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## **Unconventional Consumption Methods and Enjoyment of Things Consumed: Recapturing the “First Time” Experience**

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Hedonic adaptation diminishes enjoyment and fosters waste. Three studies show that instead of replacing the familiar object, merely consuming it via unconventional methods can restore enjoyment. This occurs because unconventional consumption methods promote “first time” immersion. Accordingly, unconventional methods that disrupt immersion or become familiar over time do not help.

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# Unconventional Consumption Methods and Enjoyment of Things Consumed: Recapturing The “First Time” Experience

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Jorge Spielman’s dinner guests had an idea: to honor their host, himself a blind clergyman, they dined blindfolded. In doing so they found that the same foods suddenly tasted better, as if depriving their sight heightened other senses. After many gatherings to similar effects, Spielman was inspired to open the world’s first “pitch black” restaurant in his hometown of Zürich, where patrons must eat in complete darkness. The restaurant has garnered a wealth of praise and profit since opening in 1999, and many eateries around the globe now imitate Spielman’s idea with similar success (Forbes 2015).

Is there something special about darkness that enhances gastronomic pleasures? Perhaps. However, we explore a broader feature that might more parsimoniously explain this phenomenon: the mere fact that dining in the dark is strange. We find that consuming an object via unusual means can boost enjoyment. Beyond darkness per se, many familiar experiences might be revitalized (at least temporarily) simply by consuming them in some unconventional way.

We suggest that unconventional methods invite a “first time” perspective on the consumption object; even if a person has eaten a particular dish before, the overall event of eating it *like this* likely feels unprecedented. Accordingly, perceived novelty leads people to attend more closely, engage more fully, and generally immerse themselves into an experience (Redden 2008; Sansone et al. 1992), and immersion can facilitate enjoyment (Brown and Ryan 2003; Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Killingsworth and Gilbert 2010). People commonly lament the inability to recapture “first time” experiences with now-familiar things, but perhaps consuming them in new ways can partly help.

We investigated this possibility by asking people to eat a snack (Experiment 1), consume a drink (Experiment 2), and watch a video (Experiment 3) by either normal or unusual means. We hypothesized that, when the consumption object is familiar and the consumption method is new, unconventionality may revitalize enjoyment for the thing consumed. Throughout, we also tested for various mediation and moderation evidence for the driving role of “first time” immersive feelings rather than something about individual consumption methods (e.g., an unusual method may simply be an objectively superior way to consume). To the extent that the same unconventional method no longer produces feelings of a “first time,” the boost should disappear (Experiments 1-2). Furthermore, unconventional methods should be especially beneficial after people have adapted to the consumption object (Experiments 2-3). Finally, not all unusual consumption methods should enhance enjoyment. Because we hypothesize that unconventionality may boost enjoyment by increasing immersion when it is otherwise waning, unusual methods that disrupt immersion should not boost the experience (Experiment 3). We seek to establish a general effect of unconventionality, highlighting when and how unconventional consumption methods could be most helpful.

### Experiment 1: Eating Popcorn with Chopsticks

In Experiment 1, participants were asked to repeatedly eat popcorn using their hands (a conventional way to eat popcorn) or chopsticks (an unconventional way to eat popcorn). All of these participants have likely eaten popcorn before, but presumably very few participants have eaten this familiar snack using chopsticks. Our hy-

pothesis was three-fold: (i.) chopsticks may enhance enjoyment of the food; and if so, this should be (ii.) mediated by corresponding boosts in immersion akin to a revitalized “first time” experience, and also (iii.) moderated by time, such that enjoyment and immersion should wane once using chopsticks is no longer novel.

### Method

Sixty-eight adult participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions. The study was ostensibly about snacking speed and getting people to eat more slowly. To allegedly achieve this goal, “traditional” participants were instructed to eat 10 kernels of popcorn one-at-a-time using their hands. This marked a single “trial,” and they completed two trials in total. “Unconventional” participants followed identical instructions but instead had to use chopsticks to eat for both trials. This cover story and manipulation helped disguise the hypothesis while also accounting for various incidental features (e.g., eating by the handful in one condition but not in the other).

After eating the popcorn in each trial, participants indicated their experienced enjoyment for the popcorn by rating how *enjoyable*, *positive*, and *delicious* it tasted, and how much they *savored* and *liked* it, each on individual scales anchored at 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*). These dependent variables were collapsed into an enjoyment scale ( $\alpha=.91$ ). Participants also reported their immersion during eating by rating how much the task led them to *immerse* in the experience and *focus* on the food, and how much it *intensified* the flavors, on the same scale. These mediator items were collapsed into an immersion scale ( $\alpha=.84$ ).

### Results

A Repeated Measures GLM with Condition (traditional, unconventional) as a between-subjects factor and Time (Trial 1 and Trial 2 rating scales) as a within-subjects factor revealed no main effect of Condition,  $F(1, 66)=1.82, p=.182, \eta^2=.03$ , or Time,  $F(1, 66)=2.16, p=.146, \eta^2=.03$ ; on enjoyment, but did reveal the hypothesized significant interaction between these variables,  $F(1, 66)=4.88, p=.031, \eta^2=.07$ . Pairwise comparisons reveal that unconventionality indeed enhanced enjoyment at Trial 1: the same popcorn tasted significantly better when eaten one-at-a-time using chopsticks ( $M=7.23, SD=1.08$ ) versus one-at-a-time using one’s hands ( $M=6.45, SD=1.45$ ),  $F(1, 66)=6.25, p=.015, d=.61$ . In contrast, these boosts in enjoyment *disappeared* at Trial 2, at which point the eating experience returned to baseline: the popcorn was equally enjoyable regardless of whether people ate it using chopsticks ( $M=6.57, SD=1.63$ ) or using hands ( $M=6.59, SD=1.24$ ),  $F(1, 66)=.004, p=.950, d=.01$ . This suggests that chopsticks enhance enjoyment due to their novelty. Other accounts (e.g., if chopsticks encourage slower eating, provide effort justification, or otherwise reflect an inherently superior way of eating popcorn) predict that these initial boosts should remain. Results on immersion followed a similar pattern and mediated the enjoyment boosts at Trial 1, (Effect=.53,  $SE=.22, 95\% CI_{bootstrapping} [.16, 1.00]$ ; Hayes 2013).

Experiment 1 demonstrates that unconventional consumption methods can boost enjoyment by facilitating immersion. Otherwise identical popcorn tasted better when eaten with chopsticks than with hands. Moderation by time and mediation by immersion both support the proposed framework: chopsticks enhance enjoyment be-

cause they provide an unusual and therefore immersive method of consumption and not because they are inherently superior in some way. As the unconventionality of chopsticks wanes, so goes their influence on hedonic experience. A post-test revealed an affective forecasting error such that only 16% of participants predicted enjoyment to be higher for popcorn consumed with chopsticks than by hand.

### Experiment 2: Sipping Water in Unconventional Ways

In Experiment 2, participants were asked to generate their own ideas for unusual consumption methods so as to generalize the effects beyond any one method concocted by an experimenter. We also sought to further highlight the role of “first time” feelings in driving the boost. As proposed, unconventionality should enhance enjoyment to the extent that it invites an immersive experience. Accordingly, if people generate their own lists of unusual methods, it is unlikely that each and every idea will enhance enjoyment relative to conventional consumption, but our hypothesis suggests that rotating through them (i.e., having many individual “first time” experiences rather than relying on a single method) should maximize enjoyment over time. This further serves our goal of testing *when* unconventional methods should be most effective: rather than any one method being objectively better, we seek to highlight the critical role of “first time” feelings.

#### Method

Three hundred participants were recruited via Mturk. Participants grabbed a bottle of water and then listed five unique unconventional ways in which they had never consumed water before, with the restrictions that the ways could not objectively change the water itself (e.g., no adding flavors) and that they should be able and willing to actually drink using each method if instructed to do so. Sample responses include “Use a funnel and drink from tap” and “Drink from a spoon”. Participants were then randomly assigned to condition and sipped and rated the water five times. “Traditional” participants sipped the water in the normal way they usually drink for each of the five sips. “Unconventional-variety” participants sipped the water using different methods they listed, which were piped back one at a time at random. “Unconventional-repetition” participants sipped the water using one of the methods they listed which was piped at random for the first sip and then piped again repeatedly for the remaining sips. After each sip, all participants rated their enjoyment for the water on a similar scale as in Experiment 1 ( $\alpha=.97$ ).

#### Results

A Repeated Measures GLM with Condition (traditional, unconventional-variety, unconventional-repetition) as a between-subjects factor and Time (Sip 1-5 rating scales) as a within-subjects factor revealed a main effect of Condition,  $F(2, 297)=6.68, p=.001, \eta^2=.04$ , a main effect of Time such that the water grew less enjoyable across sips,  $F(2, 297)=53.64, p<.001, \eta^2=.15$ , and the hypothesized interaction,  $F(2, 297)=11.37, p<.001, \eta^2=.07$ .

As can be seen, the “unconventional-variety” condition enhanced enjoyment for all but the initial sip: for each subsequent sip, participants who had many first-time experiences felt sustained enjoyment throughout the taste test, significantly more than those who drank normally each time ( $ts \geq 2.00, ps \leq .046, ds \geq .29$ ) and those who drank in the same unconventional way each time ( $ts \geq 2.60, ps \leq .010, ds \geq .34$ ). Likewise, repeating the same unconventional method made the water no more enjoyable than drinking it normally for each of these subsequent sips ( $ts \leq .85, ps \geq .395, ds \leq .13$ ).

These findings emphasize the driving role of unconventionality in boosting enjoyment, beyond any one specific method per se. Second, these findings reveal that unusual methods are especially useful

for breaking hedonic adaptation when people grow to take an entity for granted. Otherwise identical water remained highly enjoyable to the extent that the *way* people consumed it remained unconventional.

### Experiment 3: Watching a Video Anew

Experiment 3 further examined an important and intuitive boundary condition: not all unconventional methods enhance enjoyment. Participants were asked to watch the same video repeatedly. At the final exposure, some watched the video as they had for preceding exposures. Others watched this repetition in one of two “first time” unconventional ways, one of which impeded immersion (watching upside-down). While novel consumption methods should generally boost enjoyment by boosting immersion, we hypothesized that this form of unconventionality would not allow people to immerse into the experience, and so these participants may not enjoy the video more than normal.

#### Method

Three hundred participants were recruited via Mturk. Participants watched an exciting video of a motorcycle ride three times, and rated their enjoyment after each viewing via a similar enjoyment scale and immersion scale as previous experiments. Before the third viewing, participants were assigned to condition. “Traditional” participants simply continued this process again for the third viewing. “Unconventional-immersive” participants were told to watch using “hand goggles”—forming circles with their thumbs and index fingers around their eyes and using them to track the ride (e.g., to bob their heads left or right when the driver turned left or right). “Unconventional-disruptive” participants also watched the video in a new way, but one that should inhibit immersion: the video was flipped upside-down.

#### Results

A Repeated Measures GLM analyses with Condition as a between-subjects factor and Time (View 1-3 rating scales) as a within-subjects factor revealed no main effect of Condition on enjoyment,  $F(2, 297)=1.04, p=.355, \eta^2=.01$ , a main effect of Time such that the video grew less enjoyable across exposures,  $F(1, 297)=17.33, p<.001, \eta^2=.06$ , and the hypothesized interaction,  $F(2, 297)=9.30, p<.001, \eta^2=.06$ .

Pairwise comparisons reveal a significant effect at the third viewing where the manipulation took place,  $F(2, 297)=6.39, p=.002, \eta^2=.04$ . Unconventional participants who watched via hand goggles enjoyed the video significantly more ( $M=5.75, SD=2.21$ ) than participants who watched the same video normally ( $M=4.99, SD=2.50$ ),  $t(297)=2.22, p=.028, d=.32$ . Critically, not all unconventionality did the trick: unconventionality involving watching upside-down ( $M=4.58, SD=2.41$ ) did *not* boost enjoyment versus watching normally,  $t(297)=1.23, p=.218, d=.17$ . Results on immersion revealed a similar pattern, and mediated the enjoyment boosts at Trial 3, (Effect=.37,  $SE=.13, 95\% CI_{bootstrapping} [.12, .61]$ ; Hayes 2014).

Experiment 3 replicates and extends our general framework. Again, boosts in enjoyment derive from boosts in immersion into otherwise familiar experiences, and these boosts in immersion can be gleaned from unusual consumption methods. But accordingly, consumption methods that are unconventional but *disruptive* for immersion often fail to boost enjoyment as intended.

### General Discussion

We find converging evidence across various domains of experience, direct effects, moderation analyses, mediation analyses, and control comparisons, all highlighting the same basic effect: otherwise identical entities can become more enjoyable merely when con-

sumed in an unconventional way. A familiar food tasted better when people used chopsticks to eat it (Experiment 1); a familiar drink tasted better when people took sips in continually new ways (Experiment 2); and a familiar video was more enjoyable when people used hand goggles to re-watch it (Experiment 3). Importantly, however, when unconventional methods grew dull (Experiment 1, Experiment 2) or inhibited immersion (Experiment 3), these boosts disappeared. This should not have been the case if unusual methods per se were objectively superior in some way, which would obviously explain why they enhanced enjoyment. Rather, the current experiments generally suggest that such boosts may reflect rejuvenated feelings of a “first time” consumption experience.

### Practical concerns

The most important implication pertains to how these findings bear on the psychology of waste. Waste is a growing societal concern, around the globe and in all areas of life; see recent calls by World Bank (2012) and the OECD (2014) for the need to better understand how to combat these increasingly wasteful trends. When something declines in enjoyment, people notoriously assume that “it” is the problem and therefore abandon the entity for a new alternative (Campbell et al. 2014; Herrnstein and Prelec 1991). Clearly more research is needed to tackle these diverse trends, but the current studies reveal an overarching possible fix. Before intuitively (and perhaps mistakenly) reverting to a substitution strategy, simply changing the way “it” is experienced could reduce cost and prolong value. Beyond waste, the current findings more generally suggest an easy, cheap, and potentially effective way to better enjoy the things we consume: using unconventional methods, but not *overusing* them, may serve to boost enjoyment and combat hedonic adaptation.

### Outstanding questions

Beyond these broader issues, the idea of unconventional consumption raises many fruitful avenues for research. What are the parameters of unconventionality? Experiment 3 highlights how methods that inhibit immersion can backfire, so it would be valuable to identify the most important sources of inhibition. Experiment 1 suggests that some boosts could pass very quickly, so future research should also identify how and why feelings of unconventionality can be maintained.

Finally, the current findings may parsimoniously explain existing wellbeing-boosting factors, which largely appear throughout the literature as isolated strategies and effects (see Quoidbach, Mikolajczak, & Gross 2015). If such manipulations invite people to behave atypically (which they often do, see Quoidbach et al. 2015 for a review), many factors touted to boost enjoyment might largely reflect the unconventionality of the method. Until these possibilities are tested, consider using the wrong utensils at tonight’s meal rather than splurging at a trendy “dark” restaurant—it may taste just as delicious.

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