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This study looks at the relationship between consumption in the context of everyday shopping and subjective well-being. Using grounded theory to analyze this relationship qualitatively, the study found that there are specific phenomena related to habitual shopping behavior and hyperconsumption. In addition, the study found that there is a strong emotional component related to habitual shopping which impacts subjective well-being in individuals. The model developed in this study isolates the components of the consumption process, from acquisition to disposal, of products purchased during everyday consumption.

[to cite]:


[url]:

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The data used is from the World Values Surveys (WVS) (Inglehart et al. 2004). The WVS is administered by a network of social scientists in countries around the world allowing for analysis of cross-cultural differences across countries and time. The survey was conducted in 82 countries and was collected in 4 waves: 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005. This study uses data collected in 1990, 1995 and 2000. The sample size in each country is at least 1000 subjects.

Trust is defined by the variable “Most people can be trusted” which is similar to the variables used by Zak and Knack. The dependent variable for this study is “Life satisfaction” which is ordinal. Additional variables include scale of income, family savings, freedom of choice and age. These additional variables were selected because we would like to control for these to see if the effect of trust is still significant on life satisfaction even after controlling for income, freedom, age, and savings. Analysis of the data was conducted using regression and partial least squares (PLS) in order to compare the results.

Results

The model in this paper describes a relationship between the overall feeling of trust and the sense of life satisfaction held by the citizens of a particular country. This study did find support for the hypothesis that a significant relationship between levels of trust in a population and the overall life satisfaction or subjective well-being exists. This model demonstrates that variables other than income and savings have an important impact on subjective well-being. The feeling of trust is a cognitive variable that has a significant impact on how happy people feel. This indicates that there may be other important cognitive factors that can affect happiness and that objective measures of income and socio-economic class are not always indicative of the factors that can moderate overall life satisfaction.

References


The Subjective Well-Being of Buying: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Habitual Acts of Consumption

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People often experience a variety of emotional states, from happiness or excitement to sadness or depression when engaged in consumption activities such as shopping. These emotions are often directly tied to the process of consumption, for example the act of acquiring, storing, giving or throwing away products, rather than emanating from the consumption of the product itself. Acts of consumption, for the purposes of this paper, are defined as the search for, selection of, and the disposal of goods and services for the purpose of consuming versus the actual consumption of the product itself.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a field of analytical study that attempts to understand how people evaluate their lives (Diener, Suh, and Oishi 1997). Researchers try to understand both the negative set of emotions that people experience (i.e. depression, compulsion) and the positive ones (i.e. joy, happiness, satisfaction) in order to measure the relative ratio between the two emotional poles. Many forms of consumption seem to have a significant effect on overall SWB. It would seem reasonable that the act of consumption could also have an impact on levels of SWB for individuals who are particularly attached to these acts such as shopping, browsing, purchasing, consuming, collecting and dispensing with.

This paper qualitatively examines the process of consumption in these various forms, and how habitual and hyperconsumption behavior impacts overall SWB. Particular interest is placed on analyzing the emotions, preferences, and the storage and dispensation habits tied to consumption. I hope to better understand how consumption increases and/or depresses SWB. The research questions investigated are:

What are the addictive qualities of shopping?  
What drives people’s decision making when they engage in hyperconsumption or compulsive consumption of products?  
Why do people hoard goods? Why do people packrat?  
What are the emotions associated with shopping?  
How do people calculate values on things they desire, things they buy and things the keep or discard?  
What conflicts arise from hyperconsumption?  
What are the social contexts surrounding consumption and hyperconsumption?  
Are there gender differences in how shopping, prices, hyperconsumption and hoarding are viewed?  
What are the earliest experiences that influence consumption behavior?

What is unique in this study is that I develop a theoretical framework and a typology of how consumption impacts SWB.

Habitual behavior is often associated with addiction to various substances including alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, heroin, and marijuana and is a heavily researched area in the medical, economics, biochemistry, psychology and marketing literature (Becker and Murphy 1988; Bernheim and Rangel 2002; Carter and Tiffany 1999; Eisch and Mandyam 2004; Hassay and Smith 1996; Miyata and Yanagita 2001; Potenza et al. 2003; Stein et al. 1998; Ward and Hudson 1999; Wills, Pierce, and Evans 1996). More recent studies have looked into new areas of addictive or habitual behaviors that have deep emotional components for the user. Such new areas include, for example internet shopping, collecting and hoarding including trying to understand the neural substrates of addictive behavior (Anderson, Damasio, and
Addictions often lead to out of control behaviors such as theft and lying or even more extreme circumstances such as violence and death. Compulsive buying may be similar to other types of addictive or compulsive consumption behaviors such as alcoholism, drug abuse, eating disorders and compulsive gambling in that it leads to a repeated behavior with detrimental outcomes (Hirschman 1992). O’Guinn and Faber define compulsive consumption as an uncontrollable impulse or desire to “obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance, or activity that leads an individual to repetitively engage in a behavior that will ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or others” (O’Guinn and Faber 1989). Faber and colleagues analyzed self reported mood states for compulsive buyers and hypothesized that compulsive shopping may be a way of self medicating for depression and negative affect. The study found that compulsive buyers felt more extreme mood states and a wide array of mood states, particularly negative ones, before going shopping (Faber and Christenson 1996). It is believed that addictive behaviors like consumption may be a “dependent state acquired over time by a predisposed person in an attempt to relieve a chronic stress condition” (Gupta and Derevensky 1998; Jacobs, Marston, and Singer 1985).

This study is focused on understanding the relationship between addictive behavior patterns related to the acts of buying, storing and discarding, along with the emotional side affects of these activities. Structured long interviews were conducted with consumers on the topic of their consumption habits. This study used grounded theory to systematically analyze the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Grounded theory was used due to its suitability in generating theoretical insights from in-depth interviews (Venkatesh, Chen, and Gonzalez 2005). All data was put into a textual format in order to facilitate the coding process. Code memos were generated during and after the open coding process in order to document and identify some of the various concepts, categories, properties and dimensions emerging from the data.

In this study, several themes related to the emotionality of habitual shopping behavior emerge. The theoretical model developed out of the categories generated from the grounded theory process analyzes the impact of consumption on SWB. The model isolates the stages related to the acquisition and disposal stages of consumption. It shows categories of mental state, conflict, value, action and duration as the key variables that impact each of the consumption stages: searching, buying, storing and disposing.

References