

Ethnofuturism for a Medical Future Perfect

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The future perfect

By the time you arrive, I will have gone to the hospital.

This sentence is an example of the verb tense the *future perfect*. The unnerving reality of the future perfect is that it describes two or more independent variable actions that *may* occur in the future - always with a level of uncertainty. Naturally, we respond to the future perfect with mixed emotions: anxiety, skepticism, fear, perhaps a little excitement. It's no surprise, then, that we respond to the idea of ethnofuturism (or, if you prefer, Futures Thinking) in much the same way. Ethnofuturism, like the future perfect, is research for the future, and understanding the future is never a perfect science.



Ethnofuturism

Originally, ethnofuturism was a term invented by [Estonian](#) [1] authors and artists to describe their intentions to blend old, culturally significant forms with modern technologies made available by their recent sociopolitical liberation. Ethnofuturism, as it's used today, capitalizes on this idea of blending the old with the new, the locally relevant with the globally significant, to enable a more ideal future. Simply put, it's ethnography for the future. More specifically, it's an emerging trend of research strategies aimed at using these cultural and behavioral insights to inform business strategies, product innovations, and service applications.

Applications

The consumer and fashion industries have understood the value of ethnofuturist research techniques for many years (see Jan Chipchase's aptly named blog [The Future Perfect](#) [2] which inspired my inquiry into the subject), employing strategists, technologists, trend forecasters, ethnographers, and other multi-disciplinary [futurists](#) [3] to understand how people may behave in five, ten, and fifteen-plus years from now. See, for example, [Trendwatching.com](#) [4]. The focus of ethnofuturism is on understanding *possible* shifts in behavior, preference, and knowledge in order to realize a better future.

Professionals working in this area take advantage of traditional research

techniques, such as cultural ethnography, marketing research, and data analysis, and blend them with emerging strategies, such as scenario casting, rapid ethnography, and futures thinking, to [inform possible outcomes](#) [5]. Venessa Miemis observes “It's not predicting the future, but rather taking a structured approach to understanding the potential impacts of today's decisions and actions” (see her article on [Futures Thinking](#) [6]). For a more comprehensive discussion of emerging research strategies, see [Design Research: Methods and Perspectives](#) [7], edited by Brenda Laurel. The objective is to understand predictable behavioral patterns so that new products and services can accommodate and respond in appropriate, valuable, and meaningful ways. Three prominent factors make ethnofuturist techniques relevant for medical product development: increasing human *mobility*, *globalization*, and the maturation of advanced medical *technologies* such as robotics.

Mobility and Globalization

The rapid growth of human *mobility*, both physical and digital, has led to an increasingly global level of interaction. People respond to other cultural behaviors in observable ways, often co-opting them for their own. The interactions that occur provide expert researchers insight into people's likely near future expectations, even if they are not adequately met today. This cross pollination of ideas and behaviors occurs in everyday consumer environments, but it occurs just as readily in hospitals and other healthcare environments. Formally, ideas are exchanged through international initiatives such as [Doctor's Without Borders](#) [8], but the exchange happens much more rapidly and with far more lasting implications through informal, everyday exchanges. The researcher's job is to understand these behaviors in order to identify potential future needs and expectations.

Technology

Forecasting will become more important in the medical industry as advanced technologies become more ubiquitous. While current applications take advantage of the more technical strengths of robotics, such as precision, repetition, and reliability (see [MAKO Surgical's](#) [9] partial knee resurfacing), future applications will need to incorporate intelligent systems that can respond appropriately to diverse situations, such as medical emergencies. As technologies (and eventually, markets) mature, new applications will certainly arise. Research professionals will be paramount to answering difficult questions: How can these technologies be used to assist our aging population? What level of *artificial intelligence* is appropriate in home health care settings? What *services* should these technologies provide, and which applications will be most readily accepted by consumers? Clearly, many research strategies already exist for probing these types of questions, and more will undoubtedly be developed to improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

Medical Future Perfect

Many of the same research strategies employed by futurists today will play a significant role in the future of user research in medical product development. The future of health care is too important and too near for it not to. [Jamais Cascio](#) [10] provides a practical overview for how research professionals can begin thinking about likely medical scenarios. His process outlines four key activities: Asking the Question; Scanning the World; Mapping the Possibilities; and Asking the Next

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Question. Research strategies that allow us to ask pertinent questions, identify telling challenges, and explore “possible, probable and preferable” solutions provide valuable insight to our medical future. These tools will become increasingly relevant in medical and home health care industries as these markets continue to mature and turn to more intelligent technological solutions as a strategic competitive advantage.

[Source](#) [11]

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