Research Article

The misforecasted spoiler effect: Underlying mechanism and boundary conditions

Dengfeng Yan [a,*], Alex S.L. Tsang [b]

[a] *University of Texas at San Antonio, USA*
[b] *Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong*

Abstract

While consumers believe that knowing the ending of a story will spoil their enjoyment of the narrative, recent work shows that spoilers have little impact on consumers' actual experiences. The psychological mechanism underlying this affective misforecasting, however, is less clear. In this research, we propose that compared with real experience, affective forecasting may be associated with longer psychological distance and high-level construal, which may encourage forecasters to assign greater weight to the outcome of a plot. In addition to showing the basic effect, we also identify circumstances under which such affective misforecasting is less likely to happen or even reverses. In line with our theorizing, the results of two studies showed that the misforecasting disappeared when participants had chronic or situationally primed low (vs. high) construal levels. In the final experiment we reversed the previous finding, showing that participants underpredicted the negative impact of a spoiler when the spoiler revealed the process of a plot.
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Introduction

Spoiler avoidance is very common in narrative consumption, as evidenced by the ubiquity of spoiler alerts. For example, one person wrote in an online forum, "I hate spoilers and I don't like it … what's the point of watching a soap if you know what's going to happen?" An online gamer repeated the sentiment: "I was just reading through the forums here on Giant Bomb, trying to find tips for the challenges in the game, when I came across spoilers for the game's ending … Stupid plot twist spoilers. I hate them." Even though some consumers intentionally avoid having plots spoiled by staying away from major spoiler sources such as social media, spoilers are inevitable. For example, a customer could be sitting in a Starbucks and overhear someone blurt out "Snape was in fact undercover for Dumbledore!"

Interestingly, although an abundance of anecdotal evidence suggests that consumers think spoilers will compromise their enjoyment, Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) recently showed that exposure to a spoiler did not impair consumers' actual narrative consumption experiences. In their studies, participants were asked to read a few stories and indicate how much they enjoyed them. For each story, the authors created a spoiler paragraph that revealed the outcome in an inadvertent way. Contrary to the lay belief, their results showed that participants liked the stories even more when the spoiler was present than when it was absent.

The present work expands this line of research in three important ways. First, while Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) demonstrated that consumers mispredict the spoiler effect, less is known about the psychological mechanism underlying this affective misforecasting. Understanding this question is important from both a theoretical and a practical perspective.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Marketing, University of Texas at San Antonio, 1 UTSA Circle, San Antonio, TX 78249-1644, USA.
E-mail address: dengfeng.yan@utsa.edu (D. Yan).

Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) have articulated a few possible explanations. For example, the spoiler may increase consumers' perceptual fluency when they read the full narratives (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). However, Leavitt and Christenfeld's data seems to be inconsistent with this account. In particular, when the spoiler paragraph was independent from the main story, it increased actual enjoyment, as compared to the unspoiled condition. However, when the same material was incorporated as an opening paragraph of the story, it had no effect on how much the story was liked. If processing fluency is the mechanism, one should anticipate similar effects in both circumstances. In the current research, we propose a different explanation and provide empirical evidence to support that. From a practical perspective, marketers are interested in knowing ways to reduce the negative impact of spoiler exposure. We believe that uncovering the underlying psychological mechanism may help identify some possible solutions.

Second, anecdotal observation suggests that while many consumers are spoiler averse, others are less so. For example, it is not rare for people to enjoy reading the same book or watching the same movie again and again. This phenomenon has not been incorporated into previous literature. Thus, our second goal is to use our theorizing to identify a moderator for spoiler avoidance. In particular, we suggest that consumers with a chronic concrete (vs. abstract) mindset are less likely to avoid spoilers.

Finally, the present work, to our best knowledge, is among the first to distinguish between two types of spoilers. Existing literature has conceptualized a spoiler as "an extensive summary of the story line" (Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007) that reveals any plot elements which threaten to give away important details concerning the turn of events of a dramatic episode (Wikipedia Contributors, 2015). However, prior studies have been exclusively focused on spoilers that reveal the ending of a story (Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2014; Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2011). In addition to such outcome spoilers, the present research also examines process spoilers that reveal details leading to the outcome. More importantly, we show that participants' reactions to these two types of spoilers are qualitatively different: While consumers tend to *overpredict* the impact of outcome spoilers (as shown in previous research), they *underpredict* the influence of spoilers that reveal the process.

Conceptual background

Consumers often base their purchase or consumption decisions on their prediction of how the consumption experience will make them feel. For example, when deciding whether to buy a new car, consumers usually base their decisions on their predictions of how they would feel driving the car. Indeed, past research has shown that consumers' anticipated feelings guide a wide range of consumption decisions such as brand choice, consumption preference, and dieting decisions (L. Lee, Frederick, & Ariely, 2006; Shiv & Huber, 2000).

However, research has shown that very often consumers' affective forecasting is not accurate, such that they may misforecast the valence, intensity, or duration of future events. For instance, people predict that they would be much happier

driving a luxury car than driving an economic brand. However, the reported actual experiences of driving these different cars showed no significant difference (Schwarz & Xu, 2011). Such affective forecasting bias also occurs for important life events. For example, assistant professors predicted that getting tenure would make their life much happier whereas being denied tenure would lead to lasting emotional distress. However, in reality, former assistant professors who had achieved tenure were no happier than those who had not (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). A number of cognitive processes may contribute to forecasting errors, such as immune neglect (Gilbert et al., 1998), which refers to forecasters' unawareness of their tendency to adapt to and cope with negative events. For example, in the previous scenario, assistant professors who were denied tenure may change their beliefs about the importance and/or the favorability of getting tenure.

However, these accounts and a few mechanisms speculated by Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) don't seem to be able to fully explain the misforecasted spoiler effect and other observations associated with this phenomenon (e.g., some people do not avoid spoilers). In this research, we address this question by analyzing the differences between *forecasting* and *experience*. While forecasting and experience may differ along a number of aspects such as amount of information and task involvement that are well studied in previous literature, we focus on two underexplored distinctions. First, by definition, forecasting pertains to *future* events, whereas the actual experience is about what is happening *now*. Thus, they differ along the temporal distance dimension. Second, forecasting is associated with high *uncertainty* or *hypotheticality* (e.g., one plans to see a movie but later on realizes that one has a time conflict), whereas actual experience is about *reality*. Both temporal distance and hypotheticality are manifestations of a broader construct, namely psychological distance (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). So essentially we propose that one of the distinctions between affective forecasting and actual experience is psychological distance: Forecasting is associated with long psychological distance, whereas experience is associated with short psychological distance.

This distinction allows us to draw upon the extensive literature on psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope et al., 2007) to answer the question of why consumers often overpredict the spoiler effect. Extensive literature has shown that psychologically distant objects are classified or represented as abstract, high-level construals that rely on generalized schemas rather than on specific details. By contrast, psychologically close objects are represented as concrete, low-level construals that focus more on specific details than on generalized abstractions (Liberman, Trope, & Wakslak, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Under this theoretical framework, there are two sets of findings that are most relevant to our predictions.

One line of literature shows that individuals tend to use primary features to construe psychologically distant events but secondary features to represent close events. Trope and Liberman (2000), for instance, asked participants to imagine