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Elizabeth C. Hirschman & Morris B. Holbrook

Hedonic Consumption: Emerging Concepts, Methods and Propositions

This paper defines hedonic consumption as those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience. After delineating these concepts, their theoretical antecedents are traced, followed by a discussion of differences between the traditional and hedonic views, methodological implications of the latter approach, and behavioral propositions in four substantive areas relevant to hedonic consumption—mental constructs, product classes, product usage and individual differences. Conclusions concern the usefulness of the hedonic perspective in supplementing and extending marketing research on consumer behavior.

Introduction

DURING the 1950s there was substantial discussion concerning the symbolic aspects of products (Gardner and Levy 1955, Levy 1959). As Levy noted, "People buy products not only for what they can *do*, but also for what they *mean*" (p. 118). This line of thought went forward during the 1960s to incorporate the notion of congruence between the lifestyle a consumer chose and the symbolic meaning of the products he/she purchased (Levy 1963).

However, during the 1970s there was a hiatus of research and discussion regarding product symbolism. This dearth of interest possibly was due to the excesses of the motivation research era, yet there is much to be gained—both pragmatically and conceptually—from inquiries into the esthetic, intangible and subjective aspects of consumption (Hirschman 1980a, Holbrook 1980, Levy 1980). These factors pertain to phenomena that we shall refer to as "hedonic consumption." *Hedonic consumption designates those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multi-*

sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products. Because the terms *multisensory*, *fantasy*, and *emotive* evoke a variety of meanings, we shall define them formally at the outset to forestall confusion in their subsequent interpretation.

By multisensory we mean the receipt of experience in multiple sensory modalities including tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions and visual images. While consumer researchers typically assume these experiences to be *afferent* (e.g., a product taste test), the hedonic perspective also posits *effluent* experiencing of multisensory impulses as an important form of consumer response (Berlyne 1971). Individuals not only respond to multisensory impressions from external stimuli (a perfume) by encoding these sensory inputs but also react by generating multisensory images within themselves. For example, smelling a perfume may cause the consumer not only to perceive and encode its scent but also to generate internal imagery containing sights, sounds and tactile sensations, all of which are also "experienced."

These internal, multisensory images can be of two types. First, *historic imagery* involves recalling an event that actually did occur. The scent of a perfume, for example, can cause the consumer to evoke a past episode involving a romance with one who wore the perfume. Second, *fantasy imagery* occurs when the

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consumer responds by producing a multisensory image not drawn directly from prior experience (Singer 1966). Instead of replaying a historic sequence the consumer constructs an imaginary one. The colors and shapes that are seen, the sounds that are heard, and the touches that are felt have never actually occurred, but are brought together in this particular configuration for the first time and experienced as mental phenomena.

Of course, even those sensations that originate in the consumer's mind draw upon real events for their construction (Singer 1966). It is unlikely that a consumer could generate a detailed, multisensory imaginative sequence without having some access to relevant real experiences. Thus, one should view multisensory imagery as a continuum from purely historic recollections to complete fantasy. Although both may play roles in hedonic consumption, we shall focus here on the latter, less explored area of fantasy.

In addition to the development of multisensory imagery, another type of response related to hedonic consumption involves *emotional arousal*. Emotions represent motivational phenomena with characteristic neurophysiological, expressive and experiential components (Izard and Beuchler 1980). They include feelings such as joy, jealousy, fear, rage and rapture (Freud 1955). Emotive response is both psychological and physiological in nature, generating altered states in both the mind and body (Ornstein 1977, Schacter and Singer 1962). It includes but extends beyond the affect or preference variables often studied by marketing researchers.

Rarely in marketing research has the full scope of emotional response to products been investigated. In research on hedonic consumption, however, this range of feelings plays a major role. The seeking of emotional arousal is posited to be a major motivation for the consumption of certain product classes, e.g., novels, plays and sporting events (Holbrook 1980). Further, emotional involvement is tied to the consumption of even simple products such as cigarettes, food and clothing (Levy 1959).

In sum, hedonic consumption refers to consumers' multisensory images, fantasies and emotional arousal in using products. This configuration of effects may be termed *hedonic response*. The characteristics and causes of hedonic response are further developed in the sections that follow.

Theoretical Background

The systematic, empirical investigation of hedonic response in consumption is quite new, with most relevant research dating from the late 1970s (e.g., Hirschman and Holbrook 1981; Holbrook 1980, 1981; Holbrook and Huber 1979; Levy and Czepiel 1974).

However, the theoretical origins of the field may be traced to several specialized subfields in a variety of behavioral sciences: culture production systems within sociology (Becker 1973, Crane 1976, Hirsch 1972), esthetics within philosophy (Jaeger 1945), affective response within psycholinguistics (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1957), and fantasy imagery/daydreaming studies within psychology (Singer 1966, Swanson 1978).

In marketing an important precursor of research on hedonic consumption involved the stream of investigations termed *Motivation Research*. This research began in the 1950s (Dichter 1960) and continued into the 1970s; it focused on the emotional aspects of products and the fantasies that products could arouse and/or fulfill. However, many of the clinically oriented studies conducted by motivation researchers were subject to well-known criticisms concerning their rigor and validity (Kassarjian 1971, Wells and Beard 1973). Hence their long-term contribution has been limited.

A thematically related but more conceptually robust body of literature relevant to hedonic consumption dealt with product symbolism (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967, Levy 1959, 1964). The intellectual debt owed to these earlier efforts is quite apparent in several recent studies of symbolic consumption and its relation to hedonic experiences (Hirschman and Holbrook 1981).

The literature from these varied areas provides insights that can usefully extend and supplement the traditional orientation toward consumer research in marketing. These insights are evolutionary progressions of current paradigms and perspectives; however, in some ways they represent a fundamentally different orientation toward the examination of the interaction between consumers and products. Using a hedonic consumption perspective, products are viewed not as objective entities but rather as subjective symbols. The researcher is concerned not so much with what the product is as with what it represents. Product image, not strict reality, is a central focus; consumer emotive response, rather than just semantic learning, is a key criterion. Thus, the hedonic perspective seeks not to replace traditional theories of consumption but rather to extend and enhance their applicability.

Hedonic perspectives can be applied to several areas of current concern to marketers. In this paper we examine four: Mental Constructs, Product Classes, Product Usage and Individual Differences. In each area contrasts between the traditional and hedonic approaches are delineated. The incremental contributions that the study of hedonic consumption can make toward increasing knowledge of consumer behavior are explored by developing a series of propositions. These propositions highlight some discoveries that

have been made using a hedonic focus. Most of these could not have been anticipated from the vantage point of traditional theory. Also, we shall cite some key deficiencies of current hedonic consumer research in each area. These limitations lie primarily in the domain of conceptualization and measurement and represent challenging obstacles to be overcome by researchers in this area.

Mental Constructs

Comparison of Traditional and Hedonic Approaches

Plato theorized that the human mind possessed three distinct faculties: *cognition* or knowing, *emotion* or feeling, and *conation* or willing (Scott, Osgood and Peterson 1979). Remarkably enough, these three constructs have remained largely intact over the years and are doubtless recognizable to most marketing researchers as the *belief*, *affect* and *intention* components of the familiar multiattribute attitude paradigm (Holbrook 1978). In much present consumer research there is an emphasis on the belief component of mental activities. Further, current investigations of consumer information processing focus almost exclusively on verbal information. Information occurring in other modalities—gustatory, olfactory, tactile, pictorial, aural—remains largely unexamined (Holbrook and Moore 1981). Additionally, within the multiattribute framework emotion is represented almost entirely by the subconstruct of affect. Emotive response, however, as it is usually measured, represents little more than a consumer's evaluation of tangible product attributes. The broader dimensions of emotion, such as strong feelings of anguish or rapture in response to products, are little explored or accounted for (Holbrook 1980).

This neglect probably results from the traditional economic view of products as objects for which the consumer desires to maximize utility, where utility typically is measured as some function of the product's tangible attributes. While this approach is quite valid and useful for goods whose tangible qualities and utilitarian performance serve as primary determinants of their value to the consumer, it would seem inappropriate for products whose selection and use are based upon satisfying emotional wants, rather than fulfilling utilitarian functions.

Traditional consumer research has largely ignored multisensory afferent and efferent consumer response, while measuring semantic rather than emotive and imaginal reactions to products. While not denying the utility of the traditional view, hedonic consumer research seeks to augment its focus by acknowledging the several sensory channels used by consumers to

perceive and experience products. Pictorial stimuli appear to be particularly important in this light (Holbrook and Moore 1981). Thus, this approach supplements verbal data with that supplied by other sensory modalities and the internal generation of sensory impressions.

Propositions

Several propositions can be derived from a consideration of hedonic mental constructs. First, in some instances, *emotional desires dominate utilitarian motives in the choice of products* (Maslow 1968). For example, as was clearly recognized by the motivation researchers, there are contexts in which emotions such as love, hate or jealousy will override consumers' economic decision rules based on deductive reasoning (Dichter 1960). Although they are depicted with great frequency in classical and popular literature (*Candide*, *The Godfather*), plays (*Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*), movies (*Kramer vs. Kramer*) and television shows (*Dallas*), and firmly supported by psychoanalytic work (Freud 1955), situations such as this have remained largely unexplored in much recent consumer research.

Second, *consumers imbue a product with a subjective meaning that supplements the concrete attributes it possesses* (Hirschman 1980a, 1981b). This process may be reinforced by exposure to evaluative (as opposed to factual) advertising content (Holbrook 1978). For some products such as esthetic objects, these intangible, symbolic attributes can be key determinants of brand selection. Indeed, perceptions of the product as a subjective symbol rather than a concrete object can account for the selection of brands that are clearly inferior in terms of their tangible features but are viewed as subjectively superior symbols (Levy 1959).

Third, *hedonic consumption is tied to imaginative constructions of reality* (Singer 1966). Thus, hedonic consumption acts are based not on what consumers know to be real but rather on what they desire reality to be. This, of course, echoes a proposition raised 20 years ago by motivation researchers (Dichter 1960). Indeed, the consumer's internal construction of reality may not be congruent with the external, objectively verifiable world. It follows that researchers probing the mental imagery that the consumer constructs around a product require measures of how the product is seen in the consumer's subjective reality, beyond its objective context. One way of accomplishing this is to ask consumers if they ever pretend that something other than reality is occurring when they are consuming a product (Swanson 1978).

For example, recent research indicates that members of an audience may imagine themselves as one of the actors while viewing a movie, play or other

performance; there is evidence that some of those who engage in this type of projective fantasy may purposely attend a performance because they have foreknowledge that it contains a role in which they would like to imagine themselves (Hirschman 1982a). Similarly, the great popularity of pornography suggests that many who consume pornographic books, movies and paraphernalia are doing so to act out or enhance their sexual fantasies (Green 1981). Thus, fantasies on various themes are important determinants and consequents of hedonic consumption. Swanson (1978) terms these *absorbing experiences* because the consumer is absorbed into the reality created by the product.

Another example of self-constructed reality is that of cigarette smokers who enjoy imagining themselves as "Marlboro Men." The traditional assumption has been that the effectiveness of the cowboy theme depended on lending the cigarette and, hence its user, a masculine image. It is likely, however, that the image adopted by some Marlboro consumers is a much more literal one—that these consumers actually want to generate self-images as the idealized cowboy. Thus, one important set of motives for consumption is the desire to enter or create an altered state of reality.

Fourth, *a growing body of evidence suggests that sensory-emotive stimulation seeking and cognitive information seeking are two independent dimensions*. Extensive investigations by Zuckerman (1979) on the construct of sensation seeking (the desire for sensory-emotional arousal) followed by recent studies on hedonic consumption (Hirschman 1982) indicate that consumers seek sensory-emotional and/or cognitive stimulation—that is, some consumers are above average on both dimensions, others above average on one dimension only, and others below average on both.

This orthogonality of sensory-emotive and cognitive stimulation seeking could lead to a major reformulation of notions concerning optimal stimulation level and innovativeness (Hirschman 1980b). Apparently, two (or more) distinct optimums exist for any given consumer.

Limitations

The hedonic approach to consumer behavior raises important issues concerning the role of mental constructs such as multisensory imagery and emotional arousal. However, to examine these areas requires the further development of research methodologies, the operationalization of several new variables and an extended conceptual framework.

First, techniques for better manipulating and measuring consumer acquisition and processing of multisensory images are needed. The present emphasis on

the use of verbal descriptions in consumer research needs to be supplemented with data on consumers' use of other sensory impressions in experiencing products. Some researchers already make use of pictorial (Holbrook and Moore 1981), aural (Huber and Holbrook 1980) and gustatory stimuli and employ nonverbal response measures such as the information display board or eye-movement camera (Jacoby et al. 1976). However, the underlying nonverbal stimulus-response connections require more systematic, empirical investigation.

Another need concerns the nature of emotional response. Reliable and valid operationalization of emotions is essential in two areas. The first involves *the role emotion plays in the selection of products*. The choice contexts in which emotion may operate have not yet been fully identified but represent great potential for better comprehending consumer decision making. This could be especially appropriate in situations when the product is being purchased primarily as an expressive symbol, for example, as a gift or to commemorate an important life event.

Second, measures of *emotional arousal during acts of product consumption* are needed. Consumers may purchase certain products with the intent of generating an emotional reaction within themselves. This intervening hedonic response must be monitored during consumption so as to determine its linkage to consumer satisfaction and product enjoyment. One potential source of such process measures is chemical changes in blood serum and cortical areas of the brain (Kroeber-Riel 1979). Another involves overt, observable behaviors that evince the consumer's emotional response (Izard and Beuchler 1980). A third deals with alterations of vital signs indicating arousal and excitement (Schachter and Singer 1962).

Product Classes

Comparison of Traditional and Hedonic Approaches

A second difference between hedonic consumption and traditional consumer research concerns the product classes selected for investigation. Traditional consumer research has tended to focus on package goods (toothpaste, cigarettes, cereal, detergent, beer) and major durables (appliances, automobiles) as objects of study (Holbrook 1980). In contrast, hedonic consumer research investigates the performing arts (opera, ballet, modern dance, legitimate theater), the plastic arts (painting, photography, sculpture, crafts) and the corollaries of these high culture products within popular culture (movies, rock concerts, fashion apparel). Numerous examples of these latter substantive concerns may be found in the conference sessions

edited by Hirschman and Holbrook (1981), Hirschman and King (1980) and Holbrook (1980).

The divergence of product focus between hedonic and traditional consumer research mirrors the divergence in theoretical philosophies underlying each discipline. Each has chosen products where a priori one might anticipate that the assumptions and propositions it advanced would most likely be found valid. For example, one might logically expect that selection decisions concerning utilitarian products such as washing machines would be best predicted and explained using the expectancy-value formulation of the traditional multiattribute attitude model. Similarly, hedonic consumption researchers have typically played their strong suit by selecting emotion laden, subjectively-experienced products such as ballet, music and theater.

This emphasis on esthetic products is constructive for several reasons. First, it provides an impetus for exploring several classes of products that have been largely ignored in traditional consumer research: audio records and tapes, novels, plays, movies, opera, sporting events and so forth. Such products play an important role in the consumer's life—providing him/her with entertainment and an outlet for emotion and fantasy. Second, despite the fact that all products can be hedonically experienced by consumers, those upon which research has been focused deserve special attention because of their capacity to generate unusually strong emotional involvement (Holbrook 1980). In contrast to the low involvement experienced in using toothpaste or detergent, the response to observing a sporting event, watching a film or hearing a rock concert is more intense, more involving and potentially more important in the life of the consumer (Maslow 1968).

Third, an intriguing characteristic of esthetic products is that, while they may be consumed in anticipation of the pleasure they provide, the consumer may also choose to consume them even with foreknowledge that they will cause emotional pain (Suomi and Harlow 1976). Such consumption situations may help consumers deal with unpleasant or unhappy events that they feel the need to confront, via fantasy and emotional arousal (Freud 1955). Two instructive examples are the recently televised docu-dramas, *Roots* and *Holocaust*. Paradoxically, viewing of these series was especially strong, respectively, among blacks and Jews whose consumption of the product was certain to evoke violent and fearful images drawn from their own history (*Time* 1980). Other recent examples of painful hedonic consumption would include the viewing of *Kramer vs. Kramer* by parents involved in child custody fights, *Unmarried Woman* and *Starting Over* by people deserted by their spouses, or *And Then You Cry* by persons afflicted with cancer.

Such consumption behavior seems irrational if one assumes that consumers pursue maximization of the "sum-of-pleasures-minus-pains" according to Bentham's felicific calculus. Using the traditional utility-maximizing multiattribute paradigm, such behavior would represent selection of a product in which several strong, negative attributes were known to be present. However, the hedonic perspective acknowledges that consumers can utilize painful knowledge to expend emotions and construct fantasies that enable them to deal with unhappy realities better. In this light such consumption behavior is constructive and rational (Freud 1955, Suomi and Harlow 1976). Indeed, recent exploratory research reveals that consumption of movies, plays and books is often consciously undertaken to help consumers deal with "unhappy events they had experienced" (Hirschman 1982a).

Two psychological theories provide further rationales for such acts of painful hedonic consumption. Psychoanalytic theory (Freud 1955) suggests that purposeful exposure to frightening experiences enables the consumer to purge anxieties. If left unattended, these anxieties might eventually emerge as neurotic symptoms. For example, Jews who are unable consciously to deal with knowledge of their historic persecution may later manifest their anxieties in the form of paranoia. An alternative but noncompeting rationale for the consumption of anxiety-arousing products stems from work on behavior modification (Suomi and Harlow 1976). By exposing oneself to such experiences on a self-controlled basis, the consumer can build up a gradual tolerance (desensitization) concerning the frightening knowledge and thereby reduce its ability to arouse fear and anxiety.

Propositions

Some important propositions are suggested by the hedonic perspective regarding product classes. First, *the product classes discussed tend to be more emotionally involving than those traditionally examined in consumer research*. Products such as movies, concerts, plays and novels can evoke complex fantasies and fulfill deep-seated and salient emotional needs. Their consumption often represents an act of profound importance to the consumer.

Second, *the consumption of such products generates and requires substantial mental activity on the part of the consumer*. This is true because of the multisensory imagery inspired by (say) a ballet and the expenditure of emotional resources used to experience and interpret the product. Further, it is likely that the mental activity engendered by consuming hedonic products is predominately right brain-oriented (Ornstein 1977), since the capacity for responding to visual-spatial stimuli and emotion laden events is believed centered in this hemisphere. If later research

supports this contention, then it is likely that such products may also be experienced as gestalts, since the right brain seems to respond to stimuli in a holistic rather than analytical fashion.

Third, *patronage decisions regarding hedonically consumed products are based primarily on the symbolic elements of the products rather than their tangible features*. A novel or play is selected primarily because of its ability to transport the consumer to a more desirable reality and/or to help in coping with an unpleasant emotional dilemma. Recent research indicates that even physical activities such as bicycle riding and skiing can be undertaken because of their symbolic qualities (Hirschman 1982a).

Limitations

The primary limitation encountered with respect to hedonically-consumed product classes involves the special challenges they pose in developing adequate measurement methodologies. First, as a threat to *reliability*, many of the products discussed (a concert, ballet or play) are live performances and subject to variability across time. The composition of performing units may change, as in the substitution of an understudy for the leading lady. Further, even if the cast of performers is constant, the quality of their performance is susceptible to variation. In either case, the content of the product changes, thereby reducing the reliability of measures taken. Moreover, even for products not created via live performance (movies, records), such external factors as instrumentation (poor quality TV reception, speaker distortion) and consumption conditions (hot and crowded theaters, street noises) may threaten reliability.

A second measurement problem concerns the question of *validity*. Achieving valid measurement is difficult enough in most behavioral research. Yet these difficulties are compounded when the stimulus of interest is composed of both real and imagined aspects and when the consumer's hedonic response may be manifested both physically and mentally. Here, a combination of traditional scaling techniques (semantic differential scales, forced-choice tasks) and physiological indices of arousal (galvanic skin response, brain waves) will doubtless be required to reflect the complexity of hedonic consumer responses (Krober-Riel 1979).

Product Usage

Comparison of Traditional and Hedonic Approaches

Within traditional consumer research the most studied consumption activity is the decision making process (Bettman 1979). This focus originates in the strate-

gically oriented concern of marketers with the prediction and explanation of brand choice. While the hedonic perspective in no sense advocates a reduction of research on consumer decision making, it does argue for increased attention to phenomena involved in product usage. The hedonic perspective includes the psychological experiences that accompany product usage. Thus, hedonic responses may be viewed as the essence of the usage experience.

Within this general framework the dynamic interaction between product and consumer is especially important. For example, the reaction of an audience has complex reciprocal effects on both performers and viewers during a play or sporting event (*Rolling Stone* 1980). Many hedonic products are consumed over time. An opera may last several hours; a painting may be contemplated in a museum for a few minutes or in the home for years. The emotions and fantasy images experienced by the consumer are in continuous flux throughout this usage period. One objective of hedonic consumption research is to monitor and, if possible, to predict emotional reactions and fantasy imagery during product usage.

During product usage the consumer's mental energies expended in emotional and imaginal responses pose a problem of resource allocation (Ornstein 1977, Schacter and Singer 1962, Singer 1966). Thus, if consumers know in advance that hedonic consumption will require a certain level of imaginal participation and emotional expenditure, they may choose to use (or to avoid) a certain product because they wish (or refuse) to make such an investment of their imaginal-emotional resources (Singer 1966, Zuckerman 1979). This notion of imaginal-emotional effort allocation during product usage extends the traditional marketing focus on money expenditures, while also moving beyond the emphasis of information theorists on cognitive processing effort during decision making (Bettman 1979).

Consider a consumer who is contemplating entertainment choices on Friday night and has narrowed the options to two movies both costing \$4 per person, thereby controlling for demands on money resources across alternatives. One movie is a noninvolving situation comedy (*Nine to Five*) while the second is an intense saga of love, hate, violence and sexuality (*Raging Bull*). We believe that consumers desiring a minimal expenditure of their imaginal-emotional energy would likely choose the former, while those desiring a more cathartic experience would probably opt for the latter.

Propositions

Some interesting propositions emerge from regarding hedonic consumption as a dynamic usage experience. First, *there appears to be a preferred or most desir-*

able pattern of emotional arousal for products experienced over a specific time frame (Osborne and Farley 1970). For example, a novel, a movie, a rock concert or a football game are products that are experienced over time, during which varied emotions and fantasies are aroused in the consumer. Often the most preferred pattern of arousal is one that begins at a low level, increases in intensity, reaches a climax and then gradually subsides. This pattern appears in the structure of most operas, ballets, movies, novels, plays, jazz solos, and orchestral pieces and is more formally represented by the prologue, chorus, climax, epilogue sequence of classical Greek literature and drama (Jaeger 1945). In a clear parallel to sexual intercourse, the sequence represents a classic instance of art imitating life, perhaps with characteristic rhythm drawn largely from the survival value of procreation (Berlyne 1971, Maslow 1968).

According to Zuckerman (1979), sexual arousal is one of the primary concomitants of many types of hedonic consumption. For example, a popular hedonic experience for high school and college students is the rock concert. A vivid account of the role the rock concert can play in fulfilling the sexual fantasies of both audience and performers was recently provided by David Lee Roth, lead singer in a popular rock group: "As for me personally, I feel sexy a whole lot of the time. That's one of the reasons I'm in this job: to exercise my sexual fantasies. When I'm onstage, it's like doing it with 20,000 of my closest friends. And you don't have to ask them if they 'came.' They'll let you know" (*Rolling Stone* 1980, p. 21).

A second proposition stems from recent findings that *the capacity and desire for expending imaginal-emotional resources varies within one consumer over time* (Zuckerman 1979). Such temporal shifts in hedonic energy raise important questions concerning the dynamic patterns of product usage. However, their investigation raises serious methodological problems, to which we now turn.

Limitations

Exploration of hedonic consumption as a dynamic process requires the development of appropriate measures of imaginal-emotive effort, capacity and desire. Yet, in contrast to the progress that has been made in measuring cognitive effort and capacity (Jensen 1980, Sternberg 1977), the measurement of imaginal-emotive effort and capacity remains largely unexplored.

In seeking measures of imaginal-emotive expenditures, there are two primary sources from which to draw: Zuckerman's (1979) sensation seeking scale and the scales Hilgard (1970) and Swanson (1978) developed to assess tendencies toward absorbing ex-

periences. Sensation seeking encompasses four inter-related dimensions: thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition and boredom susceptibility (Zuckerman 1979). The construct is measured using a 72-item, forced-choice instrument. Despite the pencil-and-paper nature of this operationalization the scale has been found to correlate quite strongly with several indicative behaviors, such as risky physical activities (hang gliding), drug and liquor consumption, frequency and variety of sexual intercourse, preference by women for infant breastfeeding and enjoyment of complex visual and auditory stimuli.

The measures developed by Hilgard (1970) for assessing tendencies toward absorbing experiences have been shown to correlate with susceptibility to hypnosis and altered states of consciousness. Moreover, the absorbing experiences scales applied in clinical settings have recently been revised by Swanson (1978) for application to normal, consuming populations. Exploratory research has shown that tendencies toward absorbing experiences are related to the seeking of sensory-emotional arousal and to the escape from reality by engaging in fantasy (Hirschman 1982a).

Both the sensation seeking and absorbing experiences scales are readily administered in survey research designs and are, therefore, potentially usable in the large sample studies favored by marketing researchers. Need for their use is suggested by the fact that sensation seeking has been found to be independent of cognitive information processing characteristics such as divergent processing ability, short-term memory capacity and information transfer, but strongly related to other hedonic consumption measures such as imagery and projective consumption (Zuckerman 1979).

An accompanying disadvantage stems from their essentially static nature, which renders them poorly suited to trace the dynamic changes in the consumer's general degree of hedonic effort and capacity. Moreover, it is likely that they tap chronic levels of hedonic energy associated with basic personality structure rather than acute levels of momentary sensory-emotive expenditures. In this sense, they are less appropriate to the study of usage experience than to the investigation of individual differences, a subject to which we now turn.

Individual Differences

Comparison of Traditional and Hedonic Approaches

A final area of demarcation between the hedonic and traditional approaches to consumer research concerns the issue of individual differences. In accord with its

strategic orientation, much traditional marketing research has taken a post hoc approach to sources of interpersonal variance, in which consumers evincing certain behaviors (brand loyalty, high usage rate, low satisfaction) are profiled according to their discriminating characteristics. This descriptive profile approach is one common method of market segmentation and also appears in the many audience profile studies conducted by hedonic consumption researchers (Andreasen and Belk 1980). However, a complementary orientation more typical of hedonic research employs an approach in which subcultural groups are defined a priori—before being compared on the basis of hedonic responses (Hirschman 1982a, Singer 1966). Here, the central proposition is that individual differences in ethnic background, social class and gender cause products to vary greatly in the emotions and fantasies they inspire in a consumer.

Given this premise, recent research has begun to investigate differences between various subcultures in their emotions toward and fantasies about products. For example, six ethnic groups (Chinese, English, Greek, Irish, Italian, Jewish) were found to differ greatly in their emotional motives for pursuing consumption activities, their tendencies toward fantasy and altered states of consciousness, and their projection into consumption experiences (Hirschman 1982a). This subcultural approach to individual differences helps enrich research results by focusing attention on the social origins of variation in hedonic response. Further, it helps efforts to identify and understand the cultural sources of images—both of a real and fantasy nature—that guide consumers in their adoption and usage of products.

Propositions

Given this perspective, some important propositions follow. First, *differences in consumer emotional and imaginal response to products appear closely tied to a variety of subcultural differences*. Ethnic groups, whether defined along racial, religious or nationality dimensions represent complex systems of socialization, educating their members into a certain world view and enforcing adherence to a set of customs (Hirschman 1981a, 1982b). Hence, an individual tends to treat a product according to the perspective learned from his/her ethnic group. Similarly, the values shared by members of a given social class or gender affect desires for and responses to products.

Second, *subcultures vary in the amount of fantasy and emotionality encouraged/permitted in their members* (Hirschman 1982b, Singer 1966). Differences of this type can greatly influence the potential for and exhibition of hedonic response by consumers. For instance, Jews and Italian Catholics are generally permitted by their ethnic norms to be emotionally ex-

pressive, whereas such displays are discouraged among Protestants (Patai 1977). It has also been found that fantasizing and complexity of imagery are distributed in similar fashion across these three religious groups (Singer 1966). Jews and Catholic Italians not only report more and richer fantasies than do Protestants but also report significantly more erotic and sensual content in their fantasies (Singer 1966).

Third, *subcultural groups vary in their perception of what products are appropriate for hedonic consumption*. For example, consumers of many hedonically-experienced products are characterized by very distinctive social class profiles (Lapso 1981, Wachtel 1981). Operagoers are typically older, wealthier and higher in social status than theatergoers. Similarly, large socioeconomic differences exist between those who patronize basketball games and those attending museum exhibits (though cost differentials between these two products are minimal or even countervailing). These differences suggest that social class acts as a subcultural socialization agent, channeling consumers into those hedonic activities appropriate to their social positions. Marketers attempting to broaden the performing arts audience confront the problem that, if middle-class consumers begin attending in large numbers, upper-class patrons may leave in favor of something more exclusive. Notions of social appropriateness appear to extend to gender and ethnic group influences on hedonic consumption. Ethnic groups share norms that encourage and discourage certain kinds of hedonic consumption. For example, recent research on weekend evening entertainment choices by Catholics, Jews and Protestants shows several significant differences (Hirschman 1982b). There are also various social norms concerning masculine entertainment forms (e.g., sporting events) and feminine entertainment forms (e.g., shopping).

Limitations

Research on subcultural differences in hedonic consumption has thus far neglected the effects of cultural pluralism associated with the heterogeneous ethnic composition of American society. For example, because religious affiliation transverses the social class hierarchy, mutually facilitative or suppressive moderating effects may occur. Thus, if Protestants (say) are predisposed to the consumption of literature, one might find upper-, middle- and lower-class members of this religious denomination reading philosophy, best-sellers and romance paperbacks, respectively. Such potential interaction effects have not yet been explored systematically in hedonic research.

Conclusions

We have defined hedonic consumption as those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory,

fantasy and emotive aspects of product use. We have argued that this hedonic viewpoint represents an important extension of traditional consumer research and offers a complementary perspective for conceptualizing many otherwise neglected consumption phenomena. Accordingly, constructs of multisensory experience, fantasy imagery and emotive response have been introduced, defined and linked to various consumption processes.

Hedonic consumption is tied theoretically to work in several of the behavioral sciences—including sociology, esthetics, linguistics, psychology and psycholinguistics—as well as to motivation research and product symbolism in marketing theory. Given its comparative neglect in marketing research, we have sought to put forward a framework for its concep-

tualization and study. Four areas have been examined in terms of comparisons with the traditional approach. These four areas include Mental Constructs, Product Classes, Product Usage and Individual Differences.

The framework offered is admittedly both tentative and ambitious. We expect that it will provoke controversy but hope that it will also stimulate reflection on the nature of consumer behavior. The behavior of consumers, we believe, is far more sensorily complex, imaginative and emotion laden than has been reflected in the traditional approach to marketing research. The hedonic approach, while certainly no complete solution, may take us further toward comprehending the multiple facets of the consumption experience.

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