

Revealing Your Past vs. Unveiling Your Future: Which Drives More Interest?

David Fang¹, Yang Huang², Yu Ding¹
Stanford GSB¹
University of Pennsylvania²



When someone self-discloses, are you more drawn to their past or their future?

Past

**Why I Decided to Travel
the World Solo**

**Why I Decided to Donate My Kidney
to a Stranger**

**How I Turned My Hobby into a
Successful Business**

Future

**Why I Will Decide to Travel
the World Solo**

**Why I Will Decide to Donate My Kidney
to a Stranger**

**How I Will Turn My Hobby into a
Successful Business**



82.6% of daily conversations contain **time-dependent utterances** and 92.2% involve **self-disclosure**
(Demiray et al., 2018).

Research Question

How does the **time orientation** (past vs. future) during self-disclosure influence audience *interest*?

Two Competing Hypotheses

Competing Hypothesis #1

Future is more interesting as it is more arousing and feels closer



Competing Hypothesis #2

The past is more interesting as we can develop strong narratives of it within our minds



The future feels more arousing and feels closer

- Discussing the future evokes greater arousal which increases desire to share about the future (*Weingarten & Berger, 2017*) and future events tend to evoke stronger emotional reactions (*Caruso et al., 2008; Van Boven & Ashworth, 2007*)
- Future events are perceived as psychologically closer than past events (*Caruso et al., 2013*)
- Arousal and psychological closeness is associated with greater interest (*Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2017; Berger, 2011*)



The past forms more compelling narratives

- Past events are based on real experiences, which can enable narrative formation and foster mental transportation (*Ryu et al., 2019; Van Laer et al., 2014*)
- Past events follow a clear cause-and-effect structure, which forms stronger narratives (*Green & Brock, 2000; Mahr & Csibra, 2018*)
- Both ultimately results in formation of more compelling narratives



More compelling narratives are more interesting

- Narrative formation boosts interest by immersing audiences leading to greater interest (*Hamby et al., 2016, 2017; Green & Brock, 2000; Graaf et al., 2011; Valsesia et al., 2017; Van Laer et al., 2014; (Zak, 2015)*)
- Meaning if narrative formation is disrupted this effect should cease (Song & Schwarz, 2008), for instance if there is a drop in fluency



Overview of Studies

	Sample Size	Setting	Design	Purpose
Study 1	3,185	News Headlines	Archival Analyses of A/B Experiments	Main Effect
Study 2a	686	Tinder Conversations	Archival Analyses	Main Effect
Study 2b	310	Real-time Zoom conversations	Archival Analyses	Main Effect
Study 3	234	Real-time text-based conversations	Experiment	Main Effect
Study 4	1,000	News Headlines	Experiment	Main Effect & Mediator
Study 5	403	News Headlines	Experiment	Moderation of Process

Study 1: Main Effect Test – News Headline



Past

The New York Times

Future

MAGAZINE

I Made an Appointment With My Dentist. I Got His Son. Is That OK?

STYLE

How I Met My Father

OPINION

I Was Transformed by the Best Cult Ever: Michigan Football

OPINION

I Am Going to Miss Pitchfork, but That's Only Half the Problem

STYLE

It's Mother's Day, and I'll Sleep, Dance, Camp (or Cry) if I Want To

OPINION

I'm Going to Die. I May as Well Be Cheerful About It.

Study 1: Main Effect Test – News Headline

Method

Participant

- the Upworthy Research Archive
- N = 3,185 A/B experiments
- included 11,612 **news headlines** with **first-person singular pronouns**

Measure

- Linguistic Inquiry Word Counter (LIWC)
- operationalized sharing of past and future information using *focuspast* and *focusfuture* variables
- measured interest through the **click-through rate** of the headlines

Examples of Upworthy first-pronoun headlines

Past Information	Future Information
“I’ve Been A Football Fan On And Off Since I Was A Kid. But This Is A Game-Changer.”	“I’m Never Going To Look At Football The Same Way Again.”

Upworthy Click-Through Rates

Dependent Variable: Click-Through Rates (CTR)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	0.016*** (0.00023)	0.015*** (0.00074)	-0.071 (0.052)
Focus Past	0.00011*** (0.000015)	0.00010*** (0.000016)	0.000097*** (0.000016)
Focus Future	0.000014 (0.000025)	0.000014 (0.000026)	0.000018 (0.000026)
Focus Present		-0.000009 (0.000016)	-0.000005 (0.000016)
LIWC Controls		X	X
Topic Models			X

Study 3: Main Effect Test – Valentines Matchmaking Experiment



Study 3: Main Effect Test – Valentine’s Week Matchmaking

You have been matched with another Prolific participant of the opposite sex who is single, aged between 21-35, and also located in the UK. You will now engage in a conversation with them for **up to 5 minutes** through a chatroom. Either party can leave the chatroom at any time.

After the conversation ends, you will have the opportunity to indicate your desire to share your Prolific email address with the other party. If both parties agree to this and wish to connect, we will exchange your Prolific email addresses between both parties.

You are participant A.

Once you are ready, click 'Next' to enter the conversation.

SMARTRIQS

interactive experiments in Qualtrics

Hit 'Enter' or the 'Send message' button to send a message.

REMAINING TIME: 4:38

*** A has joined the chat ***
*** B has joined the chat ***
A (06:43 PM): Hello!
B (06:43 PM): Hi, how are you?

Type message... SEND MESSAGE

Study 3: Main Effect Test - Valentine's Week Matchmaking

Method

Participants

- N = 234, Prolific
- Participants were paired and conversed based on the prompt they were assigned.

Measure

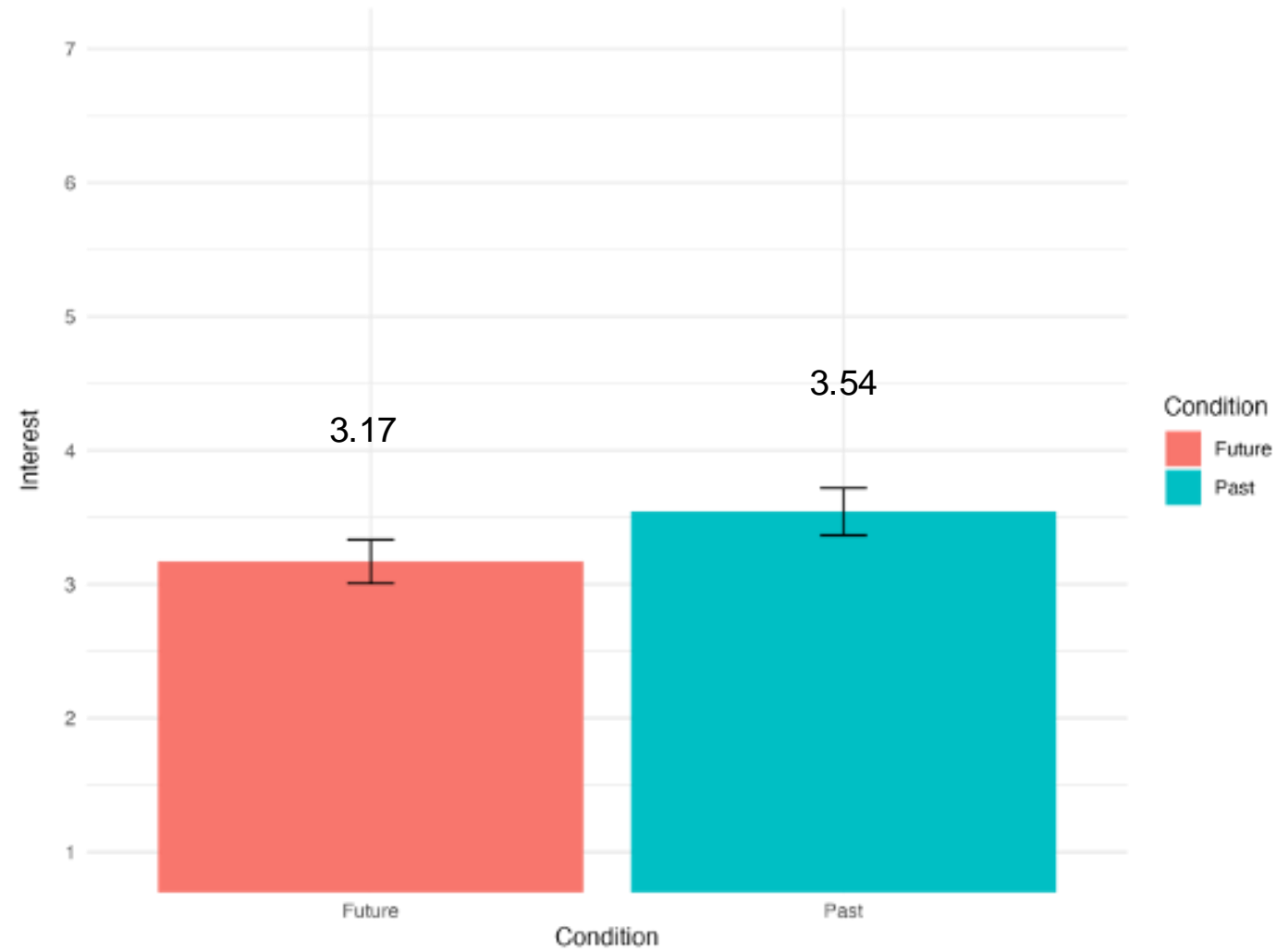
- Dependent variable (composite of two items; $r = .81$):
 - likelihood of texting back
 - interest in the other party

Study 3 Conversation Prompts

Past-oriented Conversation Prompt	Future-oriented Conversation Prompt
To get the conversation started, please introduce yourself and share with your match something interesting that happened to you one month ago.	To get the conversation started, please introduce yourself and share with your match something interesting you're looking forward to one month from now.



Interest



$t = -1.55, p = .061$



Study 4 & 5: Main Effect & Mediation Test – Personal News Headline Experiments



Study 4: Main Effect and Mediation Evidence

Method

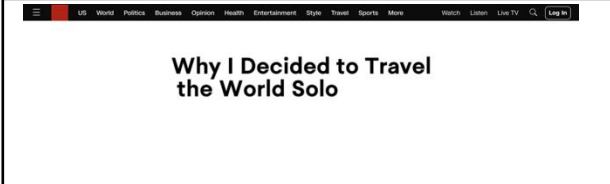
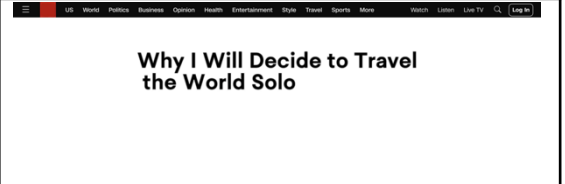
Participants

- N = 1000, Prolific
- Participants rated attitudes toward first-person news articles
- Headlines were manipulated to use either simple past or simple future tense
- 5 headline variations (2x5; between subjects)

Measure

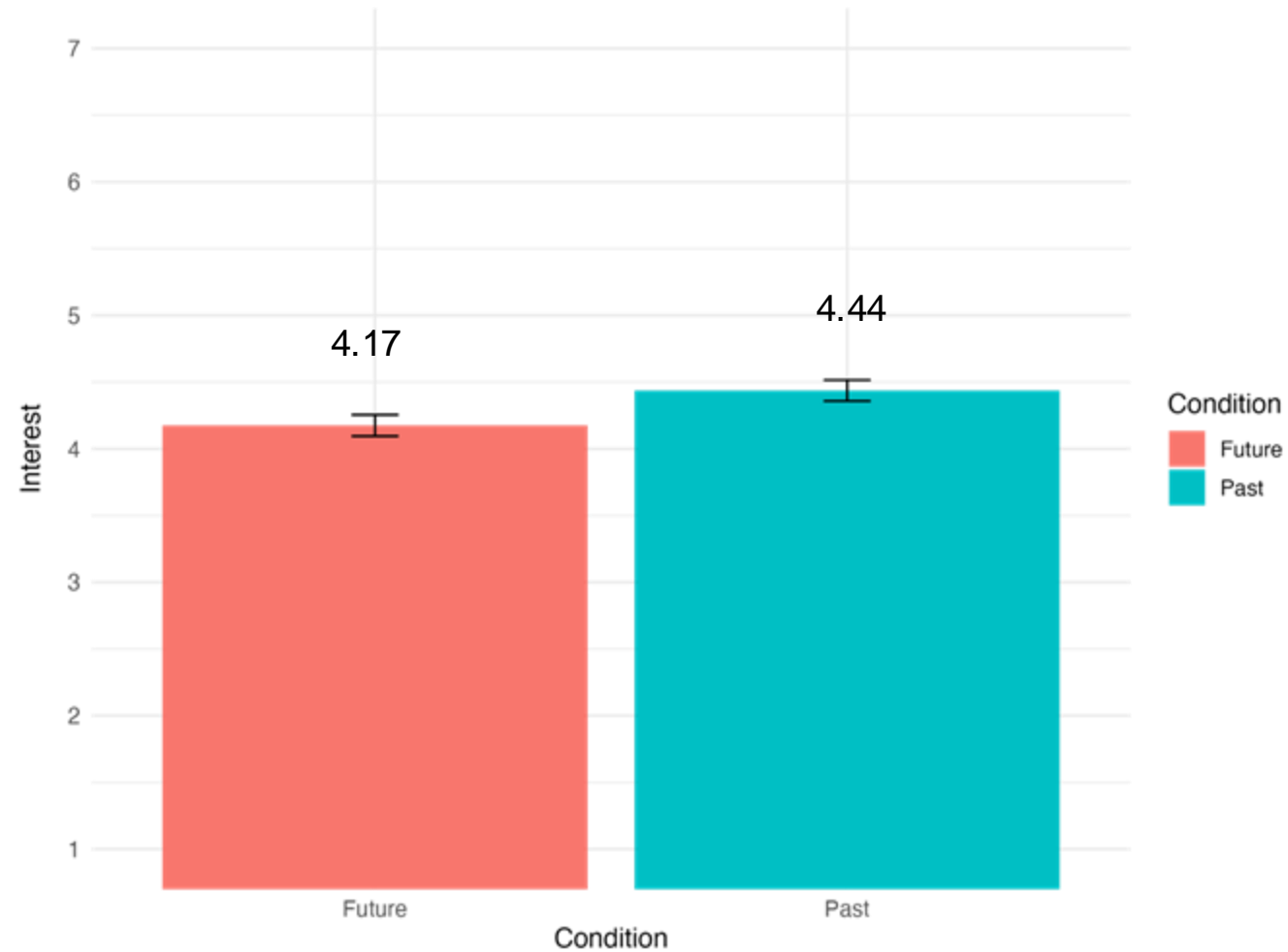
- Dependent variable (composite of two items; $r = .93$):
 - interest in reading the article
 - likelihood of reading
- Mediator:
 - narrative formation: *how compelling they found the article as a story, rated on a scale from 1 to 7*

Study 4 Examples of Stimuli

Past	Future
	



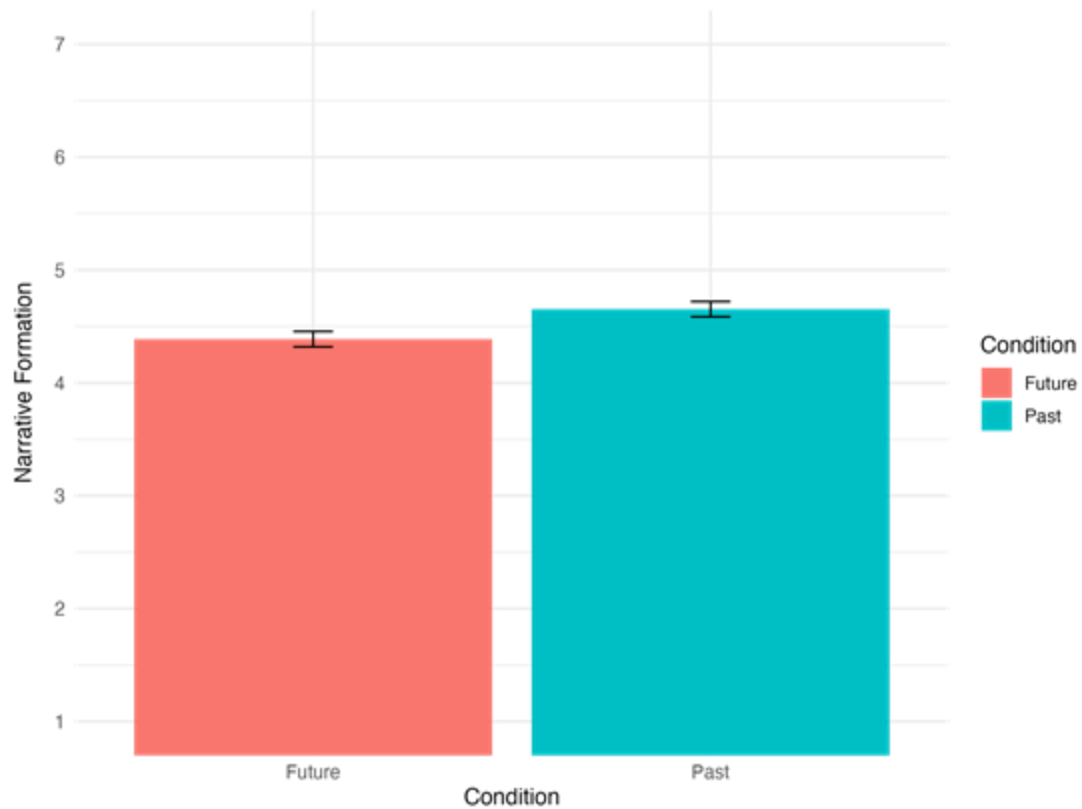
Interest



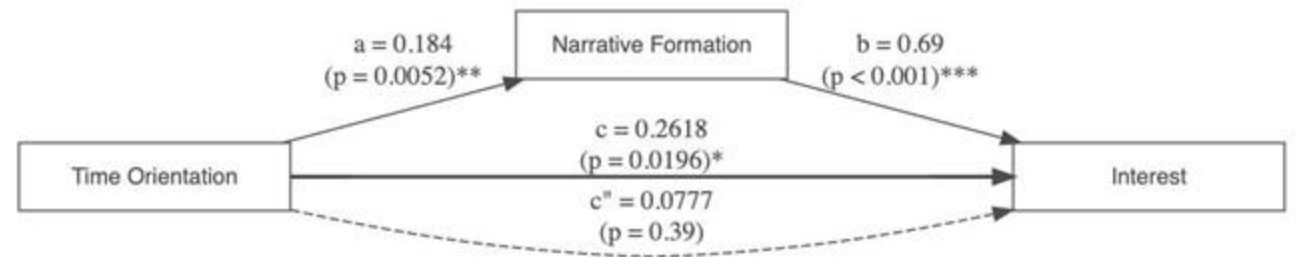
$$F(1, 992) = 5.44, p = .020$$



Narrative formation



$F(1, 992) = 7.69, p = .006$



an average causal mediation effect (ACME) of 0.18, 95% CI = [0.06, 0.32], $p = .006$



Study 5: Process Evidence through Moderation

- Mental construction of information becomes more challenging when speech is disfluent, such as when using the passive voice, which is harder to process than active voice (*Song & Schwarz, 2008; Chan & Maglio, 2020*).
- We predict that sharing past (vs. future) information will be less beneficial for headlines written in passive voice due to its higher disfluency.

Active voice	Passive voice
Subject + verb + object	Object + verb + subject
✓ Dad washed the car 	✓ The car was washed by Dad.
✓ Milly is baking a cake. 	✓ A cake is being baked by Milly.
✓ They wore a sweater. 	✓ The sweater was worn by them.



Study 5: Process Evidence through Moderation

Method

Participants

- N = 403, Prolific
- Participants rated attitudes toward first-person news articles
- Headlines were manipulated to use either simple past or simple future tense

Measure

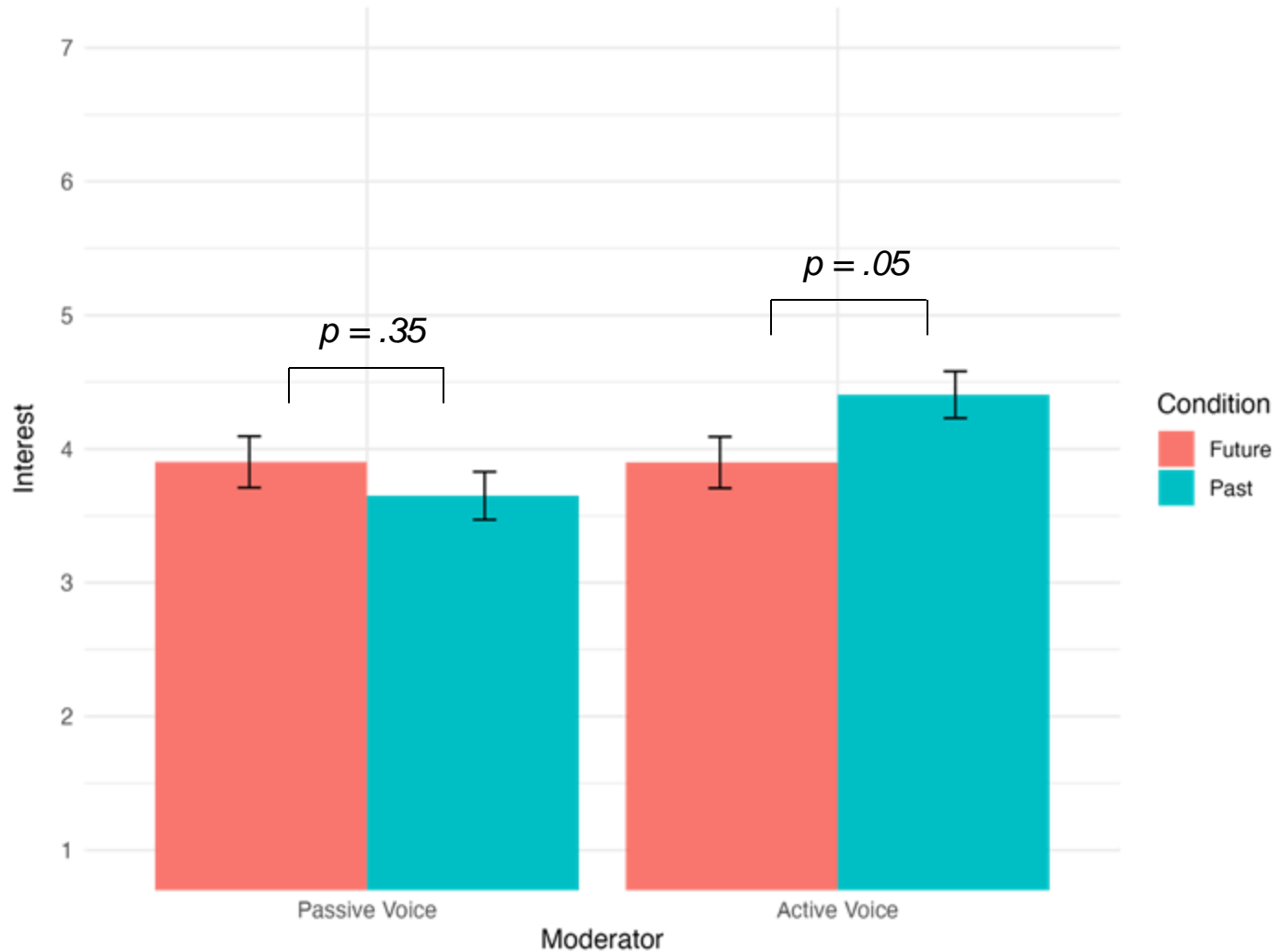
- Dependent variable (composite of two items):
 - interest in reading the article
 - likelihood of reading

Study 5 Examples of Stimuli

Passive Voice	Active Voice
A Philosophy of Minimalism Was Adopted That Simplified My Daily Life	I Adopted a Philosophy of Minimalism that Simplified my Daily Life
A Philosophy of Minimalism Will Be Adopted That Will Simplify My Daily Life	I Will Adopt a Philosophy of Minimalism that Will Simplify my Daily Life



Interest



When the headline was in passive voice, there was no significant difference in interest. In contrast, active voice headlines led to higher interest.

Interaction effect: $F(1, 399) = 4.12, p = .043$



Summary

- Sharing past personal information results in higher audience interest.
- This effect is explained by better narrative formation.
- Disfluency can moderate this effect.



David Fang

Stanford University



Yang Huang

University of Pennsylvania



Yu Ding

Stanford University

Thanks!

Send any questions to davfang@stanford.edu