

# How Pleasing is it? Understanding the Proximity to Hedonic Consumption

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## **How Pleasing is it? Understanding the Proximity to Hedonic Consumption**

Individuals make decisions everyday between pursuing pleasures or distancing themselves based on a mix of emotions and cognition. The current research attempts to answer questions about differing motivations for consumption of hedonic products and experiences, working on how individuals adapt their perceptions by varying the mental construals surrounding these experiences. The selected research method relies on an innovative data collection approach, Album On-Line (AOL), to analyze individual representations through a projective method and assess their consensus through an INDSCAL approach to construct collective online photo albums around multiple themes on a subject. These representations help to frame a consumer-centric representation of the affective and cognitive motivations for hedonic products and experiences. The findings from this study identify potential hedonic products by consumers, based on thought processing across a near and far condition based on various dimensions, and in two languages (English/French) in line with today's globalized communications.

*Keywords: hedonic consumption, psychological proximity, consumer journeys*

*Track: Consumer Behavior*

## **1. Introduction**

Imagine returning from a long day of work and having to decide between reaching for a bottle of beer or a cup of coffee, watching a new show on Netflix or replying to pending e-mails during lunch break, or in some instances, both at the same time. Here, as in many everyday decisions, it is difficult to decide whether the product decisions would be for pleasure or practical reasons. Although consumer research can be credited to be amongst the few domains which had started defining this vast subject, there remains a huge amount of work to be done in this regard (Alba & Williams, 2013; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

An understanding of hedonic consumption largely concerns how the context is built and processed in consumers' minds, which also serves as the driving force for this research. The research questions that would be attempted to answer include: 1) what is the influence of differing affective and cognitive motivations on a product's hedonic and/or utilitarian attributes; 2) can these differing motivations be impacted by modifying the structure of thought processes; 3) how does this impact on product attributes influence the usage and consumption of a product.

These research questions facilitate in meeting the following research objectives: 1) an understanding of the varying motivations for hedonic and utilitarian product consumption; 2) demarcating the boundary (conditions) for decision making in terms of affective and cognitive motivations, respectively linked to hedonic and utilitarian product consumptions; 3) improve an understanding of the thought processes linked to product choices and brand recall in terms of individual-level product descriptions of hedonic and utilitarian attributes. A mixed-method research framework was used as a primary step towards answering these research questions in fulfilling these research objectives.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

Within the domains of psychology and marketing, there is little consensus on defining a concept as enduring as pleasure, the pursuit of pleasure and the varying connotations associated with its different consumption forms. Two large enigmas which encircle this consumption domain are the ability to comprehensively define and demarcate this form of consumption from alternate forms, while also inclusively understanding the different instances where the act of hedonic consumption is optimally realized by individuals. Given the occurrence and variation with which consumers pursue pleasure, it can be a daunting task to define the process of hedonic consumption. According to Alba & Williams, (2013), a broader, means-end approach is essential in understanding the various hedonic or utilitarian motivations that individual consumers might have for different product categories.

## 2.1 *Indulging in Hedonism*

While prior studies have shown that certain products weigh higher on hedonistic attributes such as sensory and experiential characteristics, certain other products have a greater tendency of utilitarian characteristics including more functional attributes (Batra & Ahtola, 1991). While these polarized distinctions have certain identifiable attributes, a pure hedonic product such as chocolate may also be consumed for utilitarian motivations for cardiovascular benefits of dark chocolate or when a laundry detergent is marketed based on its fragrance (Alba & Williams, 2013). A similar blurry distinction could be observed for various consumer activities such as going for a run or gardening, wherein the inherent toll is sometimes seen as a pleasure source rather than a source of fatigue (Crossen, 2006; Linden, 2012).

A big paradox in the field of social sciences and marketing is trying to understand individual reasoning for the pursuit of pleasure and happiness. This has an impact on their social relations, decision making, purchases, and views in general. Although hedonic consumption generally includes all forms of consumption associated with a high sense of emotive attachment and affective reasoning (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), there still needs to be a finer distinction in terms of anticipated goals or expected benefits from a product.

### 2.1.1 Hedonic consumption

As per the initial definition of hedonic consumption, it generally relates to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of a product's experiential consumption rather than the objective benefits accorded by it. This would include all forms of highly emotive and affect-laden experiences, expanding to ideas of virtues and vices, symbolic and functional products (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

One of the multifaceted aspects of hedonic consumption involves an activation of the sensory perceptions. Multisensory perception involves the registry of an experience across different senses such as vision, audition, gustation, olfaction and somatosensation, a priori through interaction with a product or experience. Consumers not only register felt sensations through the brain but also record them for a future recollection to be recalled later through their senses. For instance, the fragrance in the halls of a lavish hotel or a luxury store would remind of a certain memory the next time it is experienced again. However, there are also instances of recalling a scene which did not occur for real but has been constructed from memory with an accumulation of various sensory elements and fantasy, to complete an unfinished historic imagery with fantasy based elements (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Singer, 1966); such as a rainy scene in a movie complemented by an umbrella brand's imagery and heritage.

The earlier decades of marketing as a domain were widely dominated by symbolic usage of products such as the Marlboro man, Mountain Dew's Clem/Willy imagery along the lines of an "uneconomic man", focusing more on the aspects of a product's connotations, visual appeal and later on the identification with a certain milieu or entourage that it signified (Champniss, Wilson, & Macdonald, 2015; Levy, 1959). Such instances of a multisensory image relied on the retrieval of a fictional imagery when lacking a historic image (Singer, 1966). All associated multisensory experiences in this regard are assembled in the minds of consumers to anchor the hedonic experience through an image conjured up by the mind (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Since hedonic consumption also involves a strong emotive arousal accompanied with the experience and its imagery, this signifies a psychological and physiological reaction. With emotions representing a vast spectrum of neurophysiological and psychological experiences, they generally vary in terms of length/duration, intensity, locus of origin (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Frijda, 1993).

Seeking out highly emotive experiences is considered a central tenet of hedonic products, which could be experienced differently based on personal preferences, motivation and level of involvement. The differing ways through which individuals construe these varying experiences along a spectrum can be better explained by understanding the consumption goals.

### 2.1.2 Goal-based perspective

Many consumption products represent a mix of utilitarian and hedonic motives, making it indistinguishable to set the boundaries between the two. For instance, a laptop can be used to work but also to watch Netflix, a smartphone could help replying to emails while listening to music. Identifying the goal of consumption is essential in such cases to discriminate between potentially confounding reasons for consumption.

A goal-based pursuit or perspective helps to clarify the individual-level differences for the same or different products. Taking the example of morning coffee, one person might feel energized with the aroma of coffee while another could drink it to avoid a headache. This is also the case of two individuals willingly watching movies filled with gore, sadness or fear for different reasons of excitement or fearful sensations (Andrade & Cohen, 2007). In a similar way, certain activities which are generally considered to be virtues could be used as vices, such as self-medicated use of antidepressants to induce sleep or avoid stress, in a similar way as being addicted to sustained exercise to the point of self-inflicted muscular pain (Alba & Williams, 2013; Linden, 2012). In all of these, it is essential to identify the motives which lead individuals to pursue something rather than the anticipated result.

## 2.2 *Psychological Distance*

Psychological distance, which falls broadly within the construal level theory, pertains to the way individuals conceptualize events, people, objects, experiences based on certain dimensions, in relation with the subjective experience of reality rather than the objective question of existential reality (Nira Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). Psychological distance concerns all things which are not a part of the present reality and do not pertain to the current time (referred to as the “here and now”). Since the “here and now” is the most recent and clear memory for the mind, it is affiliated with richer and more concrete details.

There can be different reasons which lead to perceptions of not being in the present reality. Events that are far from the present time, for instance half an hour ago versus one week ago, or this evening as compared to this time next year, are conceptualized differently in terms of time by the mind (Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004). Locations that are spatially distal from the current position could also be perceived by the mind as being far such as home or place of work compared to visiting another city or country. There also exists a difference when thinking of loved ones, family, neighbors against meeting people in a first encounter and persons from different cultures or countries as for the self. In terms of reality, alternate versions of events or hypothetical situations would be considered distant such as having been born in a different continent, developing a different skill or speaking a different language than the one currently acquired, imagining life on Mars, having had the ability to fly or travel across time.

These alternate constructions to proximal reality construe four levels of psychological distance namely temporal, spatial, social and hypothetical distance. In the preceding examples, the first set of situations in each context respectively pertain to the proximal reality while the others pertain to a distal reality. The unifying theme amongst all these is that they are all imagined from the origin of zero distance with respect to the present time, place, self and reality, derived from the direct experience for the individual in the here and now. All situations which are not exactly placed within this same context or are farther would be termed as psychologically distant and would require mental reconstruction (Nira Liberman et al., 2007).

### 2.2.1 *Construal Level*

Based on this, there exist two distinct categories: low-level construals for proximal experiences relying more on subordinate investigation and the details pertaining to an event, and high-level construals relying on superordinate characteristics by asking ‘why’ questions of causality for distal experiences. According to Liberman, Trope, & Wakslak (2007), psychological distance and construal level go hand-in-hand. Events or experiences that are at

a greater psychological distance from the current reality and present time will be construed at higher, more abstract construals while events which are more proximal to reality and the present time would be construed at lower, concrete construals.

### 2.2.2 Psychological distancing for hedonic consumption

According to Hirschman & Holbrook (1982), there is evidence that suggests consumers sometimes indulge themselves in an imaginative role distant from reality and proximal to their desires. There have been studies which show that consumers imagine themselves as actors within a movie, play, performance or even pornography in order to visualize their desires (Greene, 1981; Hirschman, 1982). Such events and experiences have been denominated as “absorbing experiences” because of their capacity to engage the consumer (Swanson, 1978), or “extraordinary experiences” attributing to their consecrated nature, a communal feeling and transcendence (Tumbat & Belk, 2011).

However, another stream of literature suggests that, affective feelings are stronger for judgments of events occurring in the present than those distant from current reality, either in the future or the past (Chang & Tuan Pham, 2013). However, there is a certain confounding of effects with regards to the antecedents. Outcomes of certain events might be felt more in the present contextually, for instance, fear or adrenaline rush before going on stage, regret arising from time wasted or not well spent just afterwards, or shame from an embarrassing moment in front of friends. There are also other events whose outcomes have already passed or will come to be in future and still connote a strong affective feeling such as nostalgia for a graduation years ago or joy for a Christmas family dinner.

Of the many decisions that are encountered in the face of hedonism, some include: enjoying a dessert such as cake or ice cream; drinking alcoholic beverages such as wine; spending excessively on luxurious products such as handbags, watches, cruise trips; entertainment through video games or movies. The following section further justifies the usage of a mixed-method approach.

## 3. Methodology

In accordance with the research objectives to understand the varying motivations for decision-making in terms of hedonic and utilitarian attributes of consumption (see Introduction), it was deemed necessary to opt for an innovative approach which allowed mental projection and empirical analysis simultaneously. As reinstated in the section “Indulging in Hedonism”, true hedonic consumption lacks a concise and complete definition, leading to

multiple attempts on food choices and musical pieces as hedonic consumption while ignoring vacations, traveling, cars and gadgets (Alba & Williams, 2013; Arnold & Reynolds, 2012; Kahnx, Ratner, & Kahneman, 1997; Lacher, 1989). Inasmuch as research on contemporary consumer behavior is concerned, the current method aims to enrich existing consumer research by expanding the horizons of hedonic consumption in line with its envisioned definition of “multisensory images, fantasies and emotional arousal in using products” (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

A projective method coupled with the INDSCAL approach was applied to discover consumers’ unconscious opinions and to acquire richer, more informed responses than direct qualitative methods (Malhotra, 2008), helping to gauge a nuanced understanding of the psychological proximities that consumers perceive for hedonic products. This technique, first proposed by Vernet (2007) called the Album On-Line (AOL) approach, allows assessing participants’ elicitation through a set of images based on four steps (Kessous, Valette-Florence, & De Barnier, 2017). It starts with asking participants to search and choose five images based on their thoughts on a theme to produce personal albums. The next step involves a combination of all individual albums by the researcher to produce a collective album, which is then sent to respondents asking if they want to modify their first album and provide reasons for changes. The final stage involves resending the final collective album containing pictures which have been selected by multiple participants, back to respondents to evaluate their concordance with the selected images. The usual group size for Album On-Line constitutes 6-12 persons of mixed gender (Fern, 1982). The research design combines the advantages of an in-depth approach, such as interviews or focus group, with that of a projective method.

The methodology consisted of two diffusions of the study in France (French version) and the UK (English version), to check for possible language effects as well, asking respondents about their consumption of hedonic products, the perception with regards to psychological proximities with these products and efforts undertaken to enhance/reduce their distance with the brands. The experimental conditions consisted of two versions manipulating the four dimensions of psychological distance simultaneously based on a proximal and a distant condition, both of which had been pretested. The responses at each phase were translated and back translated by native language speakers. The exploratory method, launched through the Prolific platform, allowed a first-hand identification of different indulgent products and hedonic brands as considered by consumers, their individual consumption motivations, along with the construction of a narrative. Based on this, an INDSCAL approach was applied to arrive at a two-dimensional frame for affective and cognitive motives for hedonic consumption.



#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The results from the current study revealed an interesting mix of results, with the French respondents mainly choosing a mix of technological products and fast fashion as cognitive motivations for proximal consumption. For hedonic consumption, there was a mix of landmark life events, futuristic and collaborative products, and themes of solitude. The English version had a thin divide between affective and cognitive motivations for consumption, which could be explained by usage of similar thoughts/words across emotional and practical reasoning in English, leading to a distinction based mainly on gestures or expressions than words. For instance, themes of well-being, cleanliness products and nutrition appeared frequently across affective and cognitive conditions. In the affective condition, social networks, and products on creativity, traveling featured more often for the distal condition; the cognitive condition included automobiles, price consciousness, electronic gadgets and music as examples for proximal condition.

#### **5. Implications for Theory and Practice**

The current research proposes that individuals' perception of their psychological distances with individual objects in life is crucial in understanding their relations with indulgent behaviors. Consumers employ a variety of ways to stay close to objects and experiences which lend greater hedonic feeling to the self, and distance themselves from objects and experiences which hinder the pursuit of pleasure (Chang & Tuan Pham, 2013; Englis & Solomon, 1995; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). This research would help to learn the significance of psychological proximity in the evaluation and consumption of hedonic products (Huang, Burtch, Hong, & Polman, 2016; Kim, Zhang, & Li, 2008). The need for affect could be a possible individual motivation to reduce psychological distances with hedonic products attributing stronger affective experiences for travel, impulsive buying, and dietary behaviors.

The spatial distance between marketers and their consumers has increased substantially with the advent of digital and information age, however the results also show that the current social networks are a way of affective conditioning. Several businesses are targeting consumers online or through social media, and there is a great need to create campaigns of hedonic products which can resonate well with consumers locally as well as globally. A better understanding of the psychological process for hedonism across different languages/cultures would help not only in the better promotion of hedonic products but could also serve as a useful tool in public service advertising to "add" distance towards impulsive hedonism. The awareness of psychological perceptions around an indulgent substance would help to discern excess hedonic consumption concerning impulsive spending, substance abuse and obesity.

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