Hedonism: a Phenomenological Study of Pleasure and Pain in Everyday Ethical Consumption

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This research reveals hedonism as interplay between both pleasure and pain, a neglected consideration within every day, and ethical consumption. This gap is addressed by exploring how, when and why ethical consumers experience hedonism during a new consumption project journey.

This research explores how consumers experience hedonism as the outcome of a relationship between experiences of both pleasure and pain within the context of every day, and ethical consumption. Sensorial and psychological pain experiences arise over time from the difficulties and challenges faced during individual efforts to ultimately realize greater pleasure and achievement of a transformative ethical consumption goal.

The phenomenon of hedonism as an interplay between experienced pleasure and pain is illuminated through depth interviews, journals and observations; revealing how, when and why ethical consumers experience hedonism during a personal journey of preparing for, embedding, and reflecting upon a new ethical consumption project.

HEDONISM IN EVERYDAY ETHICAL CONSUMPTION
Counter to lay perspectives of hedonism as solely pleasure (Weijers, 2012), the philosophical doctrine of hedonism with its origins in Greek Philosophy is grounded in a dynamic between both pleasure and pain, where it is argued that maximisation of pleasure and minimisation of pain motivates behaviour (Bentham 1996; Feldman 2004, Heathwood 2013; Jantzen et al. 2014; Moore 2013; O’Keefe, 2010; Rawls 2009, Singer, 2013). This study subscribes to a phenomenological perspective on hedonism characterised by experiences which are intrinsically pleasurable or painful and furthermore, that this is subjectively felt and interpreted by the individual (Alwood 2017; Crisp 2006; Meerwijk and Weiss 2011; Labukt 2012, Shneidman 1999).

The term pleasure is applied here in its broadest sense encompassing all pleasant feelings and desirable emotions including contentment, delight, elation, enjoyment, euphoria, excitement, gratification, happiness, joy, love, satisfaction, pride, hope and so on (Dube and Le Bel 2001, 2003; Leighton 1982; Moore 2013; Rook 1987; Russell 2003). Pain, on the other hand, embraces all unpleasant feelings and largely unwanted emotions such as, annoyance, anxiety, despair, discomfort, disgust, distress, embarrassment, fear, guilt, helplessness, hurt, sadness, shame and remorse (Meerwijk and Weiss 2011; Leighton 1982; Moore 2013; Rook 1987; Russell 2003; Mee et al.2006; Shneidman 1999; Vetlesen 2009).

The discourse within Marketing is inclined towards the pleasure dimension of hedonism, in consumption terms “fantasies, feelings and fun” (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, 132). Studies have focused on pleasure derived from emotionally charged, high involvement, infrequent ‘extraordinary’ consumption experiences (Bhattacharjee et al 2014; Sussman and Alter 2012) for example, white-water rafting trips (Arnould and Price 1993), illicit drug taking (Goulding et al.2009) or ethical holidays (Malone, McCabe and Smith 2014). The few studies which reveal any interplay between pain and pleasure remain within the realms of extreme consumption practices, for example watching horror movies (Andrade and Cohen, 2007), “high-risk” skydiving (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993:1), Tough Mudder events 1 (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017) and sadistic consumption (Fitchett 2002) or within mainstream but isolated behaviours, such as running as “pleasurable escape” from the monotony of everyday life (Kerrigan et al. 2014, 161).

Within the context of ethical consumption, the relationship between pleasure and pain has been understood differently in relation to hedonism. Connolly and Prothero (2003, 203) described such consumption as a metaphorical “dark and cold place”, where ethical alternatives are perceived to be constraining and compromising (Malone, McCabe and Smith 2014; Szmigin and Carrigan 2005). Such a view of ethical consumption as pain runs contrary to the emergence of pleasure as feeling good by doing good (Freestone and McGoldrick 2008, Szmigin and Carrigan 2005). Indeed, Soper (2007, 2013) uses the term ‘Alternative Hedonism’ to focus on the pleasures of consuming differently along environmental and social lines. Nevertheless whilst experiential pain and pleasure is revealed in ethical consumption there is a lack of consideration of the dynamic between them, arguably where you might expect to see it; for example in growing produce with its likely successes and failures, or cycling instead of driving which could take longer but improve well-being.

Whilst Kerrigan et al. (2014) advocated further research to explore the ‘tension’ between pleasure and pain, particularly when consumers seek to experience and achieve a transformative goal (163), research to date fails to explore how this dynamic plays out. Furthermore this interplay is disregarded within the context of comparatively mundane, everyday activities which constitute the majority of our consumption experiences, for example, preparing meals, shopping, relaxing or commuting (Caru and Cova 2003; Csikszentmihalyi 1997; Featherstone 1992; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1992). Finally, exploration of hedonism in ethical consumption has arguably been hampered by a continued focus on rationality in choice (Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016; Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010) and there remains a dearth of insight into how individual ethical consumers experience hedonism as interplay between pleasure and pain.

THE STUDY AND MAJOR FINDINGS
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) was used to explore the lived experiences of hedonism (Cherrier 2005; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) of self-identifying ethical consumers (Harrison, Newholm and Shaw, 2005; Malone et al. 2014; Young et al. 2010) who were considering or just about to make further changes to their consumption to address their ethical concerns. A purposive heterogeneous sample of twelve females and six males, who varied in age from 19-56 years were recruited and whose new ethical consumption goals included becoming vegan or vegetarian, growing produce, commuting by bike, reduced or more mindful consumption choices.

A longitudinal research design spanning four months to one year incorporated depth interviews, participant journals and observations...
enabling access to experiences of behaviour change from multiple perspectives (Creswell 1994, Logie-Maclver, Piacentini, and Eadie 2012). IPA revealed six key themes which uncover how participants experienced interplay between pleasure and pain on their journey of preparing for, embedding and reflecting upon a new ethical consumption practice influenced by macro-infrastructures, time, affordability, interpersonal relationships and an internal values hierarchy. The themes are “Taking control versus being controlled”, “Ideology versus reality”, “Proactive versus reactive”, “Mindful versus immediate gratification”, “Enlightened versus nescient”, “Belongingness versus stigmatization”.

THE CONTRIBUTION

This research is theoretically important as it makes three critical contributions towards repositioning the concept of hedonism in consumer research. Firstly, it reveals that hedonism is not solely about pleasure, but its relationship with pain; to date this duality has been a neglected consideration in the Marketing literature more generally and ethical consumption specifically. Secondly, it temporally frames hedonism in everyday, ordinary consumption and this has previously been overlooked in research dominated by studies of extraordinary or one-off experiences. Finally, hedonism is illuminated through phenomenological first person accounts considered within the context of ethical consumption practices; more specifically what hedonism feels like and means to an individual within the context of their everyday lives.

REFERENCES

Harrison, Rob, Terry Newholm, and Deirdre Shaw (2005), The ethical consumer, Sage.


