

What Does It Mean to Be Myself (Away From Home)? Bridging the Gap to Hedonic Consumption

Faheem Ahmed
Université Grenoble Alpes
Pierre VALETTE-FLORENCE
Université Grenoble Alpes - IAE

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The current research attempts to answer questions about differing motivations (hedonic, utilitarian) for consumption of products and experiences, working on how individuals adapt their perceptions with varying mental construals surrounding these experiences. The research method relies on an innovative data collection approach, Album On-Line (AOL), to analyze individuals' projective representations and assess their consensus through an INDSCAL approach. These representations help in framing a consumer-centric representation of the affective and cognitive motivations for consumption, based on thought processing (distant, proximal) and language (English/French), in line with contemporary global(cal)ized communications.

Keywords: hedonic consumption, psychological proximity, consumer journeys

1. Introduction

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. 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). The objectives of this research include: 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 chosen 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 to its different consumption forms. Two large enigmas that encircle this consumption domain are the ability to demarcate it from alternate forms, while also inclusively understanding the different instances where individuals optimally realize the act of hedonic consumption. Given the occurrence and diversity 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, motivation based approach is apposite for understanding the various hedonic or utilitarian motivations for different product categories.

1.1 *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 be consumed for cardiovascular benefits from dark chocolate [utilitarian motivation] or a dominantly practical product such as laundry detergent can be bought for its aesthetically pleasing fragrance [hedonic motivation] (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).

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.

1.1.1 *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, recalled later through their senses. For instance, the nostalgia arising from a known fragrance in the halls of a lavish hotel or a luxury store, which the consumer has already experienced previously. This can also be the reminiscence of an image which has been reconstructed from memory with an accumulation of sensory and fantasy elements, to complete an unfinished historic imagery with fantasy based elements (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Singer, 1966). For example, recalling the self as holding a red umbrella out in the rain in Manhattan; herein being out in the rain in Manhattan is a fictional account from a movie; the umbrella's imagery derives itself from an actual possession.

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, focusing more on the aspects of a product's connotations, visual appeal and the identification with a certain milieu or entourage that it signified (Champniss et al., 2015; Levy, 1959). Such instances of multisensory images 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, making the consumer want to associate him/herself with the image, along with what it represents in terms of product purchase and consumption rituals (McCracken, 1990).

Seeking out highly emotive experiences is a central tenet of hedonic products, and the desire for this varies with personal preferences, motivation and level of involvement. The goals of consumption help to better understand the differing ways through which individuals construe these experiences along a spectrum.

1.1.2 Goal-based perspective

One of the more commonly used approaches in marketing is the product-based approach, wherein specific product categories are explicitly classified as decadent vices or necessary virtues (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998; Wertenbroch, 1998). However the lines are blurred when a product's desire increases over time with a decreasing sense of pleasure; in much the same way as consumption rituals would be a fuzzy distinction between toil and pleasure concerning yard work, physical activities (Crossen, 2006; Linden, 2012).

Arising from this product based-approach, a goal-based perspective alighting the pursuit of hedonic or utilitarian objectives (Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Voss et al., 2003) would be more accurate. This is helpful in: 1) regarding hedonic consumption as driven by individuals, shining light on consumer idiosyncrasies than a product's inherent qualities and 2) clearing the debate on product-relevant hedonic and utilitarian attributes (Alba & Williams, 2013). However, many consumption products represent a mix of utilitarian and hedonic motives, making it indistinguishable to set the boundaries between the two inasmuch as considering the individual goals pursued. For instance, a work laptop used for official meetings and streaming Netflix, a smartphone to reply to emails and listen to music. In such cases, identifying the source of pleasure through a means-end distinction can certainly help,

wherein pleasure and pain are hardly distinguishable, such as the pleasure from post-exercise bodily pain.

Another way to consider is looking at individual motivations for consumption. The motivation-based perspective helps to clarify 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, escapism, confrontation or fearful sensations (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Freud, 1955; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Similarly, certain activities which are generally considered to be hedonic vices could seem to be necessary virtues, 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 that lead individuals to pursue something rather than the anticipated result, which are influenced as well by the ways of thinking and thought processes as demarcated through the theory of psychological distance (Nira Liberman et al., 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

1.2 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 et al., 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 that 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 et al., 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, and 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).

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.

1.2.1 Psychological distancing for hedonic consumption

According to Hirschman & Holbrook (1982), there is evidence that suggests consumers sometimes indulge 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 concerning the antecedents. The present moment can often lead to a stronger feeling of emotions, such as fear or adrenaline rush before going on stage, regret arising from time wasted or not well spent just after a long break, or shame from an embarrassing moment in front of friends. Nonetheless, a strong affective feeling is also present where outcomes have already passed or will come to be in future, such as nostalgia for a graduation years ago or joy for an upcoming 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. As the purpose of this research was to uncover the motivation-based hedonic consumption rather than a product-based approach, a mixed-method data collection approach was preferred.

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; Kahn et al., 1997; Lacher, 1989). Insomuch 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’ elicitations through a set of images based on four steps (Kessous, Valette-Florence, & De Barnier, 2017). It starts with asking participants to search for five images based on their

thoughts in relation to psychological distance and hedonic consumption to produce personal albums, providing keywords and narratives recounting their history with the product, brand environment and an experience, all of which is summed up in their chosen image. The next step involves a combination of all individual albums by the researcher to produce a collective album for the group, which is voted on by all respondents if they wish to retain or modify their first album. The third stage involves resending the final collective album after the voting phase, containing pictures that have been selected and agreed upon by multiple participants, back to the group, to evaluate their concordance with the selected images which would comprise the final group album. The final step involves an INDSCAL analysis of the final images selected and voted on by participants, through a graphical representation of these points on a two dimensional geometric space, also referred to sometimes as perceptual maps, with the axes representing consumer preferences or perceptions (Malhotra, 2015). 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 open interaction and input from participants, with that of a projective method. The process culminates in a graphical representation of the

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. The two different manipulation sets (affective, cognitive) tested on two different language-based cultures allowed a 2 (language: English v French) x 2 (condition: affective v cognitive) experimental design. **Table 1** contains the textual manipulations employed for the first round of the AOL in English. For the second round, participants in the cognitive (affective) condition were asked to think of *“the most concrete (evocative) and representative judgments (sensations) and evaluations (emotions) perceived (felt) towards a product that regularly helps you (a symbolic product)”* concerning a *“proximal (distant) and useful (symbolic) product”*. This is line with the construal of emotions at a greater psychological distance and cognition at greater proximities (low distance) and the impact of simultaneous psychological distancing (Chandran & Menon, 2004; Huang et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2008; Kross et al., 2005; Wakslak et al., 2008). The aim was to ask respondents about their consumption of hedonic products, the perception of psychological proximities with these products and efforts undertaken to enhance/reduce their distance with these products.

Native language speakers translated and back translated both the English and French versions at each step. The exploratory method, launched through the Prolific platform, allowed a first-hand identification of different indulgent products and hedonic brands as considered by four sets of consumers, their individual consumption motivations, along with the construction of a narrative. Each of the four conditions included around 10 participants on average, after accounting for churn through the four stages. Data collection lasted during the months of May and June 2019. Based on this, an INDSCAL analysis led to a two-dimensional frame for affective and cognitive motives for hedonic consumption, as represented in **Figure 1** for one of the four conditions.

Affective	Think about a product that you purchased within the last year. You had been dreaming of owning this product for a long time, as it is something that defines who you are and who you want to be. You could not hold yourself back from acquiring it, and expended a substantial amount of effort and resources to obtain this product. It is a symbolic acquisition for you and is not commonly used by your social circle.
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Cognitive	Think about a product that you bought recently within the last month. You had planned this purchase in advance, finding the closest place from where you could buy it at the lowest price. You felt the urge to obtain this product, as it fulfills your needs very well. The product aids your daily tasks through its added efficacy and practicality. It is commonly used by your loved ones and complements your routine activities.
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Table 1: Manipulation for English AOL condition

4. Results and Discussion

The INDSCAL model was run on SPSS v25, which calculated the Euclidean distances between points along a matrix, with vectors representing the distances between the images and keywords as chosen by respondents. Data from participants' agreement with final choice of images and keywords for the final group album was entered into SPSS and subjected to the ALSCAL command. The final output of the ALSCAL command produced a 2-dimensional chart as shown in **Figure 1** for one of the four conditions.

The results from the current study revealed an interesting mix across the two datasets. with the French respondents mainly choosing a mix of technological advancements and gadgets, 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.

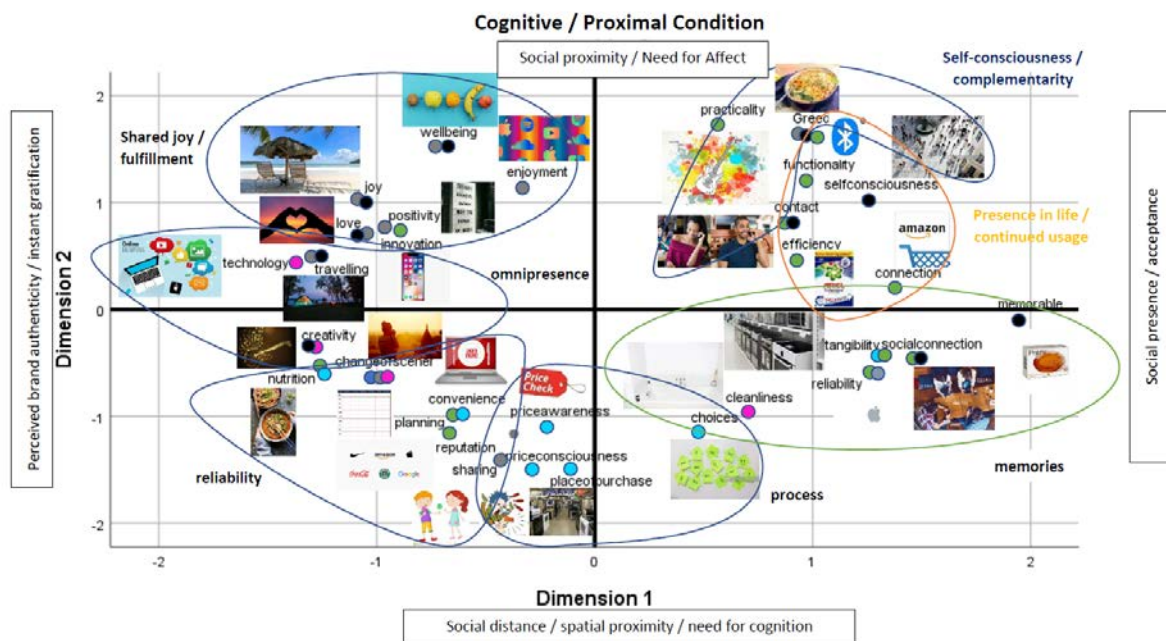


Figure 1: Results from cognitive AOL (English)

5. Implications for Theory and Practice

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 (Belk, 1988; Chang & Tuan Pham, 2013; Englis & Solomon, 1995; Levy, 1959; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). 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 in consumption contexts (Huang et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2008).

The spatial distance between marketers and their consumers has increased substantially with the advent of digital and information age, however results 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 understand consumers' processing of experiences through their trajectories, employing them in campaigns which can resonate well with consumers locally as well as globally. A better understanding of the psychological process for consumption across different languages/cultures would help not only in the better promotion of products but could also serve as a useful tool in designing products serving consumer wants.

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