

# I Like, Therefore I Am! – When and Why Do Consumers Enjoy to Express Their Product Liking?

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# **I Like, Therefore I Am! – When and Why Do Consumers Enjoy to Express Their Product Liking?**

## **Abstract**

In this paper, we investigate how preference sharing, as done for instance, in conversations about one's new favorite song or on social media via liking a celebrity's outfit, influences consumers' enjoyment. Past research suggests that consumers may find expressing their "likes" and "dislikes" inherently pleasurable because it allows them to express their self. In two preregistered experiments, we (1) successfully replicate the finding that expressions of liking lead to greater task enjoyment, (2) show that this effect occurs because liking is associated with higher self-expression and processing fluency, and (3) demonstrate that these effects are stronger for hedonic than for utilitarian products. In doing so, our findings enhance our understanding of the effect of sharing one's preferences and suggest that companies may benefit from allowing consumers to publicly express their likes and dislikes.

*Keywords: Liking, Self-Expression, Processing Fluency*

*Conference Track: Consumer Behavior*

## 1 Introduction

Evaluating and judging the environment around us is part of our daily life. We listen to a pop song and share our opinion, we watch a YouTube video and leave a comment, and we read and “like” the latest post of an influencer on Instagram. Interestingly, past research assumed that such evaluations merely serve the purpose of preparing a purchase decision and have no additional benefits for consumers (Engel, Kollat, & Blackwell, 1968). This view has been challenged by a recent study by He, Melumad, and Pham (2019) who showed that people inherently enjoy expressing their liking or disliking of products even if these expressions are not related to any particular purchase decision.

In a series of seven experiments, these authors demonstrate that consumers who make evaluation-based judgments (i.e., stating whether they like a particular product) experience higher enjoyment during this process compared to consumers making non-evaluation-based judgments (i.e., rating a product on a particular attribute). Furthermore, they show that this effect occurs because evaluative judgments allow consumers to express their selves. That is, as the opportunity to express one’s self is hedonically marked, tasks that allow for such self-expression should lead to greater enjoyment than tasks that do not allow for such self-expression (i.e., non-evaluative judgments). Importantly, the authors rule out processing fluency as an alternative mechanism that may drive the relationship between expressing one’s likes and the enjoyment of this task.

Although the empirical evidence reported by He et al. (2019) is convincing and comprehensive, there are also certain limitations to their analysis. First, the authors focus on self-expression as the key underlying process and rule out processing fluency as an alternative mechanism. However, while most of the studies rely on very large samples (i.e., roughly 500 participants per experimental cell), which points to a small effect size, the study testing the role of fluency relies on a relatively small sample size (i.e., roughly 60 participants per experimental cell). Hence, this analysis may have lacked sufficient statistical power ( $1-\beta = .33$ ). Second, the authors test only one potential moderating condition (i.e., valence of the product that needs to be evaluated) without considering other potential boundary conditions (such as the type of product). Given these limitations, the present research aims (1) to check the robustness and replicability of the presumably small effect of expressing one’s likes to act on the call of the open science movement to respond to the replication crisis in the behavioral sciences (Open Science Collaboration, 2015); (2) to test fluency as an alternative, respectively

additional, process variable with adequate statistical power; and (3) to introduce product type (hedonic vs. utilitarian) as a potential boundary condition for the reported effect.

## **2 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

Over the course of life, humans develop, strengthen, and constantly present their selves – who and what they are (Rogers, 1947; Belk, 1988). Self-expression, the act of disclosing our identity, is a fundamental human need and can be accomplished through deciding, speaking, and acting (Aaker, 1999; Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011). Katz (1960) indicates that the expression of values is more important for holding and changing attitudes than their actual instrumental function. Expressing ourselves is important to build a clear and stable self-image, thus serving as a reward (Katz, 1960). Sharing this view, Gollwitzer and Kirchhof (1998) stress that we are not only defined by characteristics such as gender or origin, but also by what we like and dislike. Especially in Western, individualistic cultures it is important to express uniqueness as it enables us to dissociate from what we do not want to be (Kim & Drolet, 2003). Furthermore, self-expression influences internal psychological processes: The expression of the self leads to positive feelings, whereas the suppression leads to negative outcomes (Pennebaker, Kiecolt, Richards, & Gross, 1988).

Building on these arguments, He et al. (2019) examine the hedonic value of expressing one's likes. In a series of studies, participants were asked to express their liking for a range of products such as t-shirts (i.e., an evaluative judgment) or to rate a particular attribute of these t-shirts such as casualness or colorfulness (i.e., a non-evaluative judgment). Participants were found to experience more pleasure when assessing and expressing their likes or dislikes, an effect that was driven by the opportunity for self-expression. Accordingly, this effect only occurs when participants have the opportunity to externalize their judgment (versus keeping the judgment private). Reflecting on our preferences allows us to express something about our self and the more we can reveal our self, the more pleasure we experience.

To provide further support for the notion that the effect of liking operates through self-expression, He et al. (2019) also rule out processing fluency as an alternative mechanism. However, as noted above, this analysis was carried out with insufficient statistical power. More importantly, assessing the role of fluency in mediating the effect of evaluation-based judgments is important from a conceptual perspective because fluency is inherently linked to hedonic experiences (Landwehr & Eckmann, 2020).

Processing fluency refers to the metacognitive experience of the ease or difficulty of ongoing cognitive processes (Schwarz, 2004; Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Fluency signals progress towards a successful processing and interpretation of incoming information, which is a hedonically positive experience. Hence, stimuli or tasks that are easy to process trigger mild positive affect and are evaluated more positively than stimuli or tasks that are difficult to process (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001; Winkielman et al., 2003). The experience of processing fluency can be accurately reported by consumers (Graf, Mayer, & Landwehr, 2018) and numerous studies show positive effects of experienced fluency on important marketing outcomes (e.g., Labroo, Dhar, & Schwarz, 2008; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee & Labroo, 2003; Novemsky, Dhar, Schwarz & Simonson, 2007). With respect to the present context, we assume that evaluative tasks lead to higher fluency than non-evaluative tasks because the former are associated with a highly accessible part of our memory, namely our own identity. As high accessibility is a key determinant of fluency (Schwarz, 2004), expressing one's own identity through evaluative judgments should be associated with high processing fluency.

To examine if self-expression or fluency mediate the effect of expressing one's likes on task enjoyment, it is useful to consider a boundary condition that is related to both process variables, namely the type of product that is evaluated. In this regard, the marketing literature has made an important distinction between utilitarian and hedonic products. Utilitarian products are defined as being useful and functional and achieve a practical goal (e.g., laundry detergent; Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Okada 2005). Such products are bought because they enable consumers to solve a problem, thus giving them a sense of control (Chen, Lee, & Yap, 2017). In contrast, hedonic products are defined as being pleasant and fun, bringing enjoyment and stimulating the human senses (e.g., perfume). Such purchases originate from the desire to indulge oneself and fulfill self-expressive goals (Maimaran & Simonson, 2011; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). Hedonic products are often related to deep-seated desires and preferences, the consumption of hedonic products is more self-expressive by nature than the consumption of utilitarian products (Belk 1988; Wiecek, Wentzel, & Erkin, 2020). Consequently, evaluating hedonic products should allow for greater self-expression than evaluating utilitarian products, which, in turn, should lead to higher enjoyment. At the same time, the evaluation of hedonic products should proceed more fluently than the evaluation of utilitarian products because consumers can rely on the readily available affect-as-information heuristic when forming such judgments (Schwarz, 2004). In sum, these arguments lead to the following hypotheses (see also Figure 1):

H1: Task enjoyment is higher for evaluation-based judgments than for non-evaluative judgments (replication of He et al., 2019).

H2: Task enjoyment of evaluation-based judgments is higher when the product to be evaluated is hedonic rather than utilitarian in nature.

H3a: Self-expression mediates the effect of product evaluation on task enjoyment.

H3b: Processing fluency mediates the effect of product evaluation on task enjoyment.

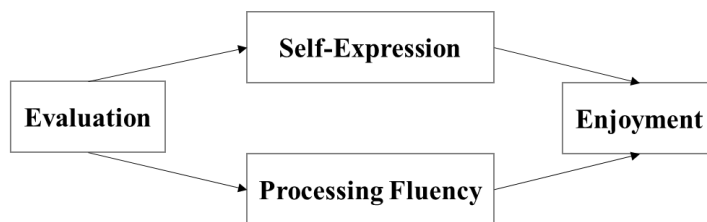


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of this paper

### 3 Study 1

Study 1 aims to replicate the second study of He et al. (2019) using a different set of stimuli and a different sample to check the robustness and generalizability of the study's findings. We examined whether evaluative judgments lead to higher enjoyment than non-evaluative judgments and whether this effect is mediated by self-expressiveness. The participants for the study were recruited in a lecture of a large German university ( $N=202$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.77$ , 41.6 % female). The study employs a one-factorial between-subjects design (type of evaluation: evaluative vs. non-evaluative). In the evaluative condition, participants were asked to express their liking of ten t-shirts of a large online retailer, whereas in the non-evaluative condition participants evaluated the casualness of the same ten t-shirts. All items, unless otherwise stated, were taken from He et al. (2019). For the dependent variable "task enjoyment" ( $\alpha = .89$ ) participants responded to two items (1="I did not enjoy this task at all"; 7="I enjoyed this task very much" and 1="I feel it was not fun at all"; 7="I feel it was very fun"). In addition, participants reported their degree of self-expression (1="I expressed very little about myself" to 7="I expressed a lot about myself"). Participants also reported their task involvement as well as some additional demographics and personality measures.

An ANCOVA controlling for task involvement yielded a significant positive effect for evaluation type on task enjoyment ( $F(1, 201)=11.39$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $M_{\text{eval}}=4.52$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ;  $M_{\text{non-eval}}=3.69$ ,  $SD=1.47$ ). Furthermore, participants reported significantly higher self-expression in the evaluative group than in the non-evaluative group ( $F(1, 201)=4.107$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $MSE_{\text{eval}}=4.08$ ,

SD=1.87;  $MSE_{\text{non-eval}}=3.55$ , SD=1.87). A process analysis using model 4 of the PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2013) revealed that perceived self-expression mediated the effect of evaluation type on task enjoyment ( $B=-.183$ , 95% CI [-.3803, -.0080]). Hence, Study 1 successfully replicates the findings of He et al. (2019) and serves as a starting point for our more fine-grained analysis summarized in H2, H3a, and H3b.

## 4 Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to investigate how task enjoyment differs across the evaluation of hedonic versus utilitarian products and to dig deeper into the underlying psychological mechanism (i.e., self-expression and/or processing fluency), thereby testing hypotheses H2, H3a, and H3b. To manipulate product type, we selected t-shirts as a hedonic product and laundry detergents as a utilitarian product, in line with the conceptualizations of these products in the literature (Batra & Ahtola, 1991).

The study used a mixed design where the type of product (hedonic vs. utilitarian) was manipulated as a within-subjects factor and the order of the evaluations (hedonic first vs. utilitarian first) as a between-subjects factor. In particular, all participants rated a set of ten pictures of t-shirts and a set of ten pictures of laundry detergents, where the order of the sets was experimentally counterbalanced. We followed the recommendation from Fritz & MacKinnon (2007) to sample at least 500 participants to test for mediation when effect sizes are assumed to be small. Participants were recruited through Amazon MTurk. Twenty-three participants were excluded due to an attention check and incomplete data sets, resulting in a final sample of  $N=599$  ( $M_{\text{age}} = 33.98$ , 32.4% female).

After indicating their enjoyment of the judgment task and their perceived self-expression, participants reported perceived processing fluency on a 20-point scale (Graf et al., 2018). To check the effectiveness of the hedonic-utilitarian manipulation, we used three items from Wiecek et al. (2020). As expected, t-shirts were evaluated as being more hedonic than laundry detergents ( $F(1, 598)=49.08$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $M_{\text{Hedonic}}=4.84$ ,  $SD=1.63$ ;  $M_{\text{Utilitarian}}=3.74$ ,  $SD=2.17$ ). In addition, we collected sociodemographic variables and some additional variables for exploratory purposes.

A mixed ANOVA with product type (within-subjects: hedonic, utilitarian) and order (between-subjects: hedonic first, utilitarian first) as independent variables was run. The analysis revealed a significant effect of product type ( $F(1, 598)=34.60$ ,  $p<.001$ ), no effect of order ( $F(1, 598)=0.06$ ,  $p>.1$ ), and a significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 598)=9.53$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Figure 2 shows the means per experimental cell, revealing an ordinal interaction pattern. Specifically, the main effect of product type provides support for H2 and indicates that evaluating hedonic products leads to greater task enjoyment than evaluating utilitarian products. (Note that the ordinal interaction effect indicates that evaluating hedonic products is always considered more enjoyable than evaluating utilitarian ones but that this effect is larger when hedonic products are the first to be evaluated in the set. As this effect has no theoretical relevance for our hypotheses, it is not discussed further.)

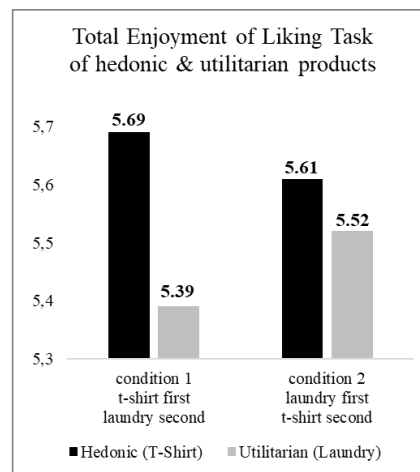


Figure 2: Effect of evaluating hedonic & utilitarian products on the total enjoyment

We performed separate mediation analyses for repeated-measures designs using the MEMORE macro for SPSS (Montoya & Hayes, 2017). Using model 1 of the MEMORE macro with 5,000 bootstrapped samples revealed that the effect of product type on task enjoyment was significantly mediated by perceived self-expression ( $B=.0676$ , 95% CI [.0345, .1102]) as well as by processing fluency ( $B=.0093$ , 95% CI [.0003, .0249]). Participants evaluating hedonic products enjoyed the task more because a) they felt better able to express something about themselves and b) they perceived it to be easier than evaluating utilitarian products. The results provide support for the mediating role of self-expression and processing fluency, supporting H3a and H3b.

## 5 General Discussion

The objective of this paper was to extend our understanding of how expressing one's likes affects enjoyment – both from a conceptual and an empirical perspective. To this end, the current study (1) successfully replicated the study of He et al. (2019), (2) tested self-expression and fluency as mediators, and (3) identified the type of product (hedonic vs.



utilitarian) as an important moderating condition. We replicated the finding that evaluation-based judgments lead to higher task enjoyment than non-evaluation-based judgments. In both studies, we showed that this effect is mediated by self-expression. Extending the theoretical and empirical work of He et al. (2019), Study 2 also showed that fluency operates as an additional mediator, which reveals that the psychological mechanism is more complex than previously assumed. Finally, we postulate that the level of enjoyment of evaluative tasks depends on product type such that it is higher for hedonic than for utilitarian products. The results of Study 2 provide support for this argument and show that increased self-expression and increased processing fluency jointly drive the observed total effect.

While the present results extend the findings of He et al. (2019) in important ways, they also leave some important questions open for future research. The finding that the link between evaluating a product and task enjoyment is conditional on product type points to the possibility that other factors that increase/decrease the self-expressiveness and/or fluency of an evaluative task should act as additional moderators. Brand familiarity, product aesthetics, and current mood are likely candidates that could be examined as potential moderators of the basic effect by future research. Furthermore, because we were able to identify fluency as a second process variable that mediated the effect in addition to self-expressiveness, it would be interesting to design studies that dissociate self-expressiveness and fluency in order to examine whether one or both variables are necessary and/or sufficient for the effect to occur.

In closing, our studies demonstrate that consumers enjoy sharing their preferences even if they do not derive any functional benefit from doing so. From a theoretical perspective, our findings show that this effect is more complex than previously envisioned and is driven by both self-expression and processing fluency. From a managerial perspective, our findings may help companies by showing how and why this effect operates. Companies need to consider that people do not only browse for products and like them with the intention to buy them, but also to express themselves, build their identity, and to experience pleasure.

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