (e.g., Hardisty and Weber 2020) against the desire for synchronized

scheduling, these findings speak to the intertemporal choice literature. For example, our work hints at a potential intervention to help improve self-control. Consider two friends who are dieting, but live in different cities. Despite the distance, they might still wish to coordinate their respective “cheat days” (e.g., breaks from their diets; Sharif and Shu 2017) for the same time every month. Such synchronized scheduling would likely boost the appeal of such a reward, increasing motivation.

Notably, past work has found that people do sometimes schedule negative events sooner and positive events later, for various reasons (Shaddy, Fishbach, and Simonson 2021). For example, feelings of impatience (Roberts and Fishbach 2020; Shaddy and Lee 2020) and the aversive nature of dread (Berns et al. 2006; Harris 2012; Story et al. 2013) can mitigate the “natural tendency to delay bad things” (Hardisty and Weber 2020, 599). People similarly delay good things to increase savoring (Loewenstein 1987; Nowlis, Mandel, and McCabe 2004), enjoy improving sequences (Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, and Redelmeier 1993) and sometimes space positive events out to forestall hedonic adaption (Wilson, Meyers, and Gilbert 2003; Redden 2008; Galak, Kruger, and Loewenstein 2011).

These previous findings underscore the importance including baseline conditions in studies 2A–2B. For example, in study 2B, 61% of participants chose to schedule jury duty (a negative event) sooner rather than later, suggesting many people do indeed wish to “get it over with.” However, that proportion increased to 86% when it also facilitated synchronized scheduling, suggesting roughly a quarter of participants who otherwise would have preferred delaying such a negative event were willing to experience it sooner. We thus refrain from describing an overall preference for scheduling negative events later and positive events sooner—only that on the margin the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of synchronized scheduling increases willingness to schedule negative events sooner and positive events later.

Finally, just as shared experience tends to improve enjoyment and memories of those events themselves (e.g., Raghunathan and Corfman 2006; Ramanathan and McGill 2007), so too might synchronized scheduling render events in different places that simply occur at the same time more enjoyable and memorable. These events could even feel more intense or extraordinary, in which case they would provide more conversational value (Berger 2014; Bastos and Brucks 2017), characterizing another potential source of utility. Future work could test these and other possibilities—for example, does the strength of the effect similarly

depend on the length of the event (e.g., fleeting vs. long-lasting) or the nature of the counterpart (e.g., close friend vs. distant acquaintance)?

Limitations and Practical Implications

There are some limitations worth highlighting. First, though participants avoided synchronized scheduling with disliked others, this could be a mistake. For example, people do not wish to share a birthday with a controversial political figure like Rasputin. But Finch and Cialdini (1989) found that once people learned that they did, they softened their negative judgments thereof. Thus, if synchronized scheduling with even disliked others actually does yield unanticipated positive consequences, people might be more likely to choose it when aware. Though such a forecasting error is beyond the scope of the present work, research on conflict mediation could potentially benefit from this insight.

Second, it is certainly not the case that people desire synchronized scheduling at any cost (monetary or otherwise). People probably would not needlessly postpone a positive event by an entire decade, for example. And there are other potential factors that may play a more important role in shaping scheduling decisions. For example, two close friends would likely not want to plan their respective weddings for the same day; logistical challenges and the prospect of “sharing the spotlight” would be unappealing. Additional research building on this framework could highlight such moderating factors.

Third, that consumers change their preference when given the opportunity to synchronize their schedules raises a natural question: Are people better or worse off when they schedule negative events sooner and positive events later than otherwise would? For example, it may be prudent to schedule a colonoscopy sooner (as in study 2B), but less so to unnecessarily delay real bonus payment (as in study 3). The answer likely depends on the context—and the extent to which any disutility is offset by the psychological benefits of synchronized scheduling itself. Answering this question would shed light on the total utility of consumption episodes that are synchronized with others.

Practical implications are worth underscoring, as well, given that the COVID-19 pandemic has already hastened adoption of remote working, online education, and video chatting. Our findings help explain, in part, why people have been so quick to transition to these remote collaboration tools. They would rather be with others than alone (e.g., Ratner and Hamilton 2015) and thus have responded to physical disconnection with synchronized scheduling for events ranging from races to rallies to religious gatherings. For example, many consumers have taken to synchronizing remote dining experiences (Wang, Kubota, and Tomoo 2022). Consequently, physical disconnection—both experienced in the past and anticipated in the future—heightens the preference for synchronized scheduling.

Therefore, it may be worthwhile to try to creatively harness these benefits. For example, just as sharing news about positive events can increase the value of those events (Gable et al. 2004; Reis et al. 2010), the present research suggests that further sharing news about the timing of those positive events could have a similar effect. People might also intentionally widen the temporal denominator (e.g., framing two events as happening on “the same weekend” rather than on “Saturday and Sunday”) to convey a stronger sense of synchronized scheduling. Or celebrity endorsers generating “calls to action” might be more effective if they created explicit opportunities for synchronized scheduling. For example, it should not be a surprise that the virtual races discussed in the introduction have not ended, despite the fact that many pandemic restrictions have.

In summary, people today have the motivation, tools, and many new ways to simultaneously experience separate events at the same time, even when they cannot physically be together. Friends share digital calendars; firms offer customizable delivery schedules; and social media posts communicate not only what is going on, but when. The preference for synchronized scheduling thus has the potential to boost morale, motivation, and meaning in the community, workplace, and beyond.

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