

Let's get Energized: edifying activities are more energizing than gratifying activities.

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ABSTRACT

Given the choice between edifying (activities that provide elements of moral, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, or religious pleasure) and gratifying (activities that satisfy; indulge; humor, as one's desires or appetites) activities, choosing gratification seems easier and more pleasurable. But how do we feel *after* partaking in each activity? In this paper I show empirically that doing something edifying is associated with feeling more energized and uplifted compared to doing something gratifying. In the pre-study, I show that there is a consensus regarding the energizing effect of partaking in edifying activities vs. gratifying activities, and in two studies demonstrate that edifying activities are significantly more energizing and less exhausting compared to both gratifying and neutral activities.

Key words: motivation, edification, pleasure

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

“Short is the joy that guilty pleasure brings” – Euripides

“What’s my guilty pleasure? The thing is, I never feel guilty about pleasures” – Tom Hiddleston

As the above two quotes demonstrate, the modern consumer has a conflicting relationship with pleasure. Surely all pleasure, given that it doesn’t hurt anybody else, should be equally good? According to John Stuart Mill, however, there exists ‘higher’ pleasures associated with our capacity for high culture, learning, contentment, etc. and we should value those pleasures more than ‘lower’ or animalistic pleasures such as sex, eating, etc. (Mill, 1966). However, doing an activity that might appear to be more effortful but provide an element of *edification*, defined as the moral, intellectual, or spiritual instruction or improvement of someone (“Edify,.” n.d.), might actually be more energizing than doing something gratifying.

In the consumer behavior literature, consumer actions/decisions/motivations are often divided into the following dichotomies: hedonic vs. utilitarian (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Lim & Ang, 2008); goal vs. no goal (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999); experiential vs. consumption (Schmitt et al., 2015); intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation (Reiss, 2012). These existent dichotomies, while useful, confounds the edifying activities with hedonic activities and intrinsic/extrinsic activities. This is probably because many of the edifying activities tend to overlap with activities that lead to long-term goal achievements, so it is often considered to be extrinsically motivated. In fact, I show in this paper that edifying activities are not only inherently valuable, but it also leaves you energized after. This is counter-intuitive, since many of the ‘high-brow’ activities seem effortful and therefore would seem more exhausting than gratifying activities that seem to take little to no effort to partake in.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Pleasure and happiness

Experiencing pleasure is one of the key aspects of achieving happiness and well-being (Berridge & Kringelbach, 2011, 2015). Pleasure can range from simple sensory pleasures

(hedonia) to “higher” pleasures that activate our brain in the cognitive, social, aesthetic, and moral sense (eudaimonia) (Alexander et al., 2021; Berridge & Kringelbach, 2015). Many of the ancient and modern philosophers alike have alluded to this fact and emphasized the importance of prioritizing the eudemonic pleasure over hedonic pleasures (Ames, 2010; Berridge & Kringelbach, 2015; Mill, 1966; Wilson, 2019).

2.2 Edification and pleasure

Edification is defined as the moral, intellectual, or spiritual instruction or improvement of someone (“Edify,” n.d.). It is often discussed in the context of education, where the literature focuses mostly on the *intellectual* improvement of pupils in school in an instrumental manner (O’Connor, 2014; Ryan et al., 2018). Similar constructs exist, often found under the ‘intrinsic/extrinsic motivation’ literature, but again, these are often limited to educational contexts (Reiss, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2009) or discussed as part of long-term goal achievement (Brunel, 1999; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999). There is some literature on a related experience, such as *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) or *hyperfocus* (Ashinoff & Abu-Akel, 2021), but these seem to be more on the state of being ‘in the zone’ or having an intense concentration and being in ‘the moment’ *during* some task where time seems to stop and one’s senses are dulled to outside stimuli. While related, I believe the edifying activities leave people more energized *after* the activity, so it is a distinct construct.

2.3 Edification vs. Gratification in Consumer Behavior

As established earlier, there is a general consensus on the existence of *higher* and *lower* forms of pleasure, often described as eudaimonia and hedonia (Alexander et al., 2021). However, to the best of my knowledge, this distinction is not really reflected in the consumer behavior literature. In fact, both edifying activities and gratifying activities are often found under the framework of ‘hedonic’ consumer behavior or activities that are ‘intrinsically motivated’ (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999; Scarpi, 2021). Further complicating the categorization of edifying activities is that they are often in alignment with long-term goal achievement.

I would like to propose that within what the extant literature have grouped under ‘hedonic’ consumption thus far, there are activities that should have distinct categorization of its own as ‘edifying’ activities – something that offers consumers with ‘higher’ pleasures as

defined by philosophers and psychologists, and that this leaves the consumer with feeling more energized.

H1: Edifying activities (activities that provide elements of moral, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, or religious pleasure) are more energizing/motivating than gratifying activities (activities that are indulgent or giving into lower impulses or ‘appetites’).

Before conducting the main study, I wanted to see if there was a consensus on what activities are considered ‘edifying’ vs. ‘gratifying’ and if there is any lay belief on which is more energizing, so I ran a pre-study on a group of undergraduate students at an East Coast university in a between-subject design.

Pre-study

Participants. Participants were 66 subjects recruited from a subject pool at NYU behavioral lab (63.93% female, $M_{age} = 19.08$). Participants were randomly assigned to either the edifying or the gratifying condition (34 edifying, 32 gratifying).

Manipulation. Participants were asked to list three activities. In the edifying condition, they were asked to name three activities they might do to improve themselves, and in the gratifying condition, they were asked to name three activities they might do for instant satisfaction. After naming the three activities, they were then asked to imagine doing one of the activities they named for one hour.

Dependent measure. After listing the three activities and to imagine doing one of those activities for one hour, the participants were asked to report how they would feel on a 1-7 Likert scale how much they would feel: energized, motivated, uplifted, exhausted, dragged down, and depressed (in random order). After calculating Chronbach’s alpha for the measures, they were grouped into ‘energized’: energized, motivated, uplifted (Chronbach’s $\alpha = .93$) and ‘exhausted’: exhausted, dragged down, depressed (Chronbach’s $\alpha = .72$)

Results:

The participants in the edifying condition predict that they will feel more energized ($M_{edifying} = 5.52$, $SD = 1.30$) than the participants in the gratifying condition ($M_{gratifying} = 4.55$, $SD = 1.74$) $p = .017$. The participants in the edifying condition also predict that they will feel more exhausted ($M_{edifying} = 1.67$, $SD = 1.08$) than in the gratifying condition, although the difference was not significant ($M_{gratifying} = 1.11$, $SD = 1.25$) $p = .067$.

Edifying	Gratifying
Physical Activities	Social Activities
Mental & Emotional Well-being	Physical Exercise
Intellectual & Educational Activities	Leisure & Entertainment
Leisure & Recreation	Food & Drink
Nutrition & Diet	Relaxation & Self-Care
Self-improvement & Personal Growth	Music & Arts
Social Activities	Shopping & Fashion
Rest & Relaxation	Recreational Activities
	Reading & Intellectual Activities

<Table 1: List of edifying and gratifying activities>

Discussion:

The result from the pre-study shows that while there are perhaps different types of activities that could be defined as ‘edifying’ vs. ‘gratifying’, that there is also a lot of overlap. The pre-study also indicates that there is an intuition for feeling more energized after doing an edifying activity vs. gratifying activity, which supports H1. The participants also seem to intuit that edifying activities would be more exhausting as well, which my hypothesis did not predict, but is not surprising, since many edifying activities require more effort.

Next, I wanted to see if people who do an edifying task would *actually* find it more energizing than the gratifying task. To prevent the participants from hypothesis-guessing, the purported purpose for the task was reading comprehension. For the edifying task, I chose an excerpt from Plato’s ‘The Republic’ where Socrates and his friends are discussing justice. This excerpt was chosen because it provided the readers with the quality of edification (being uplifted in a moral or spiritual way) without having any explicit long-term goal associated with it. For the gratifying task, I chose an excerpt of similar length from a gossip column about a reality show star Bre Tiesi, since it contained a rather scandalous storyline that seems consistent with a more low-brow pleasure of gratification. I also wanted to see if they only *felt* that they were more energized, or if this could also be measured in a behavioral way, so based on the ego-depletion literature, I created a set of 10 solvable anagrams for the participants to solve (Baumeister et al., 1998).

Study 1:

Participants. Participants were 134 subjects recruited from a Prolific (43% female $M_{age} = 38.31$). Participants were randomly assigned to either the edifying or the gratifying condition (65 edifying, 69 gratifying).

Manipulation. Participants were told that this was a reading comprehension task. In the edifying condition, they read an excerpt from Plato's 'The Republic' and in the gratifying condition, they read an excerpt from a gossip magazine, 'Us weekly' about a reality show star, Bre Tiesi (appendix A). They each answered three questions about the excerpt to both ensure that they read the excerpt carefully and to put weight to the purported object of the study.

Dependent measure. Like in the pre-study, the participants were asked to report how they would feel on a 1-7 Likert scale how much they would feel: energized, motivated, uplifted, exhausted, dragged down, and depressed (in a randomized order). Then they solved 10 solvable anagram problems.

Results:

The participants in the edifying condition felt more energized ($M_{edifying} = 2.74$, $SD = 1.58$) than the participants in the gratifying condition ($M_{gratifying} = 1.96$, $SD = 1.37$) $p = .0017$. The participants in the edifying condition felt *less* exhausted ($M_{edifying} = 2.54$, $SD = 1.38$) than in the gratifying condition, although the difference was not significant ($M_{gratifying} = 2.87$, $SD = 1.38$) $p = .147$.

I also compared the total number of anagrams solved in each condition, and the participants in the edifying condition solved more anagrams (82.15%) compared to those in the gratifying condition (77.82%), $p = 0.028$. This is also consistent with H1 that those in the edifying condition in fact had more energy after the task.

Discussion:

While study 1 demonstrates that edifying activity indeed seems to give participants both the feelings of being energized to solve more anagrams, without a neutral condition, I don't know that the difference is being driven by being edified vs. being gratified. It could also be that the difference is driven by both – that compared to the neutral condition, participants in the edifying condition are more energized, while the ones in the gratifying condition are less energized.

So, in study 2, I replicate the first study but add a neutral condition where participants read an excerpt from an Owner's manual, which is neither edifying nor gratifying. Furthermore, I wanted to test if participants will choose more edifying tasks or more gratifying tasks after performing each task.

H2a: Doing an edifying task makes you choose edifying tasks subsequently.

H2b: Doing a gratifying task makes you choose gratifying tasks subsequently.

Study 2:

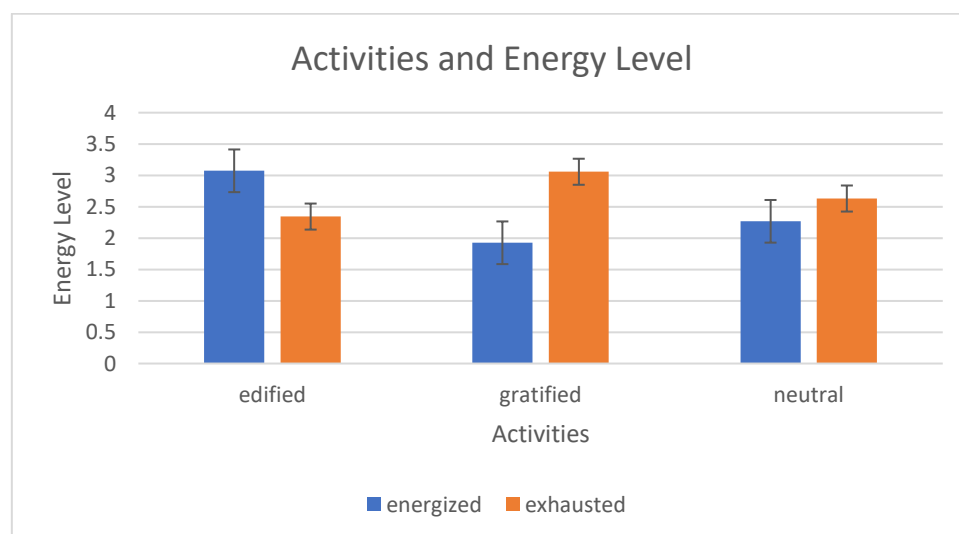
Participants. Participants were 508 subjects recruited from a Prolific (50.78% female $M_{age} = 43.74$). Participants were randomly assigned to three conditions (edifying, neutral, gratifying).

Manipulation. Participants were told that this was a reading comprehension task. The edifying and gratifying excerpts were identical to Study 1. In the neutral condition, they read an Owner's manual of a vacuum cleaner. After the reading comprehension task, they each answered three questions about the excerpt.

Dependent measure. Like in the pre-study, the participants were asked to report how they would feel on a 1-7 Likert scale how much they would feel: energized, motivated, uplifted, exhausted, dragged down, and depressed (in a randomized order). Then they were given a choice of choosing an additional reading comprehension task and were given a choice among an excerpt from a) Dante's 'Divine Comedy', or b) US weekly article about Ariana Madix, or c) no article. I also measured their negative and positive mood using PANAS subsequently. Finally, I asked if they could guess what the task was about, and nobody predicted the hypothesis.

Results:

DV1



<Figure 1: Activities and the actual energy level after completing the activities>

Comparison	Energized Difference	Exhausted Difference	p-value
Edifying vs. Gratifying	+1.14	-0.71	< .0001
Edifying vs. Neutral	+0.80	-0.29	< .0001
Gratifying vs. Neutral	-0.34	+0.42	.026

<Table 2: the comparisons and the differences for energized and exhausted level>

Thus, H1 is confirmed once again. Furthermore, this study suggests that doing an edifying activity is both *more* energizing and *less* exhausting than both the neutral and gratifying tasks, while doing gratifying task is *less* energizing and *more* exhausting than both the gratifying and neutral tasks.

DV2

To determine if doing something edifying would lead to being more motivated to do further edifying tasks and doing gratifying things would lead to do further gratifying tasks (H2a and H2b), we calculated the percentage of participants in each condition what task they chose:

	edifying	gratifying	none
Edifying	49 %	32 %	20 %
Gratifying	56 %	30 %	14 %
Neutral	51 %	29 %	20 %

<Table 3: the percentage of participants who chose edifying vs. gratifying vs. no activity>

Independently of what condition they were in, people choose edifying tasks more than the gratifying task, and they choose to do no articles the least. Thus, H2a and H2b were not supported. This topic needs further exploration.

Discussion:

We make countless choices throughout the day, and often it seems easier and less effortful to choose to indulge in gratifying activities, such as eating that chocolate cake for dessert or watch some mindless shows or be on a social media cite for hours on end. However, the above studies indicate that perhaps that is not the best use of our time in terms of feeling better or refreshed afterwards. In fact, it appears that doing something more *edifying*, such as reading a ‘high-brow’ literature, might be more energizing than indulging in gratifying activities and neutral activities.

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