

When Productivity is an Illusion: The Effect of Goal- versus Leisure-Oriented User-Generated-Content on Viewers

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Abstract:

This research examines how different types of user-generated content affects viewers' psychological responses. We distinguish between goal-oriented content, which portrays creators progressing toward a specific task, and leisure-oriented content, which is designed primarily for enjoyment and relaxation. Across two experiments, participants who viewed goal-oriented content consistently reported higher negative time perception and stronger vicarious accomplishment compared to those who viewed leisure-oriented content. These findings reveal a robust psychological pattern: goal-oriented content can create an illusion of progress that makes viewers feel productive while simultaneously heightening awareness of time loss. This suggests that seemingly “productive” content may unintentionally encourage passive consumption and procrastination rather than genuine action.

Keywords: User-generated content, Vicarious accomplishment, Negative time perception

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

In the digital media era, user-generated videos on platforms such as YouTube have become a common part of viewers' discretionary time. These videos vary widely in purpose: goal-oriented content portrays creators progressing toward a specific task, whereas leisure-oriented content is designed primarily for enjoyment and relaxation. Although both depict routine activities, their divergent orientations toward goal pursuit versus entertainment may shape how viewers interpret their own productivity and emotion. The overarching objective of this research is to examine how different types of user-generated content influence psychological responses.

Previous literature indicates that everyday-task content may trigger distinct psychological processes. Research on observational learning demonstrates that people can experience motivation, competence, or progress simply by watching others perform a behavior (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Similarly, research on goal activation suggests that when it comes to leisure-oriented activities (e.g., food choice), consumers experience vicarious goal fulfillment by the mere presence of one option and thus choose the other option (Wilcox et al., 2009). Complementing these perspectives, Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld (2004) propose that entertainment experiences emerge from cognitive and affective processing during media exposure, meaning that viewers can have meaningful psychological reactions even without engaging in the activity themselves. Taken together, these insights imply that everyday-task videos may shape viewers' psychological responses such as time use perception, and goal progress even in the absence of direct action.

However, little is known about whether *different content types* systematically produce these effects. To address this gap, this research examines how goal- versus leisure-oriented user-generated content shapes viewers' psychological experiences across multiple empirical studies.

2. Method and Results

2.1 Pilot study A

As a first step, we aim to empirically explore the types of content viewers consume and establish the association between content types and viewers' psychological reactions. We conducted one survey with 999 participants from Connect Cloud Research (Mage = 38.4, 48.5% female). We chose YouTube as the platform because it is one of the largest and most

active environments for user-generated content. YouTube provides naturalistic, widely consumed stimuli created by ordinary users, allowing us to test our hypotheses with ecologically valid content while maintaining consistency across studies. Participants were first asked, “*What type of video do you watch most often in this category?*” They were able to select as many content type as they wanted from: Study with me, Clean with me, Working out, Food preparation or Cooking, Mukbang (videos that feature a person eating large quantities of food), and Lifestyle or daily routine vlogs, and indicated any other content type(s) that were not mentioned above under the open-ended option (i.e., Others). From the open-ended responses, we identified additional video types (e.g., DIY/Assembly/Disassembly, Learning, Gaming). We then manually classified all reported video types into two overarching content categories. Goal-oriented content included Study with me, Clean with me, Working out, Food preparation or Cooking, DIY/Assembly/Disassembly, and Learning, whereas leisure-oriented content included Mukbang, Lifestyle or daily routine vlogs, and Gaming.

Table 1. Distribution of User-Generated Content Types

Category	Count	%
Food preparation or cooking	351	35.14
Working out	265	26.53
Lifestyle or daily routine vlogs	198	19.82
Clean with me	66	6.61
Mukbang	37	3.70
DIY / Assembly / Disassembly	35	3.50
Study with me	21	2.10
Learning	13	1.30
Gaming	13	1.30

Table 2. Viewing Frequency of User-Generated Content in the Past 30 Days

Frequency	Count	%
Occasionally	419	41.94
Frequently	373	37.34
Very frequently	150	15.02
Rarely	57	5.71

Tables 1 and 2 present the tabulation results of content types and viewing frequencies.

We also assessed participants' psychological responses to user-generated content using multi-item scales rated on a 1–7 scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much). Emotional activation included items reflecting both energized and calm states (e.g., “*I feel motivated/peaceful.*”). Subjective productivity assessed perceived progress and meaningful use of time (e.g., “*I feel productive even though I haven't done anything while watching the video.*”). Time perception consisted of items capturing both negative and positive experiences of time use (e.g., “*Watching this video is a good use of my time.*”, “*I sometimes watch these videos to procrastinate.*”). Vicarious goal fulfillment was assessed with items reflecting indirect experience and satisfaction (e.g., “*Watching the video makes me feel satisfied, even without doing the activity myself.*”). Internal reliability was acceptable across all measures: emotional activation (low arousal emotion $\alpha = .891$; high arousal emotion $\alpha = .794$), subjective productivity ($\alpha = .915$), time perception (negative $\alpha = .764$; positive $\alpha = .732$), and vicarious fulfillment ($\alpha = .691$).

To examine how content type influenced viewers' psychological responses, we conducted a series of ANOVAs across all measured outcomes. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and ANOVA results for each psychological response by content type (goal- vs. leisure-oriented content).

Emotional Activation. Goal-oriented content elicited significantly higher high emotional arousal than leisure-oriented content ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 5.22$, $SD = 1.26$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 4.60$, $SD = 1.45$; $F = 41.51$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.47$), whereas low emotional arousal did not differ between groups ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 5.01$, $SD = 1.24$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 5.14$, $SD = 1.18$; $F = 1.91$, $p = 0.17$; Cohen's $d = -0.10$). These results suggest that goal-oriented content heightens viewers' emotional activation, whereas both content types produce similar levels of low-arousal emotional responses.

Subjective Productivity. Goal-oriented content produced significantly higher subjective productivity ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 4.66$, $SD = 1.48$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 3.91$, $SD = 1.71$; $F = 43.82$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.49$) than leisure-oriented content. These results indicate that viewers feel more productive and perceive greater goal progress when watching goal-oriented content compared to leisure-oriented one.

Time-Use Perception. Goal-oriented content led to higher positive time perception ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 4.82$, $SD = 1.41$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 3.93$, $SD = 1.48$; $F = 72.04$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.62$), whereas leisure-oriented content led to higher negative time perception ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 3.62$, $SD = 1.56$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 4.05$, $SD = 1.42$; $F = 15.20$, $p < .001$;

Cohen's $d = -0.29$). These results suggest that goal-oriented content leads viewers to feel their time was used more constructively, whereas leisure-oriented content makes viewers more aware of postponing or putting off their own tasks.

Vicarious Goal Fulfillment. Leisure-oriented content elicited greater vicarious goal fulfillment than goal-oriented content ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 4.11$, $SD = 1.38$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 4.41$, $SD = 1.25$; $F = 9.00$, $p = 0.003$; Cohen's $d = -0.22$). These results indicate that leisure-oriented content makes viewers feel more as if they have experienced the activity through the creator, feel satisfied without doing it themselves, and even crave the activity without acting on it, compared to goal-oriented content.

Overall, the results of our survey showed that goal-oriented content produced a more activating and productivity enhancing response pattern, increasing high emotional arousal, subjective productivity, and positive time perception. In contrast, leisure-oriented content yielded greater negative time perception and stronger vicarious goal fulfillment, reflecting a more passive but gratifying viewing experience. These results indicate that goal- and leisure-oriented content shape viewers' psychological reactions in systematically different ways.

2.2 Pilot study B

To validate our content classification, we conducted a human-coding study on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The goal of this study is to examine if our categorizations of goal- versus leisure-oriented content are shared by content viewers. A total of 105 raters evaluated whether each video type was generally goal- or leisure-oriented. Before rating, participants were provided with definitions of goal- and leisure-oriented content and instructed to select "Cannot Decide/Depends" when they were not sure how to classify. Each content type received, on average, 105 independent judgments. The results were consistent with our categorization in pilot study A: mTurk raters consistently categorized Study with me, Clean with me, Working out, Food preparation or Cooking, DIY/Assembly/Disassembly, and Learning videos as goal-oriented, whereas Mukbang, Lifestyle or daily routine vlogs, and Gaming were rated as leisure-oriented, providing strong convergent validation of our content-type definitions (Table 3).

Table 3. Human coded classification of video content

Content	Goal-oriented	Leisure-oriented	Cannot Decide / Depends	Video Type
Study with me	87 (82.9%)	14 (13.3%)	4 (3.8%)	Goal-oriented
Clean with me	82 (78.1%)	16 (15.2%)	7 (6.7%)	
Working out	93(88.6%)	3 (2.9%)	9 (8.6%)	
Food preparation / Cooking	65 (61.9%)	23 (21.9%)	17 (16.2%)	
DIY/Assembly/Disassembly	81 (77.1%)	15 (14.3%)	9 (8.6%)	
Learning	96 (91.4%)	5 (4.8%)	4 (3.8%)	Leisure-oriented
Mukbang	10 (9.5%)	87 (82.9%)	8 (7.6%)	
Lifestyle or daily routine vlogs	14 (13.3%)	76 (72.4%)	15 (14.3%)	
Gaming	5 (4.8%)	93 (88.6%)	7 (6.7%)	

2.3 Study 1

Although the previous pilot studies showed correlation between consuming user-generated content types and viewers' psychological responses, we cannot claim causal evidence from survey data. To address this, we conducted an experiment where we manipulate the type of content participants consume and measure their subsequently responses. The primary goal of Study 1 was to examine whether directly viewing different types of user-generated content produce systematically diverse psychological responses. We measured negative time perception and vicarious goal fulfillment because these constructs directly reflect our theorized processes. They capture whether content makes viewers feel they have lost time and whether it creates a sense of having accomplished something by watching. We conducted an online experiment with 246 undergraduate students using a between-subjects design (goal-oriented vs. leisure-oriented content). To ensure ecological validity, we selected food preparation and cooking as the goal-oriented stimulus and Mukbang as the leisure-oriented stimulus, two of the most frequently reported content types in Pilot Study A and conceptually parallel because both involve food. To isolate the effect of content type, we carefully controlled the video stimuli. Both clips were taken from the same YouTube creator to hold constant creator characteristics, filming style, and setting. They were extracted from a single original video in which the creator first prepares and cooks a meal and later eats it, allowing us to keep the food type and visual content identical. We created two segments of comparable length (Food preparation and cooking: 2:32; Mukbang:

2:35), and neither included direct verbal communication. By holding creator, food, environment, and video length constant, content orientation was the only meaningful difference between conditions.

Figure 1. Screenshots of Goal- and Leisure-oriented content



After watching the assigned video, participants completed measures of negative time perception and vicarious goal fulfillment, our primary dependent variables. They also responded to several exploratory items related to food-related reactions (e.g., “How hungry do you feel right now?”, “After watching this video, which are you more likely to do first?”, “When do you think you will next eat?”). Finally, participants reported their YouTube viewing habits, including viewing frequency, total daily viewing time, number of subscribed channels, and typical device used to watch YouTube.

Manipulation check. To assess whether participants perceived the intended difference between the goal-oriented and leisure-oriented video conditions, we examined their responses to the classification item (“In your opinion, how would you classify this video?”). As expected, participants who viewed the Food preparation and cooking content overwhelmingly classified it as goal-oriented (71.1% goal vs. 28.1% leisure; 0.8% not sure), whereas participants who viewed the Mukbang content predominantly classified it as leisure-oriented (82.4% leisure vs. 12.8% goal; 4.8% not sure). A chi-square test confirmed that classification differed significantly by condition ($\chi^2(2, N = 246) = 86.32, p < .001$), indicating that the manipulation was successful.

Results

Negative Time Perception. Participants who watched the goal-oriented content reported significantly higher negative time perception than those who watched the leisure-oriented content ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 3.31, SD = 1.41$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 2.54, SD = 1.56; F = 16.32, p = <.001; \text{Cohen's } d = 0.52$).

Vicarious Fulfillment. Participants in the goal-oriented condition also experienced significantly greater vicarious goal fulfillment compared to those in the leisure-oriented condition ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 4.09$, $SD = 1.35$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 2.73$, $SD = 1.47$; $F = 57.01$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.96$).

Participants who watched the goal-oriented content reported higher negative time perception and vicarious fulfillment than those who watched the leisure-oriented content. Goal-oriented content may make viewers feel as though they are engaging in something productive, which can legitimize delaying their own tasks while still feeling involved in the activity. This sense of vicarious progress can coexist with a later realization that time had been consumed, producing higher negative time perception once the viewing ends. At the same time, watching someone complete a purposeful task can create a stronger sense of having “experienced” the activity through the creator, whereas leisure-oriented content offers entertainment without implying progress or accomplishment. We also found an interesting divergence in behavioral intentions. Participants who viewed the Food preparation or cooking content were more likely to select “start cooking something”, whereas those who viewed the Mukbang content more frequently chose “Do something totally unrelated”. This overall distribution differed significantly between conditions ($\chi^2(6, N = 246) = 37.69$, $p < .001$). This pattern suggests that goal-oriented content may evoke task-related motivation (e.g., “maybe I should cook too”), whereas leisure-oriented content is less likely to trigger such thoughts, leading viewers to choose activities unrelated to the video.

2.4 Study 2

Building on the findings from Study 1, we conducted a follow-up experiment using the same two Youtube contents with a broader adult sample recruited from Connect Cloud Research ($N = 1,011$, $\text{Mage} = 39.6$, 53.1% female). The goal of this study was to replicate the effects of content type on psychological responses outside the student population and examine whether the patterns generalize to a more diverse set of viewers. Participants were randomly assigned to watch either the Food preparation and cooking content (goal-oriented) or the Mukbang content (leisure-oriented).

After viewing the assigned content, participants completed the psychological response measures used in Pilot Study A, including low and high emotional arousal (Cronbach's $\alpha = .946$ for low arousal emotions and $.924$ for high arousal emotions), subjective productivity (Cronbach's $\alpha = .959$), positive and negative time perception (Cronbach's $\alpha = .805$ for positive time perception and $.755$ for negative time perception), and vicarious fulfillment

(Cronbach's $\alpha = .868$). We additionally included two items assessing heightened emotional activation (i.e., "This video made me feel emotionally activated." and "This video made me feel energized."). Participants then responded to exploratory items related to food-related reactions (e.g., "How hungry do you feel right now?", "Which are you more likely to do first after watching this video?", "When do you think you will next eat?"). Finally, they reported their YouTube viewing habits, including viewing frequency, total daily viewing time, number of subscribed channels, and typical device used to watch YouTube.

Manipulation Check. To verify that participants recognized the intended difference between the two contents conditions, we analyzed responses to the classification item ("In your opinion, how would you classify this video?"). Consistent with expectations, the Food preparation and cooking video was overwhelmingly identified as goal-oriented (88.3% goal; 11.1% leisure; 0.6% not sure), whereas the Mukbang video was primarily judged to be leisure-oriented (78.1% leisure; 16.2% goal; 5.7% not sure). A chi-square test indicated that classification differed by condition ($\chi^2(2, N = 1,011) = 526.88, p < .001$) confirming that the manipulation was successful.

Results

Negative Time Perception. Participants who watched the goal-oriented content reported significantly higher negative time perception than those who watched the leisure-oriented content ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 3.51, SD = 1.45$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 2.36, SD = 1.42$; $F = 161.67, p = <.001$; Cohen's $d = 0.80$).

Vicarious Fulfillment. Participants in the food preparation and cooking condition also experienced significantly greater vicarious fulfillment compared to those in the mukbang condition ($M_{\text{goal-oriented}} = 4.51, SD = 1.55$ vs. $M_{\text{leisure-oriented}} = 2.86, SD = 1.70$; $F = 259.61, p = <.001$; Cohen's $d = 1.01$).

These findings replicate the pattern observed in Study 1: Food preparation and cooking content consistently elicited higher negative time perception and greater vicarious fulfillment than Mukbang content. This convergence suggests that goal-oriented contents reliably heighten viewers' sense of productive engagement while simultaneously encouraging perceptions of time loss and indirect accomplishment. In other words, the psychological effects of these content types appear robust and generalizable beyond the student population.

3. Implications

This research offers several theoretical and practical implications for understanding how user-generated content shapes viewers' psychological experiences. First, these findings contribute to the growing literature on media-induced psychological states by identifying a unique pattern associated with goal-oriented content: the simultaneous emergence of vicarious accomplishment and negative time perception. Across studies, viewers felt productive while watching goal-oriented content yet simultaneously recognized lost time and became more prone to delaying their own tasks. This dual effect reveals an interesting tension: goal-oriented content viewers recognize that they are losing time while watching goal-oriented content, but they continue to watch because it momentarily feels like progress. This illusion of progress substitutes for real effort, ultimately hindering actual productivity and extending prior work on vicarious goal pursuit.

Second, these results have important implications for the consumption of digital platforms. The popularity of goal-oriented contents, such as cooking, study-with-me, or cleaning content, may stem from their ability to deliver both entertainment and a sense of purposeful engagement. However, our findings caution that these videos can also legitimize procrastination by making viewers feel as though they are learning, progressing, or preparing, when they are postponing their own tasks. This insight highlights a previously overlooked cost of "productive entertainment": content that appears beneficial on the surface may paradoxically undermine genuine productivity. Platforms and creators who intentionally curate "productive" content may unintentionally reinforce cycles of passive consumption rather than action.

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