Underappreciating the Thrill of the Familiar

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Five studies show that repeated experiences are surprisingly enjoyable: re-visiting a museum exhibit, re-playing a game, re-watching a video, and re-examining a collage proved much more enjoyable than people predicted. When contemplating future experiences, people may overweight novelty based on a mistaken intuition about the value remaining in the familiar.

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The Time of Our Lives: Examining Utility from Experiential Consumption Over Time

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Paper #2: Underappreciating the Thrill of the Familiar
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Paper #3: The Influence of Creating Event Markers on Experienced Time and Enjoyment
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Paper #4: Compromised Experiences, Compromised Relationships
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Time may be the most precious resource consumers have at their disposal, and a growing literature suggests that consumers’ decisions about how to spend their limited time are crucial determinants of their overall well-being (Aaker, Rudd, and Mogilner 2011; Mogilner, Chance, and Norton 2012; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). While ample research highlights the importance of prioritizing experiences, there is limited research to guide people’s choices of which experiences to consume (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014) or how to consume them (Tonietto and Malkoc 2016).

Given the importance of considering the multiple sources of utility we derive from experiences across time (Elster and Loewenstein 1992; Kahneman 1994), this session contributes to our understanding of experiential consumption at multiple stages: during the actual experiences, beforehand while anticipating those experiences, and afterwards from the memories and symbolic meanings of those experiences. Each paper focuses on a different piece of utility from these stages: discounting of utility in anticipation (Goodman, Malkoc, and Rosenboim), predicted utility (O’Brien and Kardas), experienced utility (Tonietto and Barasch), and expected future utility (Garcia-Rada, Norton, and Ratner).

The first paper focuses on the discounting of utility in anticipation of future experiences. Goodman, Malkoc, and Rosenboim find that consumers are more impatient toward experiential compared to material consumption, discounting the future utility of experiences to a greater degree. This arises from the singular consumption episode characterizing most experiences, and declines when experiences are consumed over multiple episodes.

The second paper bridges between anticipated and experienced utility. O’Brien and Kardas show that people underestimate how much they will enjoy repeating an experience. Though repetition may seem to offer little utility in anticipation, people enjoy the thrill of the familiar more than they expect.

The third paper focuses on consumption utility. Tonietto and Barasch find that generating content that marks the passage of time (i.e., event markers) during experiences enhances utility. In particular, creating event markers increases engagement with the experience, leading time to feel as though it is passing more quickly, and ultimately increasing enjoyment.

Finally, the fourth paper examines trade-offs between experienced and future utility. Garcia-Rada, Norton, and Ratner find that consumers may choose a less desirable experience in order to share that experience with a co-consumer. Sacrificing utility during the experience can signal commitment to a shared future, and is associated with higher future utility from relationship satisfaction.

Understanding how different sources of utility shift and interact over time is essential to leading happier and more fulfilling lives. This session sheds new light on how consumers evaluate multiple sources of utility over time, as experiences approach, unfold, and impart enduring meaning. All four projects are working papers with at least three studies completed. Given the widespread applicability of the issues discussed, we expect this session to attract researchers interested in utility and experience, experiential versus material consumption, happiness and well-being, the psychology of time, affective forecasting, and satiation. We hope that these diverse approaches to studying experiential consumption will generate a lively and fruitful discussion.

The Material-Experiential Asymmetry in Discounting: When Experiential Purchases Lead to More Impatience

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers routinely decide whether and when to spend money on doing things (experiential purchases) or having things (material purchases), either in the present or future. When delaying consumption, consumers are impatient and show high rates of discounting (for a review see Berns, Laibson, and Loewenstein 2007; Urminsky and Zauberman 2014). Yet, most of the literature examining consumer impatience has predominantly considered monetary outcomes (i.e., delaying dollars), assuming (perhaps implicitly) that how the money will be spent is irrelevant to how consumers delay outcomes. We study systematic differences in impatience towards material and experiential purchases and propose a key distinction between the two—the duration under which a purchase is consumed.

Studies 1A and 1B initially tested our prediction using common manipulations of material and experiential purchases from the literature. In Study 1A participants first generated that they would likely make around $100 that is either a material or experiential. Next, they completed a standard delay discounting task (e.g., Malkoc and Zauberman 2006), indicating the least amount of money they would be willing to accept to delay the purchase by one week, one month, or three months. To rule out alternative explanations, we also measured excitement and anticipated regret (neither had an effect and are thus not discussed further). Consistent with our prediction, we found a significant main effect for purchase type, where participants in the experiential condition (M=756.28) required higher premiums to delay than those in the material condition (M=310.70; F(1,344)=29.75, p<.01). We also found a significant time by purchase type interaction (F(2,344)=12.92, p<.001). The decline in discounting was steeper for experiences (Mweek=1,444.79, Mmonth=496.23, Myear=327.83; F(1,189)=24.95, p<.001) compared to material goods (Mweek=409.07, Mmonth=352.91, Myear=170.13; F(1,196)=5.43, p<.01), demonstrating an attenuation (accentuation) of present bias in material (experience) conditions.

In Study 1B participants considered delaying either a $950 couch (material) or $950 vacation (experiential) by 1 week, 1 month, and...
3 months (within). We again found a main effect for purchase type, indicating that participants in the experiential condition (M=618.60) required higher premiums to delay, and thus were more impatient, than those in the material condition (M=263.78; F(1,160)=30.90, p < .001). As before, the time by purchase type interaction was also significant (F(1,160)=31.55, p < .001), showing a relatively weaker present bias in the material condition.

We designed the next three studies to rule out two alternative explanations: social nature (Study 2), re-scheduling difficulty (Study 3), and the hedonic nature (Study 4) of experiential purchases. We designed Study 2 similar to Study 1B, except the following additions: (1) a new third condition, asking participants to imagine going to a vacation alone, (2) a repeated choice method to elicit impatience and (3) several variables that help better understand the process (e.g., scheduling, time sensitivity, memory, positive emotions). We found a significant effect of product type on impatience (F(2,303)=6.71, p < .05): Consumers made fewer impatient choices when delaying a material purchase (M=2.68) compared to delaying a social experience (M=3.69; t(303)=3.44, p < .001) or a solitary experience (M=3.53; t(303)=2.80, p < .01). The solitary and social experience conditions did not differ (t(303)<1). Testing our alternative processes, we found that while a concern for scheduling did lead to impatient choices (F(2,292)=17.59, p < .001), it did not mediate the effect of purchase type on impatience (nor did any of the other measures).

In Study 3, we used an incentive-compatible design, and controlled for rescheduling by asking participants to schedule a massage appointment (experience) or massager pick up (material) time prior to indicating their intertemporal preferences. They also scheduled their delay appointment/pick up the following week. They then made a series of ten choices, indicating preference between receiving their massage [massager] this week or next week for an additional compensation (from $0 to $45, with $5 intervals). Consistent with our previous studies, participants who considered delaying the experience made significantly more impatient choices (M=2.17) than those who considered delaying a material item (M=1.64; t(196)=2.14, p < .05).

Study 4 manipulated the consumption goal (hedonic/utilitarian) and material/experiential nature. We found that experiences lead to more impatience (M_experiential=4.34, M_material=3.50, F(1,351)=9.11, p < .01), regardless of the consumption goal. Consumption goal did not moderate the material-experiential effect (F(1,351)<1, p > .6).

Finally, Study 5 directly tested whether differences in the number of consumption episodes drives the effect. We pre-tested different offers that matched on attractiveness, but differed in terms of being more or less material-experiential. We generated four items for each of the four replicates: (1) material purchase consumed over a long time, (2) material purchase consumed over a short time, (3) experiential purchase consumed over a long time, and (4) experiential purchase consumed over a short time. As expected, participants made significantly more impatience choices when delaying purchases consumed over a single episode (M=4.02) compared to multiple episodes (M=3.47; F(1,187)=4.59; p < .05). Since our material-experiential manipulation no longer varied in terms of consumption duration, we did not find a main effect of purchase type (M_experiential=4.33 vs. M_material=3.51; F(1,187)<1; p > .5). That is, the material-experiential asymmetry on impatience was eliminated once consumption duration was controlled.

Our findings demonstrate that the type of purchase (i.e., material vs. experiential) systematically alters the extent of consumer discounting and impatience, indicating that a different consumption pattern over time can have significant effects on the compensation consumers require to delay a purchase. This result helps explain why some research has found vastly differently discount rates across experimental stimuli, particularly in quantitative modeling and product adoption that has focused on durable (i.e., material) goods (Dubé, Hitsch, and Jindal 2015). Further, our results highlight an instance where material purchases, that are ordinarily have negative associations (e.g., materialism, overspending), lead to a desirable outcome (i.e., less impatience).

Underappreciating the Thrill of the Familiar

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People prefer novelty and variety when seeking to maximize their enjoyment for foods, vacations, social events, consumer goods, and many other everyday experiences (McAllister and Pessersie 1982; Kahneman and Snell 1992; Rattner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999; Read and Loewenstein 1995; Simonson 1990)—consuming or doing something “new” rather than something that one has consumed or done in the past. Rather than choosing to re-experience the same things over and over again, people tend to quickly abandon familiar entities for newer, frequently more expensive, alternatives.

Why? Almost all previous research on novelty and variety has focused on the allure of the newer alternatives by which people are tempted (e.g., in advertising efforts that highlight desirable updates: Fennis and Stroebe 2010). From this perspective, an aversion to repetition reflects people’s imagination of the future novel experience, often an exaggeration of its value if actually acquired (Wilson and Gilbert 2003). However, people might also misconstrue the familiar experience, by underappreciating the richness that could be reaped if actually repeated. Hedonic states, like a pleasurable taste while eating food or feeling excited while watching a movie, are considerably more intense, more absorbing, and more dynamic in the moment of consumption compared to their simplified, stripped-down, and static mental representations (Ariely and Loewenstein 2006; Hsee and Zhang 2004; Morewedge et al. 2010; Robinson and Clore 2002). Doing the same thing over and over again may therefore provide unique immersive thrills in the actual moment (e.g., sustained affective/visceral sensations; discovering missed details and nuances; developing new interpretations) but in one’s mind seem like a tedious overdose of the same simplified thing. An aversion to repetition could reflect a mistaken intuition about the remaining value hidden in the familiar.

To address this question, participants were exposed to an enjoyable activity and reported their reactions. Some were asked to repeat the activity a number of times in a row and rated each exposure. Others simply imagined repeating the activity and predicted their reactions. Five studies followed this procedure, across a variety of experiential domains. This affords a conservative test because immediate repetition (versus after some delay) may promote actual dullness, working against the hypothesis.

Study 1 was conducted in naturalistic settings with visitors at a science museum. All participants went through the Genetics exhibit, among the most popular at the museum. Afterwards, they rated their enjoyment for the experience. Then, some were asked to go through Genetics again, and afterwards rated their enjoyment for this second visit. Others simply imagined repeating the exhibit and predicted their enjoyment.

Do people underappreciate the fun of repetition? Yes. Predictors assumed a decline: while the original experience was quite enjoyable, they believed that going through the exhibit again would be significantly less enjoyable (B=.63, p < .001). In reality, this was not the case: actual experiencers enjoyed the return visit just as much as the first time around (B=.09, p = .55).
In study 2, all participants played a video game for a set playing period, then were asked to actually play or to simply imagine playing the same game, from the same starting point, for six subsequent periods back-to-back. While the reactions of predictors and experiencers did not differ at first or second exposure (Bs ≤ .36, ps ≥ .11), predictors significantly underestimated their excitement for replaying the game a third, fourth, fifth, and sixth time in a row (Bs ≥ .78, ps ≤ .001).

In study 3, all participants watched a video of a motorcycle ride, three times in a row. Again, while predictors accurately reported their excitement for the initial viewing (B = .02, p = .94), they significantly underestimated their excitement for re-watching a second and third time in a row (Bs ≥ .49, ps ≤ .04).

In study 4, all participants viewed a collage of evocative photographs (e.g., an image of a cliff diver) for set viewing period, for a total of five consecutive periods. Yet again, predictors accurately reported their excitement for their initial exposure to the collage (B = .24, p = .24), but significantly underestimated their excitement for re-viewing the collage a second, third, fourth, and fifth time in a row (Bs ≥ .60, ps ≤ .009).

Study 5 ruled out general repetition effects (e.g., mere exposure), highlighting the role of simplification. Some participants completed the task from study 4: they saw the rich evocative collage and either experienced or imagined repeat viewings. Others saw a simplified collage that stripped away all richness and evocative imagery, holding its theme constant (e.g., a cartoon danger symbol rather than an actual cliff diver). For the rich collage, the misprediction replicated: although predictors and experiencers did not differ in their excitement at the initial exposure (B = .28, p = .17). Unexpected thrills from repeated exposure may not derive from the act of repetition but from the simplified nature of how people mentally represent rich hedonic states. When repeating experiences that are already “simplified,” people’s dulled intuitions about repetition can serve them well.

Unfortunately for the rational decision maker, most enjoyable activities are hedonically rich, not dull. An aversion to repetition may generally pose a problem. Because people may avoid repeating these experiences in daily life, they rarely discover the hidden benefits of actually doing so. Instead, people pay a novelty premium. Previous research has touted many benefits of novelty and variety for individual wellbeing (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade 2005), but a growing societal emphasis on the “new” may also explain growing consumption waste (OECD 2014). Before intuitively seeking something new, knowing to consume the same thing a few more times might help reduce costs while also maximizing the value of the thing itself. Repetition too could add a (surprising) spice to life.

The Influence of Creating Event Markers on Experienced Time and Enjoyment

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers commonly create content about aspects of an experience as it unfolds. For example, during an experience, consumers often write posts for real-time social media updates and frequently send messages to others (Ahonen 2013) about their experience. Importantly, when consumers generate information during an experience, they punctuate the intervening events within the experience, creating event markers. Prior research suggests that such markers can alter retrospective time perception and make events feel more distant (Zauberman et al. 2009), while related work suggests that reminders of past events can enhance utility from memory (Zauberman, Ratner, and Kim 2009). However, no past research investigates how creating markers during experiences might affect current time perception and enjoyment.

We propose that because activities which capture the unfolding experience increase engagement with the task (Diehl, Zauberman, and Barasch 2016), creating event markers will lead time to feel as though it is passing more quickly, resulting in the experience feeling perceptually contracted. That is, when consumers are more engaged, they tend to pay less attention to the passing of time, which can lead time to feel as though it is passing more quickly (Conti 2001). Finally, because consumers tend to infer greater enjoyment when time is perceived as passing more quickly (Gabler and Poole 2012; Sackett et. al 2010), we further predict that creating markers within an experience will increase enjoyment.

Four studies examine how creating markers can alter experienced time and enjoyment. All of the studies follow a similar set-up: participants took a virtual tour by watching a first-person video of someone touring a particular city. Following the tour, we measured time perception using two items: how quickly did time seem to pass and how long did this tour experience seem to last (reverse-scored). Study 1 also measured how engaged participants felt and Studies 1-2 measured how much they enjoyed the experience.

In Study 1 (N=165), all participants imagined that they were experiencing a tour with a friend. Those in the marker condition were provided with five text boxes to write messages related to the ongoing experience to their friend at any point during the video. Those in the control condition simply watched the video and were not instructed to write any messages. We found the predicted effect, whereby those in the marker condition (M=40.33) perceived the experience as passing more quickly than those in the control condition (M=27.50, p<.01), and also felt more engaged (Mmarker=56.62, Mcontrol=45.36, p=.016) and enjoyed their experience more (Mmarker=43.53, Mcontrol=35.78, p=.08). Moreover, we found evidence for our proposed serial mediation (markers→engagement→time perception→enjoyment; 95% [CI]=0.418, 3.960).

In Study 2 (N=210), we sought to replicate the results of Study 1 while also including an additional control group, where participants receive messages from a friend rather than creating content. Demonstrating that the effect is a unique outcome of creating markers, rather than the result of mere distraction from any marker during the experience, we found that creating markers (M=32.09) led time to feel as though it had passed more quickly compared to both the control (M=18.54) and friend-generated content conditions (M=23.09, ps<.02), which did not differ from each other (p=.25). Further, self-generated markers (M=30.66) led the experience to be more enjoyable compared to both the control (M=20.60) and other-generated conditions (M=18.61, ps<.01), which did not differ (p=.58). Replicating Study 1, we found evidence for our proposed mediation (self-generated markers→time perception→enjoyment; 95% [CI]=0.731, 3.644).

In Studies 1 and 2, we operationalized marker-creation using sharing. While sharing behavior may be one particularly common way that markers are created in everyday life, any content that consumers create during an experience should serve as a marker and therefore show our effect. As such, in Study 3 (N=202), rather than sharing, participants in the marker creation conditions wrote self-notes about their experience. Further, we included an additional marker-creation condition in which participants wrote the notes whenever they were prompted to do so rather than at any time they
chose. We found that creating markers led participants to perceive the experience as passing more quickly whether participants controlled the timing of the markers (M=53.10) or not (M=60.53), compared to control (M=46.07, p<.05). Study 3 demonstrates that the effect of marker-creation is robust to removing both the sharing aspect and the control that participants have over the timing of the markers.

Importantly, prior research defines markers as intervening events that directly relate to a past experience (Zauber et al. 2009). As such, in order to test whether our observed effect is driven by relevant marker-creation (rather than from creating any content), in Study 4 (N=107) we manipulated the relevance of the content to the ongoing experience in a 2 (relevance; within-subjects) x 2 (self vs. other-creation, between-subjects) design. Participants in this study went on two separate tours. Those in the self-generated markers condition were once again instructed to write messages to a friend during their tour experience, but to only write content that was directly relevant to the ongoing experience in one tour and only content that was irrelevant in the other tour (counter-balanced). Those in the other-generated conditions instead received messages from a friend that were relevant for one tour and irrelevant for the other (counter-balanced). We found the predicted interaction on time perception (p=.014) such that, for relevant content, self-generated markers (M=42.81) led time to pass more quickly compared to other-generated content (M=32.62, p<.01), but no such difference emerged for the irrelevant content (Mself=32.76, Mother=33.18, p=.92). Further, in the self-generated markers conditions, relevant content led time to pass more quickly compared to irrelevant content (p<.01), but no such difference emerged for the other-generated conditions (p=.86). This study therefore demonstrates that temporal markers must be self-generated and directly related to the ongoing experience in order to influence the experience of time.

We find that creating event markers during an experience can positively impact enjoyment by increasing engagement and leading to the sense that time is passing more quickly. This research contributes to the literature examining the effects of event markers while providing implications for marketers to improve consumer experiences by encouraging content-creation.

Compromised Experiences, Compromised Relationships

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When taking a flight, faced with the choice of two uncomfortable adjacent seats in the last row of the plane, or two seats in the economy comfort section that are not next to each other, what do consumers in relationships choose? We explore decisions about such shared experiences and examine the consequences of these choices for satisfaction with both the experience itself and the relationship. We suggest that some interaction partners compromise the objective quality of an experience to share that experience with a co-consumer (such as a romantic partner) – and that such choices are associated with higher relationship satisfaction.

Previous work has shown that shared experiences can be more pleasurable and preferred over both solo experiences and material possessions (Caprariello and Reis 2013). Sharing an activity with another person amplifies the experience (Boothby, Clark and Bargh 2014) and leads to more coherent evaluations (Ramanathan and McGill 2007). Moreover, consumers often feel inhibited from engaging in hedonic public activities alone as they anticipate negative inferences from others about their social connectedness (Ratner and Hamilton 2015). We build on this work and suggest that consumers not only prefer sharing an experience with someone else over enjoying alone but that they will sacrifice objective quality of the experience to enjoy the experience right next to a close other (H1). Additionally, we build on work on interpersonal closeness to demonstrate that the type and quality of a relationship can explain how consumers make choices for shared experiences. We argue that because consumers in close relationships perceive themselves as interdependent and focus on sharing their resources and perspectives with close others (Aron & Aron, 1986; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) they will be more likely to choose shared worse experiences (H2A). Specifically, in the context of romantic relationships, we hypothesize that such sacrifices are associated with higher relationship quality (H2B).

In Studies 1A and 1B, we document this ubiquitous phenomenon. First, we analyzed Trip Advisor reviews of the interactive play “Sleep No More.” This is an experience that has been designed to be enjoyed solo: the company encourages visitors to have a unique solo experience and then exchange stories with other group members at the end. We obtained 675 reviews submitted by consumers who visited this show. Two coders read the reviews and identified how the person went through the play (1=alone, 2=with other people, 0=unclear). We find that 26.7% of the visitors decided to stay with their co-consumer(s) and that these people reported enjoying the experience significantly less (Mreview rating=3.23, SD=1.54; n=40) than those who went through the experience alone (Mreview rating=4.39, SD=1.05, n=110, t(52.69)=4.42, p<.001). In Study 1B, we document these sacrifices using a broader set of experiences (N=200). We asked participants to indicate whether they could recall a time when they had to choose between enjoying an experience with someone or taking a better experience but enjoying it separately or alone. Seventy-one percent said they could recall facing this decision, and 60% of these decisions were made over the last year. Taken together, Studies 1A and 1B suggest that choices between better experiences or shared experiences are common.

Studies 2A and 2B explored whether such seemingly suboptimal choices – worse experiences – may come with benefits: better relationships. We recruited participants in romantic relationships (Study 2A; Mturk N=200) and romantic dyads (Study 2B; Panel N=216) and asked them to make choices for several experiences they could share with their romantic partner. We created multiple vignettes describing experiences that involved a decision between a “good apart” option and a “bad together” one. We manipulated the quality of the experiences by varying the level of comfort (e.g. seats for a flight), duration (e.g. time of a videogame), location (e.g. front row vs. last row seats for lecture), and perceived quality (e.g. basic vs. premium spa session). In these two studies, we observe that consumers generally prefer a “bad together” experience to a “good apart” one (proportion of people who chose “bad together” for each activity ranges from 50-96%) and that quality sacrifices are greater when there is more opportunity for interaction during the experience. Interestingly, we find that giving up quality of experience (i.e., choosing “bad together” experiences over “good apart” ones) positively correlates with relationship quality measures such as satisfaction, commitment, gratitude, and interpersonal closeness (these effects hold in our two samples, all ps<.05).

In the final two studies, we manipulate the type of experience (Study 3) and the type of relationship (Study 4) and examine how these two dimensions impact choices. In Study 3, we framed the same experience (a cooking class) either as utilitarian or hedonic and asked participants to choose seats (N=200). We observe that 77% of participants chose two adjacent seats in the last row of the class where they couldn’t see the instructor properly (over two non-adjacent first row seats) when they had a hedonic goal compared to 60% when they had a utilitarian goal (χ²(1)=6.70, p=.010). In Study 4, participants were asked to choose seats for a flight they were tak-
ing with their romantic partner, a close friend, or a distant coworker (N=303). We find that participants in the partner condition displayed the highest level of sacrifice (56.4%; followed by close friends (38.0%) and distant coworkers (11.8%; χ²=40.80, p<.001).

Our results contribute to research on shared experiences, examining when and why consumers make tradeoffs for shared experiences with close others. Our archival data suggests that being alone can enhance the quality of the experience, but our relationships data suggest that being together leads to happier couples. Thus it appears that, in some cases, people must choose either to enjoy the experience or solidify their relationships: compromising an experience can help to keep relationships from being compromised.

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