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Imaginable Futures:

A Psychosocial Study on Future Expectations and Anthropocene

Dr. Monica Mastrantonio[1]

[1]Visiting Professor at the University of York – UK, guest researcher at JLU University in Giessen, Germany.

Abstract

Now the future has become the central time of Anthropocene due to multiple factors: climate change, war, COVID, and other threats. As a social construction, time brings a diversity of meanings, measures, and concepts permeating all human relations. In humanities, future time has become a priority, because of the actual anxiety associated with it, the speed of changes in our society, or a feeling of exhaustion. As a social bounder, the concept of time is developed based on Social Psychology and Discursive practices. To understand Imaginable Futures as narratives and imagination, this research objective is to present and discuss how individuals are imagining, anticipating, and expecting the future. According to neuroscience (Kable, 2021), imagining future events activate two sub-networks of the brain. One focuses on creating the new event within the imaginative scope, whereas the other evaluates whether the event is positive or negative. Aiming to understand how future imagination is established and whether individuals are expecting a more positive or negative future, a survey with forty questions was designed. This survey contained multiple-alternatives and open questions inquiring about how much future anxiety people related to, how often the responders thought about the future, how future expectations were related to overall and mental health, and what the future would bring to humanity, among others. The survey gathered responders to participate across social media. All data was anonymous, and anonymously treated. The research had 307 responders worldwide. Graphics for each answer were generated. The analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative data. The conclusion shows a rupture between individual e global future. It also demonstrated that the future is an important asset of the now and its relationship with health. It was possible to understand the complexities involved in future thinking, which connect to the individual, mind, and cultural aspects of future time, including how hopeful individuals are in the future, and their suggestions for a better future.

Keywords: Imaginable Futures, Future Anthropocene, Future Expectation, Cultural Studies, Temporalities**.**

Introduction

Time is neither a neutral, nor an unbiased concept in Humanities. Therefore, any time narratives demand deep research, and further studies to understand the complexities of each concept, and its impact upon the present.

As a social construction based on nature observations, eastern civilization gained a lot from the construction of a common measure scheme (Bell; Mau, 1971). The calendar with its measurable time is globally disseminated and standardized, making life and activities across the globe feasible and possible. This unified cultural time can be considered as an institutionalized mechanism that enables social interactions to occur at a specific time and geographical localization, by coordinating social actions of various agents. (Duby, 1998, 2002).

Although the individual biological times, known as circadian rhythms, may differ, and sometimes, even oppose to the social rules, humans have been adapting to nature time in multiple ways (Scollon, 1998). These multiplicities express the complexities imbricated in one another. Either from a physiological, physical, emotional, or cultural perspective, time became a central asset for human relations in the actual global society.

Also, quantified time, regarded as the hours, the clocks and all other measured artifacts are human constructions (Cipolla, 1992). Measured time can be recognized as a major civilizatory force since Industrial Revolution, which shaped the globalized world and has been crucial for the Civilization Process (Norbert Elias, 2002).

However, it was the work of the social psychologist Levine (1997), which demonstrated how each different culture has a different time concept, and relates to it in unique formats. Rules about waiting, punctuality, and time measurement could vary enormously from one region to another. Levine (1997) measured temporal differences among various cultures considering: economic vitality, industrialization, population size, climate, and cultural orientation toward individualism. He created the concept of the 'pace of living,' which would portray how fast life would be rated in each region of the globe.

For Levine (1997), a multitemporal society moves back and forth among nature time, event time, and clock time. Therefore, each culture and individual relates to time in its unique way. Levine (1997) called this "Geography of Time." In this case, reaching temporal prosperity would mean an equal balance between productive and leisure time (remarkably similar to what is required on mental health practices nowadays in pursue of balance between both times).

According to Franco Junior (2005), the linear conception of time was easily spread because the world follows a Christian conception of time that begins with creation and ends with the final judgment. According to Newman (1996), chronological divisions of time affect us profoundly despite their fundamental arbitrariness, because they evoke anxieties, but at the same time, bring hope. As linear time cannot avoid these fear associations, it continues to bring anxiety, the Apocalypse, the end of times, and Armageddon.

Humanity does create new combinations and explanations towards past, present and future. The relevance and comprehension of each of these temporal frames also changes according to different historical moments (Elias, 1989). Thus, it is possible to foresee that the future brings a whole new lot of concepts, versions, and possibilities. Consequently, the future does not mean any time ahead, but much further than that. The future as the infinite of possibilities, dreams, expectations, foresight, colonization, dispute, divergences ahead is also brought onto the present through imagination (Appadurai, 2013).

For Duby (2002), the fear of the end of the world, so present in the Middle Ages, has crossed the centuries, it is something that endures. "My mother, for example, was not convinced that the end of the world would not come soon." (Duby, 1998:140). Until today, a different natural phenomenon or any other similar reason is enough for the fear of the end to be reinforced again (McBride, 1998).

In addition to natural disasters or other unpredictable factors, humanity is also capable of producing the end, exterminating nature and humanity. According to Schwartz (1992:23) "If the terrors of the year 1000 are not a certainty for historians today, those of the year 2000 will certainly be for future historians. On the threshold of a new millennium, man has the proud conviction that perhaps he is not far away the day he will be able to blow up the planet".

Therefore, the fear, panic, anxiety, associated with the future grow in consonance with future thinking. Within Social Psychology, future imagination, and narratives are dialogies co-constructed through a multiplicity of resources (Bakhtin, 1999, 2010). Built interactively, within the social and historical eco-dynamics of relationships, these meanings are ways in which individuals understand and deal with situations and phenomena. Throughout mediated language set, multiple meanings are widely found in the ways people speak up about the future.

According to Gould (1999, 2000), the world is organized as a set of stories imbricated in one and another. Futures as well as other temporal meanings are imbricated in this network of relations, expectations and imaginations. A dialogic method can provide an in-depth comprehension of the uses of the future. The construction of this discursive field and method,

as Certeau would say (2002) is based on our ability to marvel and surprise, analyse and describe forms and uses for everyday language. Within this process, the focus are in the discursive practices built across the word 'future' involving a combination of aspects within the individual and social scope (Beck, Mahony, 2018).

The concept of Imaginable Futures can offer uncountable insights into the task of redressing the manifold and urgent discontents that society faces. Social imaginaries serve as the "invisible cement" (Castoriadis, 1982:143) that binds a given society together, but this would only be possible if social meanings can be carried through space and time. Such stability requires the reproduction of meanings across individuals and cultures. Imagination is thus vital to the continuity of social imaginaries, and therefore to social cohesion.

The term imaginable is frequently used to describe something like the normative and experiential worlds of specific groups, imagined future scenarios, or a particular mindset. A recent book, Social Imaginaries: Critical Interventions (Bryan, Knight, 2019), refers to a range of kinds of imaginaries: "capitalist, constitutional, cosmopolitan, democratic, ecological, economic, feminist, global, historical, hypermodern, humanitarian, nationalist, political, politico-juridical, populist and religious." I take such imaginaries to be nested within the broader social imaginary – that is the web of meanings that binds a particular society together.

Gagnebin (1997, 1999) explains that such a method that renounces the security of predictability, and that engages into the practical use of language enables the construction of new meanings and hypothesis. Therefore, to investigate Imaginable Futures using a Survey Questionnaire, applied to different people across the globe can enlighten the intersection between the individual and the social related to IF.

The main focus of this paper is to cover the intersection of the individual and the social towards Imaginable Futures, using Social Psychology to understand how IF is related to the day individuals speak up and relate to the future.

Methodology

The survey called Imaginable Futures – International Survey with 40 questions was designed and applied to anonymous people in all different parts of the globe through the internet. Imaginable Futures was understood as a composition of foresight, expectations, scenarios, visions, which crosses one's thinking and relations when dealing with the future. This relation with the future is not only cognitive, but emotional, social, historical, sensorial. There were questions about how someone feels about the future, questions about the impact of the future on health, and enquiries about what each person expected about the future.

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The survey was composed of 40 questions, with some questions being similar to scale responses demanding answers on the intensity or frequency of an activity. Thus, results would give us an overview of the importance of each item onto one's life. The graded answers were: 'never' (0%), 'rarely' (25%), sometimes (50%), most often (75%); always (100%). There were also questions with multiple choice answers, for example, 'does the future impact your overall health?' Besides the closed questions, there were open ones that the participants could answer freely.

The survey was developed in Google Forms, and shared worldwide through a link. All collected data was anonymous. The Survey was shared through social media, and what's app messages, and reshared by some groups and individuals. The IF Survey was fully developed in English, and responders filled it in English.

Afterwards, results were tabulated and expressed in graphics in the results section. The follow-up data with article links will be shared with all participants of the survey. This will make the entire process of data management really inclusive and accessible. There were 307 responders from all continents and all age groups as stated in the graphics below.

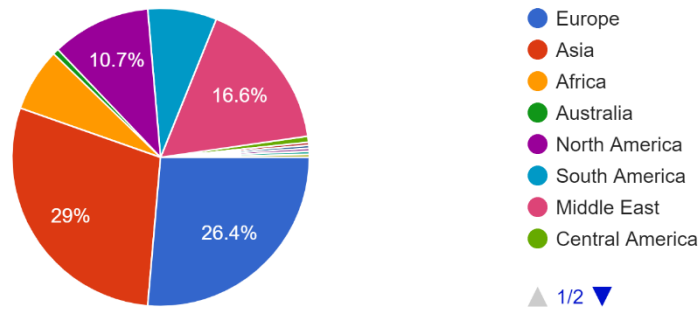**Graphic 1 – Age group of the 307 participants**

307 responses
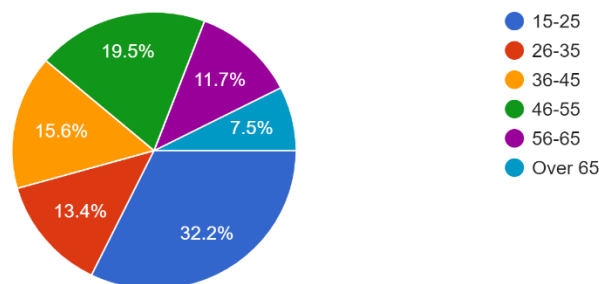
Graphic 1 shows that there were 32.2% responders between 15-25, followed by 19.5% who were 56-65, 15.6% who were from the age group 36-45.

Next graphic 2 will show the continent of each participant (Graphic 2).

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Graphic 2 – Continent of the 307 participants

307 responses

- Europe
- Asia
- Africa
- Australia
- North America
- South America
- Middle East
- Central America

▲ 1/2 ▼

The data shows that there were 29% responders from Asia, followed by 26.4% from Europe, and 16.6% from Middle East, and 10.7% were from North America.
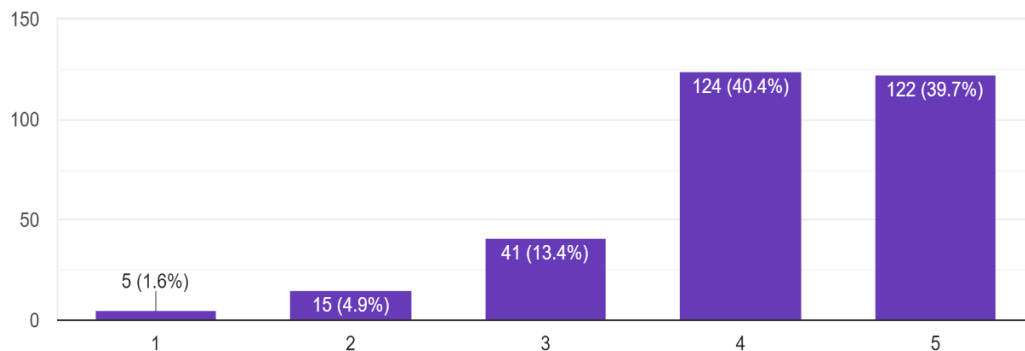
Next, the results will be presented.

Results

The results were tabulated in the graphics below as follows.

Graphic 3 – Rate to personal future as rate 1 to very negative, 2 to mild negative, 3 to neutral, 4 to mild positive and 5 to very positive in 10 years from now

307 responses

The graphic above shows that 40.4% of the responders rate their personal future as mild positive, 39.7% rate it as very positive, 13,4% as neutral, 4.9% as mild negative and only 1.6% as very negative. This way, the largest number of answers shows that the individual future is well imbricated with positiveness.

Next graphic shows the respondents' rates towards the global future.

Graphic 4 - Rate to world's future as rate 1 to very negative, 2 to mild negative, 3 to neutral, 4 to mild positive and 5 to very positive in 10 years from now

307 responses
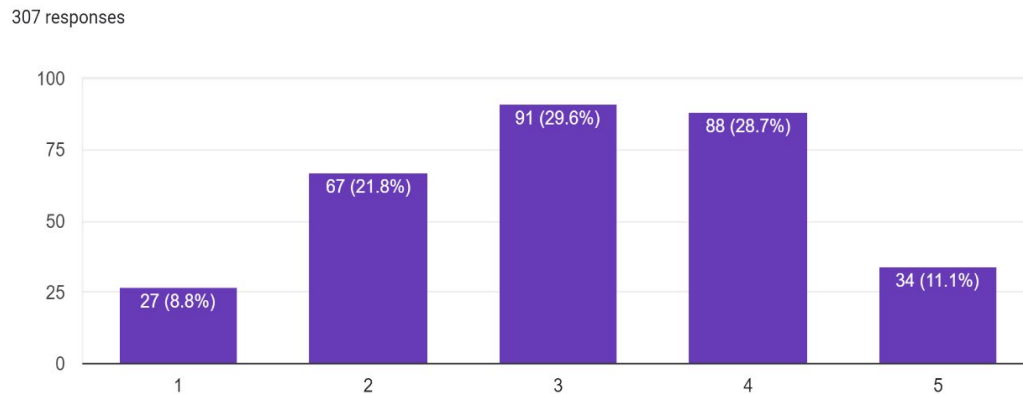
As it can be seen from the graphic above, the evaluation towards the global future is not as positive as the individual future. Most of the answers are in the neutral zone, whereas mild positive global future has 28.7% of the answers, and 21.8% show a mild negative global future. It looks much more like an equal balanced distribution of answers for both positiveness and negativeness. Next graphic will show how the responders rate humanity's grow or retrograde.

Graphic 5 – Estimate about humanity's evolution.
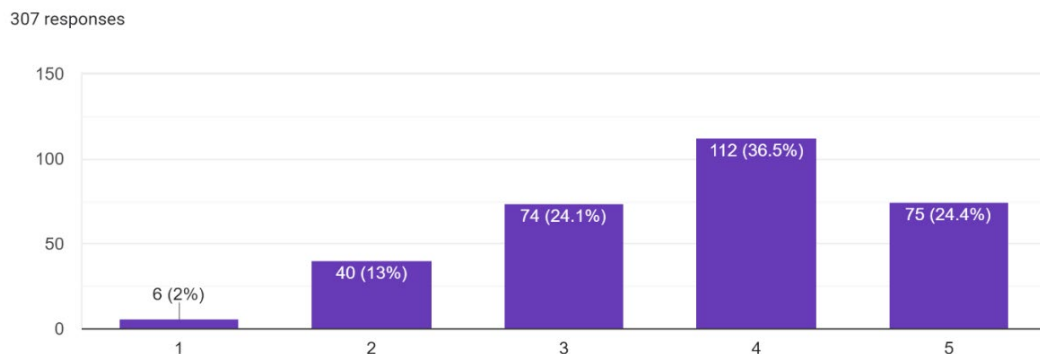
307 responses
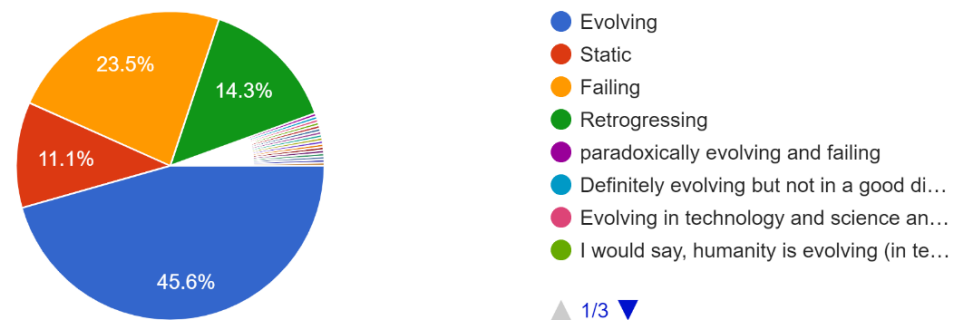
Graphic 5 brings how responders are evaluating humanity's progress or not. As Graphic 5 demonstrated almost half of the responders, 45,6% said humanity is evolving. Nevertheless, 23,5% mentioned humanity is failing, which also combines with 14.3% who evaluated that humanity is retrogressing. If 23,5% is added with 14,3% the total amount is 37,8% who are saying humanity is going backwards. Only 11,1% said humanity is static and there were some other minor explanations with around 5% of the answers.

To evaluate the frequency of future thinking around one's personal future, Graphic 6 shows the following rates.

307 responses
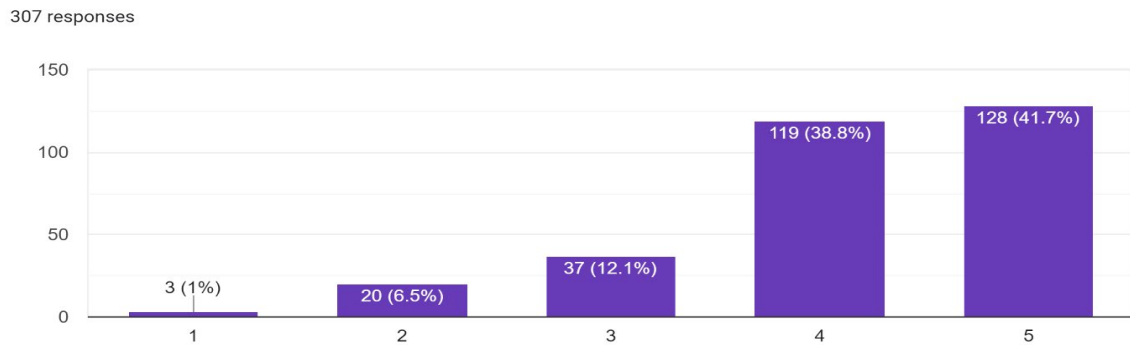
Graphic 6 above brings the frequency of future thinking on the individual foresight. The answers show that 41,7% of the responders 'always' think about their personal future, followed by 38,8% that 'frequently' think about their own futures. The lowest scores were for 'sometimes' with 12,1%; 'rarely' with 12,1%; and 'never' with 1%.

Graphic 7 – frequency of world's future thinking being 1 for Never, 2 for Rarely, 3 for Sometimes, 4 for Frequently, 5 for Always.
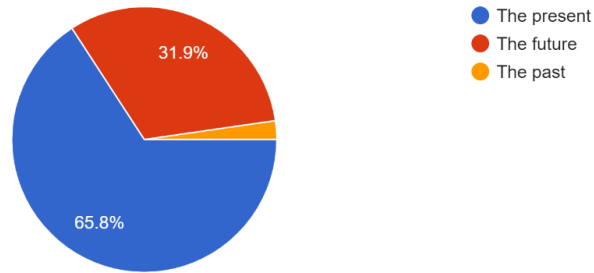
307 responses

Graphic 7 rates the frequency of future thinking related to the world's future. The frequencies are 36,5% saying that they 'frequently' think about the world's future, next comes 'always' with 24,4%, 'sometimes' got 24,1% of the responses, while the lowest scores are 'rarely' with 13%; and 'never' with 2%.

On average, the comparison between Graphic 6 and 7 clearly shows that the responders think more about their own future that the worlds' future.

Graphic 8 brings the importance evaluation of past, present and future.

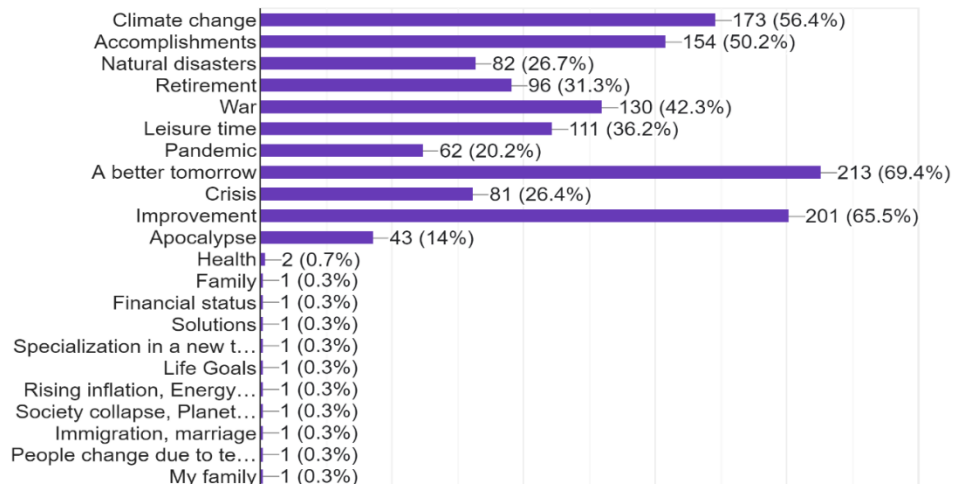## Graphic 8 – Importance of past, present, and future

307 responses

- The present
- The future
- The past

31.9%

65.8%

The majority of the responders mentioned that the 'present' is the most valuable time (65,8%), followed by the 'future' (31,9%), and the 'past' with 0,3%.

Graphic 9 – Topics involved in Future Thinking with the Highest Frequency

307 responses

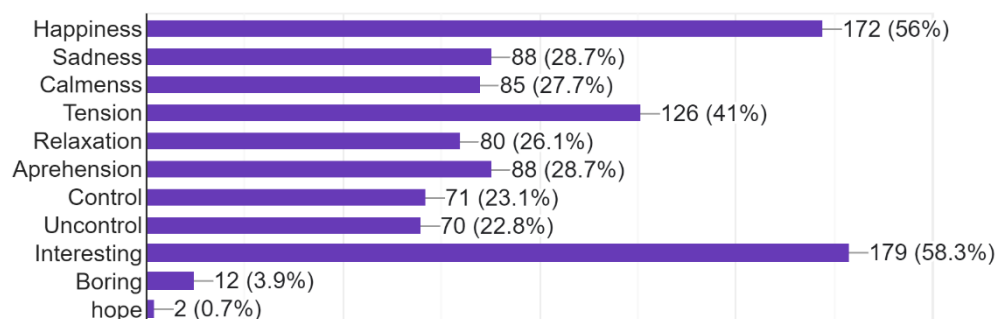| Topic	Value
Climate change	173 (56.4%)
Accomplishments	154 (50.2%)
Natural disasters	82 (26.7%)
Retirement	96 (31.3%)
War	130 (42.3%)
Leisure time	111 (36.2%)
Pandemic	62 (20.2%)
A better tomorrow	213 (69.4%)
Crisis	81 (26.4%)
Improvement	201 (65.5%)
Apocalypse	43 (14%)
Health	2 (0.7%)
Family	1 (0.3%)
Financial status	1 (0.3%)
Solutions	1 (0.3%)
Specialization in a new t…	1 (0.3%)
Life Goals	1 (0.3%)
Rising inflation, Energy…	1 (0.3%)
Society collapse, Planet…	1 (0.3%)
Immigration, marriage	1 (0.3%)
People change due to te…	1 (0.3%)
My family	1 (0.3%)

When thinking about the future, the Imaginable Future Survey also inquired what thoughts and ideas were frequently associated with it and the answers with the highest rate were, 'a better tomorrow, (69,4%), 'improvement' (65,5%), 'climate change' (56,4%), 'accomplishments' (50,2%), 'war' (42,3%), among others. It is also possible to note that there is a need to think in better futures and improvements, but at the same time, issues like climate change and war cannot be dismissed.

Graphic 10 indicates feeling involved while thinking about the future.

Graphic 10 – Feelings involved towards future thinking.

307 responses

Feeling	Value
Happiness	172 (56%)
Sadness	88 (28.7%)
Calmenss	85 (27.7%)
Tension	126 (41%)
Relaxation	80 (26.1%)
Aprehension	88 (28.7%)
Control	71 (23.1%)
Uncontrol	70 (22.8%)
Interesting	179 (58.3%)
Boring	12 (3.9%)
hope	2 (0.7%)

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The largest number of responders mentioned 'interesting (58,3%) when thinking about the future, followed by 'happiness' (56%). Next came 'tension' with 41%, and 'sadness' and 'apprehension' got the same score with 28,7%. 'Calmness' was mentioned by 27,7%, and 'relaxation' among 26,1%. What these figures show is a rather ambivalent mixture of feelings and rates which include opposite emotions like tense x calm, happy x sad, control x uncontrol.

Graphic 11 shows the responders rating towards the future.

Graphic 11 – Future vision rate being 1 for very pessimistic, 2 for mild pessimistic, 3 for neutral, 4 for mild optimistic, and 5 for very optimistic.

307 responses
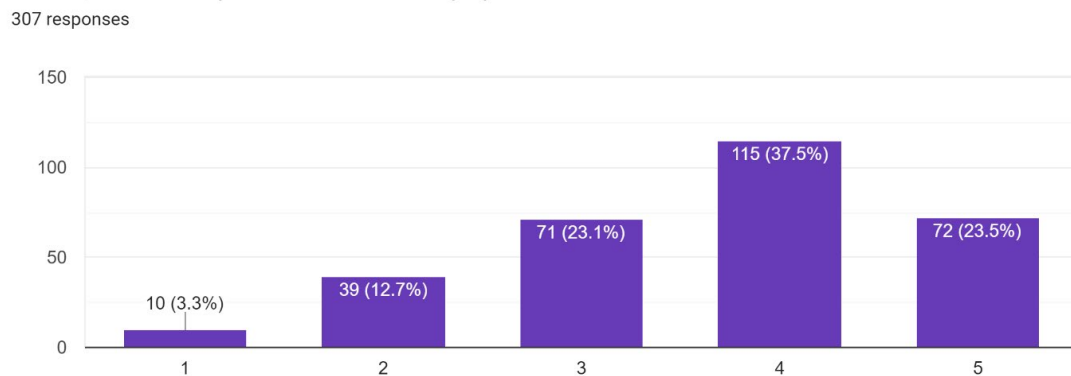
As shown in Graphic 11, the highest rate was for 'mild optimistic' (37,5%), 'very optimistic' (23,5%), 'neutral' (23,1%), 'mild pessimistic' (12,7%), 'very pessimistic' (3,3%). The data shows a prevalence of optimism.

Graphic 12 brings the impact of future thinking and foresight on overall health.

Graphic 12 – Impact of future on overall health
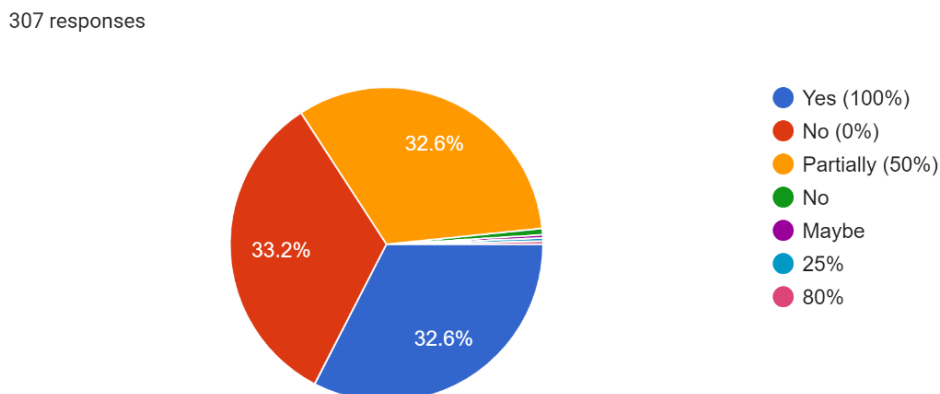
307 responses

Equally rated 32,6% out of the 307 responders said future thinking does have an impact on overall health, and 32,6% said it partially influences overall health. However, 33,2% of the 307 respondents said it does not influence their health.

The relationship between future and mental health is addressed in Graphic 13.

**Graphic 13 – Impact of the future on mental health**

307 responses
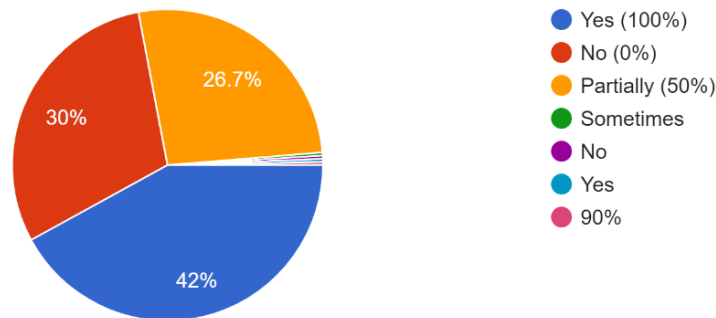
For the above question about the relation of future thinking on mental health, there is a rise of positive answers, which are 42% of participants out of the 307 who responded 'yes' when asked if their mental health was impacted by future thinking. Thirty percent of the respondents said the future had 'no' relation to their mental health, and 26,7% said 'partially,' among other answers.

Graphic 14 elucidates the relation between anxiety and future thinking.

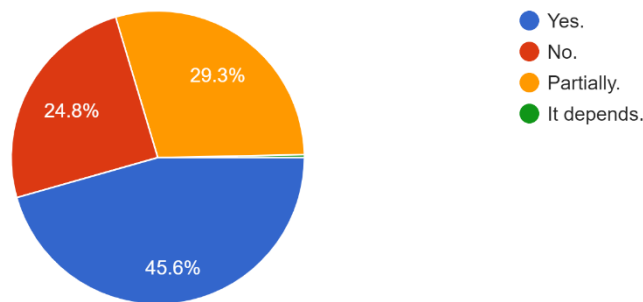**Graphic 14 – Anxiety feeling connected to the future.**

307 responses
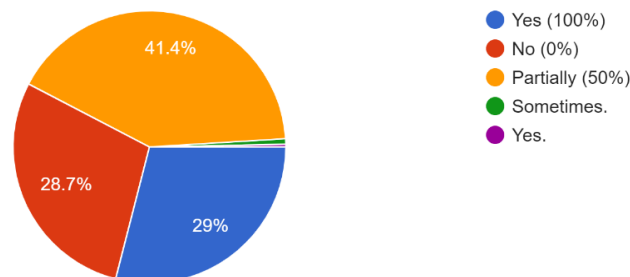
As established in the Graphic above (14), the majority of the respondents mentioned 'partially' (41,4%), followed by 29% who said 'yes' - anxiety is connected to the future, and 28,7% see no correlation between both. Overall, if the positive plus the partially positive answers are added, most of the respondents (70,4%) relate anxiety and future.

Graphic 15 brings human capacity in destroying the planet.

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Graphic 15 – Human capacity in destroying the planet.
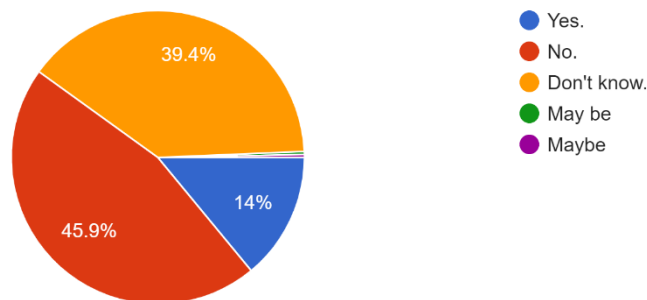
307 responses

Yes.
No.
Partially.
It depends.

The graphic above (15) clearly shows that 45,6% of the 307 respondents ticked 'yes,' 29,3% ticked 'partially,' and 24,8% said 'no.'

Graphic 16 inquired about humanity reaching the SDG goals by 2030.

Graphic 16 – Rate expectation in reaching the 17-UN-SDG goals by 2030

307 responses

Yes.
No.
Don't know.
May be
Maybe

From the 307 participants, 45,9% said humanity is not reaching the goals by this deadline, 39,4% do not know it, 14% answered it will reach it.

Graphic 17 demonstrates if the participants trusted that the construction of the future was in humanity's hands and the answers are shown next.

Graphic 17 – Relation between future construction and humanity's responsibility

307 responses

True (100%)
False (0%)
Partially (50%)
True
Partially
False
20%. There's only so much we can do as single humans. However, politics and corporations are the ones that have it in their hands.

Finally, when asked if the responders believed that the future was in humanity hands, the positive response rate was 48,2%, partially with 35,8%, and other answers got 16% of the choice.

Analysis

This survey targeted Future Imagination in multiple aspects from health issues to reaching global SDG's goals. There is a complexity of factors when addressing and investigating the future that cannot be easily or linearly grasped. There are vectors and issues that cross both individual, social and cultural aspects.

From the graphics shown in the results, it is possible to note that the present and the future are the most important times for humanity now. The past and historical data, hence so important, have become minor issues in the face of Anthropocene urgency. The future does occupy great part of human thinking nowadays.

Another interesting aspect of the data is a slightly rupture between individual and global futures. There is a tendency in evaluating and expecting a better individual future whereas the global futures are collapsing. This can be due to a defence response in trying to encapsulate one's expectation in order to survive.

The mix of feelings associated with the future also show the large spectrum of possible futures that can vary from something very calm to tension and apprehension. Although with a high number of answers towards an optimistic future, when inquired if the SDG goals would be reached by 2030 or humanity's capacity to destroy the planet, these got negative answers with the highest rates. For instance, that humanity will not reach the goals and can destroy the planet. A good point is that the capacity to construct the future is still in humanity's hands. Therefore, there is lots that everyone can contribute to.

Conclusion

In the literature review about Future Studies, there is little data that consider the individuals as active participants of the future. Most of them, use large data and point to one direction or another. It is crucial to immerse onto individual foresight, expectations, imaginations, motivations towards what the future should be like for all. Otherwise, it will continue being a dictatorship and decision-making of some towards others. On the verge of so many crisis and challenges, human minds tend to encapsulate themselves in isolation and self-growth as it is there that they may find the positiveness they need and aim. It is not that they do not wish to construct a better future for all, but as targets are not met, war collides and apprehension resides, the basic structure which still lies in our DNA is to survive.

There many more issues that crossed this research gaps and brought awareness towards the need of such data and more interlocution with people worldwide – not to teach them how to live the future, but to count with everyone's own survival.

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