Sampling Traps: How the Opportunity to Sample Experiential Products Reduces Hedonic Value

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Intuitively, sampling multiple experiential products before selecting one of them should be beneficial to consumers. By contrast, we show that the opportunity to sample tends to trap consumers into over-exploration, reducing their motivation to consume any of the alternatives in their entirety, and consequently reducing enjoyment of the consumption experience.

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Informing the Experience: How Does Prior Information Influence Consumption Experiences

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Paper #2: Enjoying the Unexpected: Prior Uncertainty Improves Hedonic Experiences
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Paper #3: Creating Happiness by First Inducing and Then Satisfying a Desire: The Case of Curiosity
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Paper #4: The Effect of Oral versus Manual Expression Modalities on Choice Satisfaction
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SESSION OVERVIEW

When consumers are allowed to sample a movie before watching it, do they enjoy the consumption experience more? Are consumers happier when they do not know what familiar song they will hear next? Does having curiosity-inducing questions enhance the subsequent pleasure of acquiring associated knowledge? Can the way in which consumers express their preferences enhance decision satisfaction? This session integrates these questions and considers how various factors prior to the consumption of an experiential product can affect consumers’ enjoyment of and satisfaction with that experience.

Specifically, the first two papers speak to the benefits of restricting information prior to an experience. Wei and Häubl demonstrate that the sampling of unknown experiential products traps consumers into over-exploration, demotivating them from enjoying the selected experiential products in their entirety. In turn, this reduces the enjoyment of the consumption experience.

Consistent with this finding, Paley, Meyvis, LeBoeuf and Nelson demonstrate the pleasurable consequences of prior uncertainty after its resolution. Consumers who were initially uncertain about the specifics of an upcoming positive experience (e.g. what song they would hear) enjoy the experience more. This effect is driven by the surprising recognition of familiar stimuli.

Alongside with the impact of the amount of prior information available, Hsee, Ruan and Lu propose the critical influence of the types of prior information available. They demonstrate that when prior information incites a feeling of curiosity, exposure to subsequent knowledge is more pleasurable. For example, compared to consumers who merely view pictures of Einstein, consumers who are made curious through prior questions are happier after reading the biography about Einstein. Importantly, consumers do not predict this advantage of curiosity.

Further, the way in which information about consumer preferences is solicited affects consumption experiences. Voß, Klesse, Goukens, and Levav demonstrate that preference expression modalities – i.e. whether consumers state their preferences orally or indicate them manually – influence choice satisfaction. Given limited prior information, oral expression of preferences triggers less deliberation than manual expression, in turn increasing decision satisfaction.

In summary, these four papers center on the influence of various factors prior to the consumption of experiential products on the satisfaction with and enjoyment of those consumption experiences. They share a focus on the exchange of information between marketers and consumers. In the context of providing information for consumers, this research implicates both the amount of information available (Wei & Häubl; Paley et al.) and the type of information available (Hsee et al.) in enhancing consumer experiences. Further, the modality through which information about preferences is solicited from consumers plays an important role on decision satisfaction (Voß et al.). The complementary approaches of these four papers provide fundamental insights for understanding the judgment and evaluation of consumption experience and can guide marketers in creating more enjoyable experiences.

Sampling Traps: How the Opportunity to Sample Experiential Products Reduces Hedonic Value

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers typically appreciate opportunities to sample experiential products – such as by viewing trailers or portions of movies, listening to parts of songs from music albums, reading book excerpts, or hiking portions of mountain trails. This type of sampling is thought to facilitate assessing the attractiveness of available options, thus enabling consumers to make better consumption choices. Counter to this intuition, this present research demonstrates that the opportunity to sample experiential products can backfire and reduce consumers’ enjoyment of consumption experiences.

Sampling experiential products – i.e., consuming them in partial – is more engaging than merely obtaining descriptive information about them (Hoch, 2002). We hypothesize that the opportunity to sample tends to trap consumers into excessive exploration of available options. This activates an exploration mindset (Hills, Todd & Goldstone, 2010), which is characterized by a greater importance of the goal of exploring additional options relative to the goal of exploiting the preferred option – by focusing on consuming and enjoying the most attractive alternative.

We hypothesize that an exploration mindset reduces the motivation to consume any of the available experiential products in its entirety. More importantly, many experiential products have the property that a substantial portion of the pleasure they provide is due specifically to completing their consumption (e.g., seeing the end of the movie). Thus, we hypothesize that, by demotivating the complete
consumption, the exploration mindset induced by the opportunity to sample reduces the hedonic value of the consumption experience.

A critical aspect of this theoretical account is the disproportionate hedonic value that arises specifically from completion—i.e., from the consumption of an experiential product in its entirety and/or up to its natural end. This property, which we refer to as "divisibility", is inherent to many experiential products (Ariely & Zauberman, 2000), suggests a critical boundary condition for the proposed negative effect of sampling. We hypothesize that the negative effect of the opportunity to sample on the hedonic value of a consumption experience is attenuated when the experiential products are high in divisibility—i.e., if they consist of small independent parts, each of which is enjoyable in its own right.

Study 1 was designed to provide a first demonstration of the basic effect. 91 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (opportunity to sample: yes vs. no). Participants were asked to select the video they would enjoy most from a list of 10 animation videos of low divisibility. In both conditions, participants read descriptions (including the title, director, and the basic storyline) of each option, one at a time. For participants who had the opportunity to sample, the video player right above the verbal description automatically started playing; they could decide whether to watch the video to completion or to switch to a different option. Participants with no opportunity to sample saw a screenshot of the video right above the verbal description, and they could not switch once they selected one. Participants in both conditions could stop watching the video whenever they liked. The results show that, relative to no opportunity to sample, the opportunity to sample significantly reduced the completion rate of watching the selected video (χ² = 13.34, (1, 89), p < .001) and the hedonic value of the consumption experience (M_sampling = 6.76 vs. M_noSampling = 7.74; t(1, 89) = 2.15, p = .034).

Study 2 examined the proposed moderating role of the divisibility of experiential products. 187 participants from a panel in North America were randomly assigned to conditions using a 2 (opportunity to sample: yes vs. no) by 2 (divisibility: high vs. low) between subjects design. The high divisible videos all had hilarious and enjoyable moments throughout, whereas low divisible animation videos had strong, cohesive storylines. As the result, the opportunity to sample significantly reduced the completion rate of watching the selected video (χ² = 9.82, p = .002). The interaction between sampling and divisibility significantly influenced the hedonic value of the consumption experience (F(1, 183) = 5.06, p = .026): the opportunity to sample significantly reduced the hedonic value of the consumption experience when the sampled videos were of low divisibility (M_sampling = 8.19 vs. M_noSampling = 8.89, t(87) = 2.02, p = .044); and the hedonic value of the consumption experience was not influenced when the sampled videos were of high divisibility (M_sampling = 8.79 vs. M_noSampling = 8.36, t(80) = -1.18, p = .24).

Study 3 was designed to provide deeper insight into the psychological mechanism that underlies sampling traps. We directly manipulated the exploitation mindset by enforced completion of the selected experiential product. 162 M-Turk workers were randomly assigned to conditions of a 2 (opportunity to sample: yes vs. no) by 2 (enforced completion vs. spontaneous completion) between subjects design. In the enforced completion condition, the button ending the video-watching section would not appear on screen unless participants completed the selected video. As the result, the opportunity to sample significantly reduced the completion rate of the selected video (χ² = 5.16, (1, 102), p = .023) in the spontaneous completion condition. Further, the interaction of the manipulations significantly impacted the hedonic value of the consumption experience (F(1, 159) = 4.34, p = .046): the opportunity to sample significantly reduced the hedonic value of the consumption experience when the completion of selected video was spontaneous (M_sampling = 7.85 vs. M_noSampling = 8.64, t(158) = 2.11, p = .038); and sampling did not influence the hedonic value of the consumption experience (M_sampling = 8.69 vs. M_noSampling = 8.14, t(158) = -1.03, p = .31) when completion was enforced.

This paper sheds light on how the opportunity to sample experiential products influences consumers’ enjoyment of consumption experiences. Evidences from three studies show that the sampling of experiential products can trap consumers into excessive exploration of available options and ultimately reduce the hedonic value of their consumption experience. In addition, the findings have important practical implications for both companies (e.g., when and how to allow consumers to sample their products) and consumers (e.g., how to avoid sampling traps).

**Enjoying the Unexpected: Prior Uncertainty Improves Hedonic Experiences**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Consumers’ experiences often vary in the extent to which the specifics of that experience are known in advance. For example, consider the pleasure of listening to a familiar song that you selected on your iPod—a certain experience, where you knew exactly what you would hear. Now, contrast this against the delight of unexpectedly hearing that same song on the radio. The current research explores a similar distinction, demonstrating that uncertain experiences—those with less preceding information—may be more enjoyable than certain experiences.

While consumers usually like to be informed about upcoming experiences, some amount of prior uncertainty may actually increase enjoyment. Indeed, the successes of Apple’s iPod Shuffle and Internet radio sites such as Pandora.com are testaments to the benefits of hedonic experiences that are not fully known in advance.

In four studies, we vary the amount of prior information given to participants and provide evidence, across multiple domains, that hedonic experiences can be more enjoyable when less prior information is available about them. Our findings indicate that this effect cannot be explained by the preceding uncertainty being pleasurable, but rather is driven by the joy of recognition—the momentary pleasure that arises when a familiar stimulus is unexpectedly recognized (study 1-3). The favorable effect of not disclosing an experience in advance occurs for both music (studies 1-3) and food (study 4) experiences, but disappears when participants are not sufficiently familiar with the stimuli (study 3).

In study 1, all participants listened to five 30-second fragments of well-known songs (e.g. Billie Jean by Michael Jackson). Half of the participants had no prior knowledge of the songs they would hear, while the others were exposed to the title and artist of each song in advance. Participants rated their enjoyment of the experience during the first few seconds of each song, and immediately after the last song ended. Results show that participants who had no prior information about the songs enjoyed the experience more (F_online(1, 102) = 6.79, p = .011; F_retrospective(1, 103) = 5.52, p = .009). This effect was mediated by self-reported excitement at the start of each song, consistent with the idea that recognition produces a momentary pleasure that improves overall enjoyment.

While study 1 implies that the positive impact of uncertainty is strongest during the first few seconds of an experience, study 2 tests this directly. This study replicated the procedure of study 1 with three one-minute song clips. We additionally manipulated whether participants rated their enjoyment of each song during the first few
seconds of the song (as in study 1) or during the last few seconds of each song. Results show a reliable interaction. Among participants who rated each song during the first few seconds, prior uncertainty again increased enjoyment ($F(1, 371) = 5.38, p = .021$). On the other hand, participants who rated each song during the last few seconds did not show this benefit of prior uncertainty ($F < 1$). This attenuation provides additional evidence that the momentary pleasure of recognition improves the evaluation of experiences.

For prior uncertainty to increase the enjoyment of experiences through the momentary pleasure produced by recognition requires that the stimuli are in fact recognizable. While studies 1-2 used familiar stimuli to ensure recognition, study 3 explored familiarity as a boundary condition.

We selected 10 current popular songs to naturalistically vary familiarity. Participants first indicated their familiarity with each song. Then all participants listened to 30-second fragments of three of the songs and evaluated their experience. Half of the participants were given the title and artist of each song in advance, whereas the other half were not told which songs would play. We expected that in this latter uncertain condition, the prior familiarity with the songs would matter. If people were familiar with the songs, then hearing each song should produce the joy of recognition. However, if people were not familiar with the songs, then hearing the song will also resolve the prior uncertainty (as the actual experience is being revealed) but would not produce the pleasurable moment of recognition. Consistent with this reasoning, the effect of prior uncertainty depended on participants’ familiarity with the songs ($t_{192} = 2.67, p = .008$). That is, only participants high in familiarity with the songs experienced a positive impact of prior uncertainty. Moreover, this interaction was mediated by the self-reported experience of pleasant surprise, further implicating the joy of recognition as the causal mechanism. In addition, since all participants were given the list of 10 possible songs in advance, this study controls for different expectations between conditions and demonstrates that the effect generalizes to more subtle manipulations of prior uncertainty.

Study 4 extends the pleasurable effect of prior uncertainty into a new domain (food). First, all participants sampled the three well-liked jellybeans to familiarize themselves with the flavors. Next, they tasted one of the three flavors again. While some participants were told in advance what flavor they would eat, others only knew that they would taste one of the three flavors again. Results show that participants who did not know exactly what they would taste enjoyed the experience more than their counterparts who knew exactly what was coming ($F(1, 125) = 5.46, p = .021$).

Overall, this research expands the theoretical understanding of uncertainty, suggesting that prior uncertainty can improve the evaluations of positive experiences. While prior research has demonstrated that a state of uncertainty can increase positive mood, (e.g. Bar-Anan, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2009; Kurtz, Wilson, Gilbert, 2007; Lee & Qui, 2009; Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, & Gilbert, 2005), our current findings indicate that revealed experiences can also be more enjoyable if they were initially uncertain to begin with. Further, this effect does not seem to be driven by the enjoyment of the prior uncertainty, but rather by the joy of recognition, or the delight of encountering a positive and familiar stimulus. These findings add to our understanding of the role of uncertainty in consumption experiences, and can guide managers in creating more enjoyable experiences for consumers.

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Creating Happiness by First Inducing and Then Satisfying a Desire: The Case of Curiosity

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Happiness, to a large extent, comes from the satisfaction of desires. Yet our basic desires, such as those for food, drink and sleep, are finite. Once satiated, they cannot be immediately and easily recreated without entailing side effects. Hence, our happiness from satisfying these desires is also bounded. The desire for knowledge – curiosity, however, can be easily induced and can possibly be innocuous. This research studies how to use curiosity to enhance happiness. The curiosity we study here is about general knowledge (e.g., “When was Einstein born?”), not about personal issues (e.g., “Am I infected with Ebola?”), and the happiness we study here is monetary hedonic experience, not overall life satisfaction.

Inspired by existing research on the hedonic consequences of curiosity, we propose that (a) curiosity acquisition (becoming curious about something) does not make one unhappy and (b) curiosity resolution (having an existing curiosity resolved) makes one happy. Therefore, first inducing a person to feel curious and then resolving her curiosity will endow the person with a net gain in happiness.

We further propose that laypersons are largely unaware of the hedonic benefit of this curiosity-induction-and-reduction process, and are unwilling to expose themselves to such a process.

Put together, we submit the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals will on average be happier if they are in a curiosity condition, in which they are first induced to feel curious about some knowledge (phase 1) and then are given the knowledge (phase 2), than if they are in a no-curiosity condition, in which they are not first induced to feel curious about the knowledge (phase 1) and then are given the knowledge (phase 2).

Hypothesis 2: When given a choice between being in the curiosity and the no curiosity condition, most people would choose to be in the no curiosity condition.

We have conducted multiple experiments that tested and lent support to these hypotheses. Here is a typical experiment. It consisted of three between-participants conditions, curiosity, no curiosity, and choice. In the curiosity condition, participants went through two phases. In phase 1, they read 10 questions about the life of Albert Einstein. They were told in advance that they only needed to think about the answers and did not need to write them down. They were also told that they would find out the answers to those questions in phase 2. In phase 2, the participants read a biography of Einstein, which contained the answers to the 10 questions. The no-curiosity condition was identical to the curiosity condition, except that in phase 1, the participants viewed 10 pictures of Einstein rather than read 10 questions about Einstein. Therefore, relatively speaking, participants in the first condition were more curious than participants in the second before they read the biography. In the third – choice – condition, participants were told about the procedures of the above two conditions and asked to make a choice.

In all the conditions, we sampled participants’ hedonic experience in both phase 1 (when they read the questions or viewed the pictures) and phase 2 (when they read the biography).

Supporting Hypothesis 1, participants in the curiosity condition were on average happier than participants in the no-curiosity condition. Moreover, the main difference in happiness between the
two conditions occurred in phase 2, not in phase 1. That is, during phase 1, participants who read the questions were not happier (nor less happy) than participants who viewed the pictures, but during phase 2, participants who had read the questions were happier when reading the biography than participants who had viewed the pictures.

Supporting Hypothesis 2, when given a choice between the curiosity and the no-curiosity conditions, most participants chose the no-curiosity condition, that is, they chose to view the pictures rather than read the questions in Phase 1, even though they knew they could find out the answers in phase 2.

We have replicated these results in other experiments, including one about consumer brands, one about English words, and one about famous cities.

The current research demonstrates the potential of boosting happiness by first inducing a desire and then satisfying it. In most of human history, our ancestors lacked the resources to satisfy even their most basic desires. In times like those, one of the most effective ways to boost happiness was to satisfy such a basic desire. Historically, this is probably why in many cultures, a popular way to treat friends was to cook a meal for them or take them to a restaurant. Relative to our ancestors, we are now living in a world of abundance. For many of us, there is too much to eat, not too little. With the advances of technology and the accumulation of wealth, more of us will face this “ceiling effect.” To generate additional happiness, we will need additional desires. Thus, the key to happiness is not to satisfy existing desires, but to induce new desires. But desires such as those for food, drink and sleep cannot be easily induced; even if they could, inducing such desires would entail costs and side effects. Curiosity, at least the type of curiosity studied in this research, is a desire that can be readily induced, and can be satisfied with little to no cost. Our studies show the potential of using curiosity induction and satisfaction to boost happiness.

Happiness is fire. To have the fire, there must be fuel. Desire is a fuel. Many fuels are limited or harmful. Yet the fuel of curiosity nourish our happiness and brighten our lives.

The Effect of Oral versus Manual Expression Modalities on Choice Satisfaction

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the current marketplace consumers are afforded various ways to express their preferences. For instance, when making a purchase online or selecting a snack from a vending machine, they press a button; when ordering at a restaurant, they express their choice orally; when eating at an all-you-can-eat restaurant, they simply take the food they like. The primary purpose of this research is to explore whether merely changing the way consumers express their preferences—i.e., their preference expression modality—keeping all else constant affects their choice satisfaction.

Recent research by Klesse, Levav, and Goukens (2015) suggests that oral (speaking) versus manual (button pressing, grabbing, writing) preference expression modalities trigger different degrees of deliberation when making a choice. Specifically, relying on neuroscientific research (Bush, Luu, and Posner 2000, Paus et al. 1993, Paus 2001), the authors argue that expressing decisions orally prompts less cognition than expressing decisions manually and, hence, results in more impulsive decision making, reflected in greater self-control failures.

In this paper we hypothesize that consumers who make decisions orally will be more satisfied with their choices than consumers who make their decisions manually even if the choice outcome is kept constant across conditions. Previous research shows that the degree of deliberation during a decision affects choice satisfaction (e.g., Wilson and Schooler 1993), and that choices made intuitively can result in greater satisfaction compared to those involving detailed reasoning (Dijksterhuis et al. 2006; Kahneman 2003). This is especially for decisions involving information scarcity and uncertainty (e.g., Dane and Pratt, 2007; Hayashi, 2001), like the ones we study in our experiments.

We conducted four studies to test this prediction. In all of these studies, we asked participants to decide—oral (by speaking) or manually (by grabbing or button pressing)—between seemingly similar options with limited information available. Once participants had made their choice, we assessed their choice satisfaction with three questions measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree): ‘I am happy with my choice’, ‘I am pleased with my choice’, ‘I feel satisfied with my choice’ (e.g., Oliver 1989).

In study 1a, participants chose between two stacks of papers labeled “Task A” or “Task B,” which were in fact identical. Prior to looking at the task sheet, participants were simply asked to express their satisfaction with their decision on a 1 to 7 scale. Participants who expressed their choice orally reported greater choice satisfaction ($M_{oral} = 5.67, SD = 1.28$) than participants who expressed their choice manually ($M_{manual} = 5.07, SD = 1.26, F(1, 80) = 7.42, p = .005$). In study 1b, we presented participants with two identical looking cups of Cola and told them that one contained a national brand Cola and another a private label. In fact the colas were the same (both cups contained a national brand). Participants who expressed their choice orally were more satisfied with their choice ($M_{oral} = 4.99, SD = 1.26$) than those who expressed it manually by grabbing the option they wanted ($M_{manual} = 4.31, SD = 1.37, F(1, 189) = 12.89, p < .0005$).

In study 2, we added a condition in which participants chose by pressing a button in order to generalize the effect we observed in study 1 to an additional manual modality. Participants were asked to choose between two samples of nougat cream. We claimed that one sample is a branded product (Nutella) and the other one is a private label product; in fact, both were Nutella nougat-cream. Participants who expressed their choice orally ($M_{oral} = 5.38, SD = 1.33$) were more satisfied with their choice than participants who expressed their choice in either manual modality ($M_{manual} = 4.93, SD = 1.11$) and $M_{manual} = 4.73, SD = 1.21; F(1, 187) = 8.61, p = .004$). Notably, the two manual conditions did not differ in their reported choice satisfaction ($F(1, 187) = .86, p = .36$).

Finally, in study 3 we provide evidence that speaking results in greater choice satisfaction because spoken choices are more intuitive than manual choices. Research in neuroscience (Heinks-Maldonado et al. 2005; Heinks-Maldonado et al. 2006) that explores brain activity when people can hear themselves speak normally versus hear a distorted version of their voice shows greater brain activity (e.g., Carter et al. 1998)—in the dorsal/caudal area of the anterior cingulate cortex; a structure known for its involvement in managing cognitive processes (Elliot 2003)—when individuals receive unexpected/alternated auditory feedback. Inspired by this finding, in study 3 we manipulate the degree of cognition by varying whether participants can hear themselves speak normally or whether they receive auditory feedback. Participants chose—either orally or manually (by grabbing the option of their choice) —between two identical looking cups of Cola. Unlike in the other studies, participants listened to music while choosing through noise cancellation headphones. We manipulated the volume of the music (low versus high) so that participants could (not) hear themselves and activated (deactivated) the noise cancellation feature. In line with our prediction, we found a
significant interaction effect between preference expression modality and music volume ($F(2, 139) = 2.72, p = .05$). Participants were more satisfied when they expressed their choice orally ($M_{oral} = 5.59$, $SD = 1.04$) than when they expressed it manually ($M_{manually} = 4.76$, $SD = 1.34, F(1, 69) = 12.26, p = .005$) in the low-volume condition, but equally satisfied in the high-volume condition ($M_{oral} = 5.00$, $SD = 1.34$ and $M_{manually} = 5.01$, $SD = 1.34, F(1, 70) = .001, p = .98$).

Taken together, the results of the studies reported here consistently show that merely changing the way individuals express their preferences affects their choice satisfaction even if the choice outcome is identical. Since decision satisfaction is vital for individuals’ (subjective) well-being, it is important to explore factors that can increase satisfaction. To our knowledge, this project is the first to demonstrate that subtle changes in the modality utilized to express one’s choice can cause different levels of choice satisfaction.

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