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Essence Slows the Rate of Hedonic Decline By Adding Meaning

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Enjoyment tends to decline with repeated exposure but factors can slow the rate of hedonic decline. Perceived essence (i.e., special aura), slows hedonic decline by adding meaning to repeated experiences. It led to greater meaning, leading to prolonged enjoyment of an experience, greater willingness to consume, and greater actual consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine buying a new painting for your office wall; you will enjoy it less as you are repeatedly exposed to it. Yet, periodically switching paintings is a costly solution. Hence, it is important for marketers to know whether certain factors can slow down hedonic decline, increasing the enjoyment consumers derive from experiences.

Hedonic decline is a decrease in responsiveness to hedonic stimuli meaning that positive experiences become less enjoyable with repeated exposure (Coombs and Avrunin 1977; Frederick and Loewenstein 1999; Galak and Redden 2018). It decreases when perceived variety increases (Epstein et al. 2009; Galak, Redden, and Kruger 2009), rate of consumption is slowed (Galak, Kruger, and Loewenstein 2013), and when consumption episodes are categorized more specifically (Redden 2008). Yet, hedonic decline is not physiological; it can be constructed in the moment (Galak and Redden 2018). Research has suggested that meaning making influences this construction process (O'Brien 2019; Yang and Galak 2015). Hedonic decline slows when each exposure provides an opportunity to make meaning. For example, when people see the same movie many times, they notice new things, form theories, and speculate, which are all acts of making more meaning with each consumption episode.

Importantly, we propose that essence can slow hedonic decline by enabling meaning making. People believe that objects acquire a special aura or "essence" from their past which affects the valuation of consumer products (Argo et al. 2008; Morales and Fitzsimons 2007; Newman and Dhar 2014) and original artworks (Newman and Bloom 2012). Perceived essence layers on non-physical elements and can add to the meaning of an object. This increases the potential meaning that can be extracted with each exposure. Accordingly, we hypothesize that hedonic decline will slow when people can use essence to make meaning. We further hypothesize that perceived essence will slow down hedonic decline when people use it to construct their own meaning of an object but not when they believe meaning is fixed. This is because while people can use perceived essence to construct meaning, it is irrelevant without a meaning construction process (i.e., belief that meaning is predetermined). In sum, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: (a) Perceived essence slows hedonic decline (b) when people believe they can construct their own meaning but not when meaning is fixed

Three studies support our predictions. Study 1 showed that greater perceived essence (i.e., an earlier serial number of an art print (2/30) versus a later serial number (27/30); Smith, Newman, and Dhar 2015) led to slower hedonic decline. 120 MTurkers were randomly assigned to either early or later serial number conditions. All participants looked at an art print labeled no. 02/30 or 27/30 for 15 seconds and then rated their enjoyment of the print ($0=Not\ at\ all$, $100=Very\ much$). They viewed and rated it eight total times. A repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant interaction ($F(7, 826)=2.04$, $p=.047$). Two planned contrasts confirmed that the pattern of the interaction matched our theory. The first enjoyment rating did not differ between the two label number conditions ($M_{2/30}=60.15$ vs. $M_{27/30}=56.21$; $F<1$). However, the contrast on the final enjoyment rating indicated a significant difference ($M_{2/30}=48.97$ vs. $M_{27/30}=36.83$; $F(1, 118)=3.72$, $p=.05$), as predicted. Thus, greater perceived essence

from an earlier serial number led to a slower hedonic decline (i.e., a less steep slope) and supports H1a.

Study 2 replicated the key effect of essence slowing hedonic decline using a different manipulation of essence (i.e., geographic proximity: original production location versus new production location; Smith et al. 2015) of a song recording. It also showed that greater perceived essence slows hedonic decline by enhancing the meaning of the experience. 127 MTurkers were randomly assigned to either production in the original location condition or production in a newer location condition. All participants listened to a Beatles song produced in the original location in London or in a newer location in China for 30 seconds and then rated their enjoyment of the song eight times. Next, they indicated how much the song expressed something for them ($1=not\ much\ at\ all$; $7=very\ much$), which measured meaning and served as the mediator. A repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant interaction ($F(7, 875)=2.49$, $p=.016$). Two planned contrasts confirmed that the first enjoyment rating did not differ between conditions ($M_{original}=77.81$ vs. $M_{newer}=70.78$; $F(1, 125)=2.34$, $p=.13$) but there was a significant difference on the final enjoyment rating ($M_{original}=61.10$ vs. $M_{newer}=40.38$; $F(1, 125)=11.16$, $p=.001$). This result supports that greater essence (i.e., the original location) led to a slower rate of hedonic decline further supporting H1a. A one-factor ANOVA revealed that the original (vs. newer production) location expressed more meaning ($M_{original}=4.18$ vs. $M_{newer}=3.20$; $F(1, 125)=7.14$, $p=.009$) and a mediation analysis (Model 4 with 10,000 resamples; Hayes 2018) revealed the indirect effect of production location through meaning was significant [$-.35$; $CI\ 95\%: -.71, -.08$].

Study 3 replicated the key effect when participants were led to believe that meaning can be constructed but the effect disappeared when led to believe that meaning is fixed. We used the method from study 1 except prior to viewing the art, participants either read a blurb about how meaning is either constructed or fixed. 140 MTurkers were randomly assigned to one of four conditions of a 2 (number: 2/30 vs. 27/30) x 2 (meaning: fixed vs. constructed) x 8 (viewings) design. There was an overall interaction ($F(7, 928)=2.28$, $p=.026$). When participants believed meaning is constructed by the perceiver, the results replicated the previous studies. There was a significant interaction ($F(7, 482)=3.77$, $p=.0005$) and planned contrasts confirmed the first enjoyment rating did not differ ($M_{2/30}=64.93$ vs. $M_{27/30}=57.55$; $F(1, 70)=1.95$, $p=.17$) but the final enjoyment did ($M_{2/30}=57.40$ vs. $M_{27/30}=33.21$; $F(1, 70)=11.88$, $p=.001$) between conditions. Yet when meaning is fixed, the results support our theory that meaning making underlies our effects. The interaction was not significant ($F<1$). The lack of an interaction shows that limiting the opportunity to make meaning reduced the impact of perceived essence on hedonic decline. Thus, when people are led to believe that they can construct their own meaning essence slows hedonic decline but not when it is fixed, consistent with H1b.

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