A Bibliographic Survey of Experiential Consumption Research
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The current research reports the results of a bibliographic analysis of the two seminal articles on hedonic or experiential consumption produced by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). A word-based statistical analysis software was used to create a taxonomy to classify research that emanated from these two articles. Six core themes and four supportive themes were identified. The core themes included articles pertaining to (a) hedonic and utilitarian value, (b) experiential products, (c) shopping, (d) ritual and symbolic consumption, (e) multisensory stimuli, and (f) qualitative methodology. The supportive themes were comprised of articles related to (a) hedonic choice, (b) buyer behavior, (c) service experience, and (d) advertising. Research gaps are identified and a new research framework is proposed.

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placement of each of the possessions. One week later, participants completed the manipulation they were not assigned to during the first session, distracter task and dependent measure (i.e., circle task).

Results revealed that participants facing a threat placed possessions they considered closely related to their selves further away from the self as compared to the control condition. In contrast, possessions that under the control condition were placed far away from the self were placed significantly closer to their self in the threat condition. This effect generalized across all three types of threat.

In the second study we explored the moderating role of self-esteem and material values. This study followed the same procedure with two exceptions: only one threat was used and participants completed both a self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965) and material values (Richins and Dawson 1992) scale. The effect of the morphing self was qualified by both individual difference measures. Participants who were both low in self-esteem and high in materialism used possessions to redefine their self-concept when MS was high (as compared to absent) to a greater extent than participants high in self-esteem and low in materialism.

In general, the results indicate that the presence of a threat can pose a significant challenge to consumers’ self. One way consumers respond to a threat is to redefine the current self through product acquisition and disposition decisions.

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Two and a half decades have passed since Hirschman and Holbrook (1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) detailed the nature of experiential consumption. The experiential perspective emphasizes the study of consumption phenomena, and consumers’ hedonic responses during consumption and usage experiences. This view suggests that subjective experience, product meaning, and consumer emotions are intrinsic to consumption. In particular, the experiential perspective is concerned with consumption episodes that consumers engage in for fun, enjoyment, and leisure. It is particularly well suited for studying the consumption of experiential products such as movies, concerts, and sporting events. More importantly, more businesses these days are trying to make conventional product use more like entertainment experiences rather than merely meeting functional requirements. Understanding how to create and shape consumer experiences is essential in today’s marketplace, regardless of product category. There is a great urgency to better understand experiential consumption in marketing practice. But after 25 years, what do we know about experiential consumption?

The current research reports the results of a bibliographic analysis of the two seminal articles on hedonic or experiential consumption produced by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). The analysis enhances our current understanding of hedonic consumption by providing a taxonomy classifying research that has emanated from these two articles. Citation and abstract information was extracted from three major databases and organized thematically using a word-based statistical analysis and visualization software. Based on 599 total articles that cited one or both of the articles, our initial analysis yielded 24 content groups. Titles and abstracts for each of the computer-generated groups were examined and subsequently classified into one of ten thematic areas.

Each of the ten thematic areas was then further divided based on whether the article was premised on a hedonic or experiential theme, or whether the article merely referenced the seminal article(s) but was actually focused on a broader marketing or consumer behavior issue. The former group was referred to as core themes and the latter as supportive themes. Six of the ten thematic areas were classified as core
themes and included articles pertaining to (a) hedonic and utilitarian value, (b) experiential products, (c) shopping, (d) ritual and symbolic consumption, (e) multisensory stimuli, and (f) qualitative methodology. The supportive themes was comprised of articles related to (a) hedonic choice, (b) buyer behavior, (c) service experience, and (d) advertising.

The core theme articles are considered to be the ongoing conversations that distinctly define hedonic and experiential consumption research. A solid base of research aimed at the differentiation and measurement of hedonic and utilitarian value support the initial conceptualization of hedonic consumption and forms the basis of subsequent research in hedonic choice and service experience. Consistent with the original propositions regarding product classes, a substantial body of research has accumulated regarding experiential products that include vacation and travel, performing arts, entertainment, and high culture products.

Surprisingly, shopping was highly represented in the literature citing the two seminal articles. Shopping occupies a boundary position in that it is both an experiential activity and an antecedent to product purchase. Shopping topics include shopping motives, hedonic shopping value, satisfaction, and retail experience and satisfaction. Contexts for shopping include malls and retail outlets, mail catalog shopping, and online shopping. Also included in this group of articles are the dark-side consumption topics of uncontrolled, compulsive, and addictive shopping habits.

Ritual and symbolic consumption represents a significant and unique contribution to experiential consumption research. Ritual consumption is rich with social and life meanings (Rook 1985). Articles in this group are associated with conspicuous or lifestyle consumption. Symbolic consumption, on the other hand, is more focused on the relationship between a consumer and a target object or experience (Fournier 1991; Mick 1986). Further, social and self-identity were inextricably associated with ritual and symbolic aspects of consumption (Meng 2005; Richins 1994). Included in this theme are articles detailing the dark-side consumption topics of gambling and addiction.

A predominance of postmodern and qualitative methodologies was also strongly represented in research originating from Hirschman and Holbrook (1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Techniques designed to study hedonic consumption include hermeneutics, semiotics, and ethnography. Grounded theory was the basis for many of the studies in this category. Many of these methods were useful for understanding subjective and symbolic meaning, but also echoed the original limitations noted by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) about inadequate empirical methods that would be needed to study many imaginal or subjective aspects of hedonic experience. Finally, multisensory research was greatly underrepresented in this area of research within consumer research.

The four supportive themes provide a conduit from hedonic research to theory and application in consumer behavior and marketing. In many instances, hedonic value was used as an affective predictor of choice, intentions and decisions, behavior, and ultimately linked to satisfaction. It is evident in this group of articles that hedonic and experiential consumption research has direct application to service, retail, and advertising. Services are experiential products by definition and thus highly relevant to service management and marketing. Similarly, the experiential nature of the retail experience was also well represented by articles in this category. Interestingly, no discernable pattern was found for advertising articles citing the two seminal articles by Holbrook and Hirschman.

Finally, we examined the research gaps based on the original propositions posited by Hirschman and Holbrook. Progress has been made on all substantive areas and propositions stipulated by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), albeit progress has been unevenly distributed. Looking forward, our understanding of consumers would benefit with a greater research emphasis on multisensory stimuli and emotive post-purchase processes related to ownership, usage, and disposition.

References

When Images and Words don’t Agree, Images Win: the Shielding Effect of Imagination on Attitude Change
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Imagine a consumer who comes across an imagery-provoking critique portraying the excellent attributes of a new restaurant and, after having spent some time mentally savouring the elegant atmosphere and the delicious food of the restaurant, finds a customer survey rating the restaurant as a wretched 3 out of 10 stars. How would the consumer use the two contradictory pieces of information to arrive at an overall evaluation of the restaurant?

One approach to resolve the inconsistency between contradictory evaluations of the same target is to weigh each argument and express a judgment that takes into consideration each piece of information (e.g., Anderson 1971). We expect that integrating contradictory pieces