DIVERGENT EFFECTS OF DISTANCE

ON THE PRIMARY VS SECONDARY CHARACTERISTICS OF HEDONIC GOODS

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Abstract

"Hedonic" goods are consumed primarily to bring joy. Combining that definition with the literature that links positive affect to abstract thinking and abstract thinking to greater psychological distances, we theoretically predict that increasing psychological distance should promote hedonic choice. We demonstrate in a field study that customers order more hedonic items with increased social distance, and in two more studies that people make more hedonic choices when greater distances are experimentally activated. Our first motivation was to understand hedonic choice through the lens of a well-established and generalizable cognitive model.

The literature is divided on whether abstract thinking would promote or hinder hedonic choice. Our second motivation was to introduce "harm" as a moderator to reconcile this discrepancy. When an item with hedonic qualities becomes primarily a cue for "harm" rather than joy, it loses its qualifications as a "hedonic" good by definition. In such instances, closer rather than greater distances should enable concrete actions to protect against harm and promote hedonic choice. Two behavioral experiments illustrate that when harm is neutralized the main effect of greater distance on hedonic choice obtains. But when harm is primed, the directionality reverses, and greater psychological distance hinders choice.

Key words: hedonic choice, psychological distance, harm.

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"Blue are the hills that are far away," and "distance lends enchantment to the view." Whether it be hills or views, things that lie afar appear to bring more joy. "Hedonic" goods are consumed primarily for experiential and sensory enjoyment (Batra and Ahtola 1991). Combining that definition with the literature that links positive affect to abstract thinking (Labroo and Patrick 2008), and the literature that links abstract thinking to greater distances (Liberman and Trope 1998), we present that shifting the focus to greater psychological distances should promote hedonic choice. To our knowledge this research is the first to build on the primary characteristic of hedonic goods, to link hedonic choice to greater distances. Our first motivation was to understand hedonic choice through the lens of a well-established and generalizable cognitive model.

The literature is divided (Mehta, Rhu and Myers-Levy 2014) on whether a focus on greater distances would promote (Kivetz and Keinan 2006) or hinder (Fujita, Trope, Liberman and Levin-Sagi 2006) hedonic choice. Our second motivation was to introduce perceived "harm" as a moderator to reconcile this gap. Items with hedonic qualities can have a secondary characteristic of causing harm to the consumer. For some people and/or in some situations the secondary characteristic of causing harm can become more prominent than the primary characteristic of bringing joy. In such cases closer rather than greater psychological distances should promote choice. Low level construals and closer

distances should prompt a mobilization toward concrete protective actions, to mitigate harm, and promote the choice of hedonic goods.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary characteristic of "joy" links hedonic goods to greater psychological distances

We theoretically link hedonic goods to abstract thinking styles, and offer three explanations. First, the primary goal of a hedonic purchase is, by definition, to bring joy, which is a positive affect. Cues that induce happiness evoke abstract construal (Labroo and Patrick 2008), and hedonic goods are cues of joy which should activate abstract thinking. Second, hedonic goods have abstract characteristics. They tend to be characterized by intangible attributes (Li, Abassi and Cheema 2020), and be more imagery-evoking (MacInnis and Price 1987). Imagery is the product of imagination, which is a form of abstract thinking, and intangible attributes are by nature abstract. Third, the purpose of hedonic consumption is intrinsically abstract. A hedonic item such as a nice painting would be desirable for the abstract goal of experiencing general pleasantness, but a utilitarian item such as a nice knife would be desirable for a more concrete goal of cutting something with precision and ease.

The literature links abstract thinking to greater psychological distances. People mentally represent objects and events that are more removed from (closer to) the self, here and now, in more abstract (concrete) terms (Trope and Liberman 2010). This relationship is bilateral, and when people are prompted with more abstract (concrete) questions they

produce more psychologically distant (proximate) responses (Semin and Smith 1999). Based on this relationship, we further theoretically link hedonic goods to greater psychological distances.

The literature suggests that when the level of abstraction in the consumer mindset that is activated by the context, matches the level of abstraction in which the alternative tends to be construed, choice likelihood increases. When abstract (concrete) thinking is activated by placing the decision in the temporally distant (proximate) future (present), people tend to choose options that are more abstractly desirable (concretely feasible) (Liberman and Trope 1998). When abstract (concrete) thinking is activated through a promotion that describes *why* (*how*) one should recycle, people actually recycle more when they are exposed to a positive (negative) message frame which is associated with abstract (concrete) construal (White, MacDonnell and Dahl 2011). When abstract (concrete) thinking is activated by reflecting on *why* (*how*) one should keep a regimen, people tend to be more positive about exercise (diet) which tends to be construed more abstractly (concretely) (Okada 2019). We build on this literature to propose that hedonic goods tend to be construed abstractly and at greater psychological distances, so when they are presented in a context that also activates a focus on greater distances, choice likelihood should increase.

We note that this is not a simple replication of more desirable versus feasible options becoming more attractive at greater versus closer distances (Liberman and Trope 1998). Desirability and hedonicity are separate constructs, as are feasibility and utility. A

house can be in a “desirable” location for utilitarian reasons such as proximity to work, as well as for hedonic reasons such as accessibility to entertainment and culture. Something that is “feasible” is “capable of being used successfully” (Merriam Webster), and both hedonic vehicles such as two-door convertibles, as well as utilitarian vehicles such as SUV’s can be easy or difficult to operate.

Our basic framework linking hedonic goods to abstract thinking styles and greater psychological distances aligns with, and offers additional insight into, various findings in the existing literature. Hedonic items are more popular as prizes than purchases because people derive more “anticipation utility” from them (O’Curry and Strahilevitz 2001). We also suggest that prizes are hypothetical as they may not materialize. Hypotheticality increases psychological distance (Trope, Liberman and Wakslak 2007), so hedonic goods that are construed more abstractly and become more attractive when presented at greater distances as hypothetical acquisitions. The literature finds that people tend to choose the utilitarian alternative in an acquisition, but also give up the utilitarian item and retain the hedonic one in a forfeiture, because loss aversion is greater for hedonic items as they are easier to elaborate on, and imagine counterfactuals about (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). We additionally present that because people are less (more) likely to change their minds about ideas that they construe abstractly (concretely) (Vallacher and Wegner 1987), and a forfeiture situation requires the decision maker to change one’s mind about alternatives that one had previously owned, one would be less likely to forfeit the more abstractly construed hedonic alternative. Arguably also in an acquisition situation the decision maker is required to change one’s mind about not possessing either alternative to possessing one or

the other, so one would be less likely to change one's mind about not possessing the more abstractly construed hedonic alternative and end up choosing the utilitarian alternative. The literature demonstrates a preference reversal: hedonic goods are preferable in a rating task, but utilitarian goods get chosen in a choice task (Chitturi, Raghunathan and Mahajan 2007; Okada 2005) because the presence of the utilitarian alternative in the choice context heightens the need for justification for the hedonic alternative to hinder its choice (Okada 2005), and/or because the need for inter-attribute comparisons in the choice context attenuates the intensity of the emotional response to hedonic alternatives (Chitturi et al. 2007). We suggest a third explanation: that because rating (choice) is an evaluation (action) which evokes more abstract (concrete) construals, hedonic alternatives that are abstractly construed become more (less) favorable in a rating (choice) task. Studies show that consumers purchase more hedonic food items on credit card, because the pain of paying cash that would otherwise hinder hedonic purchases, is attenuated in credit purchases (Thomas, Desai and Seenivasan 2011). We offer an additional insight: that credit (cash) payment evokes greater (closer) psychological distances. For one, the time to settlement is immediate for cash, and a month or more removed for credit cards. Also, the specific bills and coins used for cash transactions can be spent only once on those particular food items, whereas the same plastic card can be used over and over for more general purposes in credit purchases. Credit cards shift the focus to greater distances, and promote the purchase of hedonic food items, which match in the level of abstraction. Our framework also aligns with the findings that hedonic goods look more attractive from greater temporal distances. Hedonic choice increases with a longer time window (Siddiqui,

May and Ashwani 2017), and regret for consuming hedonic items attenuates over time, while the regret for forgoing hedonic items increases (Kivetz and Keinan 2006). Our framework further opens a perspective on *why* people's regret for hedonic consumption attenuates over time. Because hedonic goods are construed more abstractly they appear less attractive immediately after choice, thus evoking a sense of regret. But as more time passes, and one looks at the hedonic purchase from a more temporally removed position, the same item appears more attractive, thus attenuating regret. One can get temporally removed from hedonic choice by going the other direction, in the future as well. Our intent here is not to suggest an alternative mechanism *per se*, or override the existing theories. We simply point out the convergence of our theoretical framework linking hedonic choice to greater psychological distances with existing findings, and suggest that it also offers a broader understanding of existing theories.

Hedonic goods can have a secondary characteristic of "harm"

The existing literature that examines hedonic goods through the lens of construal level theory links hedonic choice to low rather than high level construals (Fujita, Trope, Liberman and Levin-Sagi 2006; Trope and Liberman 2000, 2003), which is the opposite of our framework. That literature stream relies on the vice properties of hedonic goods to conceptualize hedonic choice as something to be controlled, and argues that abstract (concrete) thinking heightens (attenuates) self-control which restricts (allows) hedonic choice (Kivetz and Keinan 2006, p281). Vices are defined by a tradeoff between an immediate enjoyment and long-term harm (Chen and Sengupta 2014; Liu, Haws,

Lambertson, Campbell and Fitzsimmons 2015; Wertenbroch 1998). Vices may have hedonic properties, but we propound that long-term harm does not define hedonicity *per se*.

In contrast to the literature stream that treats the tradeoff between enjoyment and harm as an intrinsic element of hedonic items, we focus on enjoyment as the primary characteristic of hedonic goods. Goods that are hedonic bring joy, *ipso facto*. And goods that do not bring joy are not hedonic, by definition. We introduce harm separately as a secondary characteristic of hedonic goods. Being harmful does not make an item hedonic *per se* (e.g. carbon monoxide). And there can certainly be enjoyment without harm. We present the secondary characteristic of "harm" as a moderator to reconcile the divide between our proposed theoretical framework and the existing literature about whether abstract thinking and greater distances should promote or hinder hedonic choice. This is our second theoretical contribution.

In a choice between a more hedonic chocolate cake and a more utilitarian fruit salad, the chocolate cake (fruit salad) appears more attractive at a greater (closer) temporal distance (Kivetz and Keinan 2006), which aligns with our proposed framework. However, in a separate study where the same binary choice is juxtaposed to some strongly suggestive wording in an experimental scenario where the decision maker has just emphatically "resol(ved) not to eat fattening food," the chocolate cake ends up having a negative high construal (Trope and Liberman 2000), which is contrary to our main effect prediction.

An item with hedonic qualities can become primarily a harm to guard against for some people and/or in some situations. In the face of harm, low level construal enables concrete action to protect oneself (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs 2001;

Taylor 1991). One may perceive harm in consuming ice cream for example, but activating low level construal should enable the decision maker to devise concrete protective actions, e.g. forgoing dessert later on at dinner, or walking an extra mile on the way home, to attenuate the harm. We propose that when people perceive harm in choosing an item with hedonic qualities, closer distances rather than greater distances should promote choice, because closer distances activate concrete thinking to enable actions to protect oneself.

We use the term "harm" to mean a detriment to oneself. The emotional consequence of making a harmful choice may be guilt, or shame (Han, Duhackek and Agrawal 2014), and this may be a direction for future studies. Here we focus on the stimulus of perceived harm itself, and how a focus on closer distances enables more concrete protective actions against such harm. The emotional consequence of making a choice that is detrimental to the self lies outside of the scope of our research.

Some studies suggest that people "should" consume more hedonic items (Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Keinan and Kivetz 2008). Extending that work is a study that suggests that when the self is (not) put in focus and people (do not) realize that they should consume more hedonic items, hedonic choice becomes more likely when thinking about *why* (*how*) (Mehta, Zhu and Myers-Levy 2014). As we remained silent on whether hedonic goods *should not* be consumed, we likewise remain silent on whether more hedonic goods *should* be consumed. Our theoretical framework linking greater distances to hedonic choice, with perceived harm as a moderator, aligns with those studies' findings as well. Hedonic alternatives are construed abstractly so the value (negative value) should increase (decrease) over time. Because hedonic choices are more difficult to justify (Okada 2005),

i.e. to explain *why*, thinking about *why* would heighten perceived harm. In addition, putting the focus on the self reduces the distance to zero, by definition. In a neutral *how* condition, hedonic choice becomes more likely when the distance in not reduced to zero. But when perceived harm is heightened in the *why* condition, the directionality reverses and hedonic choice becomes more likely at zero distance. Again our intent is not to override the existing theory, but to demonstrate how our proposed theoretical framework can offer additional insight to previous findings.

STUDY ONE:

THE MORE THE MERRIER

The purpose of Study One was to examine the relationship between greater social distances and hedonic choice. It was conducted as a field study of actual customers at a coffee shop on a university campus. Our prediction was that greater social distances would be activated among customers who arrived in larger groups, and they would tend to order more hedonic items.

Design

We observed the customers of a university campus coffee shop. We recorded the customers' genders, group sizes and orders. We classified the "hedonicity" of customers' orders on a scoring system that added points for flavor, sweetness, and/or richness. For example, bottled water was zero; regular black coffee was 1 (for flavor); regular coffee

with sugar was 2 (1 for flavor plus 1 for sugar); café mocha was 3 for flavor (2 for espresso vs regular coffee + 1 for chocolate) plus 1 for sweetness plus 1 for cream for a total of 5.

Large group sizes should shift the focus to greater social distances. We predicted that customers who arrived in large groups would order more hedonic items.

Results

Over six days, we observed 272 customers: 77 (28.3%) males, 184 (67.3%) females and 11 (4.0%) whose gender was unobservable. One hundred eight arrived in singles, 76 in pairs, 54 in triplets, 24 in quadruplets, and 10 in quintuplets. The hedonicity scores of the customer orders ranged from 0 (bottled water) to 7 (iced café mocha with extra whipped cream).

We compared the orders of customers who arrived in small groups of one or two, versus those who arrived in large groups of three or more. In "small" groups of one or two, all group (inter)actions involve the self and lie at a proximate psychological distance. But in "large" groups of three or more, not all group interactions directly involve the self, which should shift the focus to greater psychological distances. In a triad of ABC, individual A would not be directly involved in a conversation between individuals B and C but would be mindful of that interaction as well. A regression of the hedonicity scores of customer orders on group size (0 = the customer who placed the order was part of a "small" group; 1 = the customer who placed the order was part of a "large" group) showed that customers who arrived in large groups tended to order more hedonic items with more flavor, sweetener and/or cream ($\beta = 0.4$, *S.E.* = 0.2; $t = 2.53$, $p = .01$). This finding supports our

prediction that customers in large groups with a focus on greater social distances would choose more hedonic items.

A similar regression of the hedonicity of customer orders on number of group members (1 = the customer came to the shop as a single, 2 = the customer came as a part of a pair,…5 = the customer came as a part of a group of 5) indicated that larger groups ordered marginally more hedonic items ($\beta = 0.12$, *S.E.* = 0.07; $t = 1.64$, $p = .10$), which is consistent with our previous analysis, but with marginally less power. This may suggest that the relevant distinction in determining social distance may be whether or not group (inter)actions always involve the self, as we previously presented. Beyond three, groups of four or five may not significantly increase social distance.

Study One demonstrated an interesting pattern of actual purchases that were consistent with our theoretical predictions. Other viable explanations exist, however. For example, there may be a norm to consume more hedonic items together in social settings. In part to mitigate such alternative explanations, we conducted Study Two in a behavioral lab to experimentally activate distance.

STUDY TWO:

HEDONIC PREFERENCES INCREASE WITH MORE DISTANCE

In Study Two experimentally manipulated distance and examined the effects on preferences for hedonic items. This study focused on the temporal dimension of distance. We predicted that people's preferences for hedonic goods will increase when greater temporal distances are activated.

Design

Study Two was a behavioral lab experiment conducted with 156 students enrolled in introductory business courses at a university in the western US. It consisted of two parts.

The first part activated temporal distance. Half the participants were randomly assigned to the "far" group, and they were asked to write brief 2-3 line stories about what they would be doing "a month from now." The other half were in the "near" group, and they were asked to write brief stories about what they would be doing "tomorrow." This was an open-ended question.

The second part of the study was a rating task. In a separate pretest, we identified three items each as hedonic and utilitarian, respectively. A chocolate covered strawberry, a massage stick, and a mini potted cactus were all rated to be more hedonic; and a coffee cup, a neck pillow, and a protein bar were all rated to be more utilitarian by over 80% of the pretest participants. Those six items were used as product stimuli in Study Two. Participants saw images of the items and indicated how likely they would be to buy the respective items, each for $1 at a dollar store. They responded on a 6-point scale from 1 = "absolutely not" to 6 = "definitely." This was the dependent measure. Our prediction was that the "far" distance group would be more likely to purchase the hedonic items, and the "near" distance group would be more likely to purchase the utilitarian items.

Results

Overall participants were most likely to purchase the mini potted cactus (3.9), followed by the coffee cup (3.8), protein bar (3.4), neck pillow (3.1), then chocolate covered strawberry (3.3). They were least likely to purchase the massage stick (2.9).

There were 75 in the "far" distance condition, and 81 in the "near" condition. In a comparison between the two groups the three hedonic items were more likely to be purchased by the "far" distance group than the "near" group: the mini potted cactus (M_{far} = 4.3 vs. M_{near} = 3.6; t = 2.57, $p < .01$), the chocolate covered strawberry (M_{far} = 3.6 vs. M_{near} = 2.9; t = 2.25, $p < .05$), and the massage stick (M_{far} = 3.2 vs. M_{near} = 2.6; t = 2.12, $p < .05$). The three utilitarian items were more likely to be purchased by the "near" distance group than the "far" group: the coffee cup (M_{near} = 4.1 vs. M_{far} = 3.6; t = -1.96, $p < .05$), the protein bar (M_{near} = 3.7 vs. M_{far} = 3.1; t = -2.02, $p < .05$), and the neck pillow (M_{near} = 3.7 vs. M_{far} = 3.1; t = -1.88, $p < .05$).

A regression of the sum of the purchase likelihood ratings of the three hedonic items on distance (0 = "near", 1 = "far") showed that people were more likely to purchase the hedonic items after thinking about what they would be doing in the farther future (β = 2.06, SE = .53; t = 3.89, $p < .001$). A similar regression of the sum of the purchase likelihood ratings of the three utilitarian items on distance showed that people were less likely to purchase the utilitarian items after thinking about what they would be doing in the farther future (β = -1.67, SE = .53; t = -3.14, $p < .01$). These findings are supportive of our theoretical prediction. When greater temporal distances are activated preferences for hedonic items get stronger, and preferences for utilitarian items get weaker.

This study operationalized hedonic versus utilitarian alternatives by selecting exemplars of goods that are typically considered hedonic versus utilitarian. We further tried to balance the items in terms of general product groups. Hedonic chocolate covered strawberries and utilitarian protein bars are foods; hedonic massage sticks and utilitarian neck pillows are health products; and hedonic mini potted cacti and utilitarian coffee cups are breakable ceramics. But qualities other than hedonicity/utility may have shaped participants' preferences. The particular shape and/or color of the mini potted cactus, chocolate covered strawberry, and/or massage stick may have appeared more attractive after considering the more distant future. To help rule out such ad hoc alternative explanations, we designed Study Three using the same product category for all experimental conditions.

STUDY THREE:

Study Three examined the effect of temporal distance on the choice of hedonic alternatives. This study complemented the design of the previous Study Two in two ways. First, in comparison to the last study where participants indicated their preferences, in this study they made choices. Also, the choice set comprised of different alternatives all in a given product category of sunscreen. We predicted that people would be more likely to choose the more hedonic sunscreen when greater temporal distances are activated.

Design

Study Three was a behavioral lab experiment conducted with 174 students enrolled in introductory business courses at a university in the western US. It consisted of two parts.

The first part activated temporal distance. Half the participants were randomly assigned to the "far" distance group, and they were asked to discuss the long-term benefits of using sunscreen. The other half were in the "near" distance group, and they were asked to discuss the immediate benefits of using sunscreen. This was an open-ended question.

The second part was a choice task among different brands of sunscreen. We used three actual sunscreen brands for this study. Presumably based on a combination of the respective actual brand names, packaging, and taglines to which they may well have been exposed in their daily lives, the Hawaiian Tropic brand was perceived to be more hedonic and the Neutrogena brand more utilitarian by over 80% of respondents in a pre-test. Based on the pretest we selected the Hawaiian Tropic brand to represent the hedonic alternative, and the Neutrogena brand to represent the utilitarian alternative in Study Three. In the same pretest, the Coppertone brand was mentioned most frequently, and it was not strongly associated with either hedonicity or utility, so we used that brand to represent the neutral alternative in Study Three.

Participants were shown images of the product alternatives and asked to choose among the three brands and an "other" option. They were all equivalent in sun protection factor and package size. To emphasize its hedonic positioning the Hawaiian Tropic brand was presented with the tagline "Let's enjoy the sun," to highlight the experiential pleasantness. To emphasize its utilitarian positioning the Neutrogena brand was presented

with the tagline “Dermatologist recommended,” to highlight the practical health benefits. The neutral Coppertone brand was presented with the tagline “Top selling brand.” These taglines were all derived from and captured the essence of the actual taglines, respectively. Our prediction was that those in the “far” distance group would be more likely to choose the hedonic Hawaiian Tropic brand, while those in the “near” group would be more likely to choose the utilitarian Neutrogena brand.

Results

Out of the 174 participants, 44 (25.3%) chose the hedonic Hawaiian Tropic brand, 38 (21.8%) chose the utilitarian Neutrogena brand, 29 (16.7%) chose the neutral Coppertone brand, and 63 (36.2%) chose “other.” By condition, there were 89 in the “far” distance group, and 85 in the “near” group.

A binary logit of the choice of the hedonic brand (1 = Hawaiian Tropic, 0 = something else) on distance (0 = “near,” 1 = “far”) showed that the odds ratio of choosing the hedonic Hawaiian Tropic brand over something else was higher in the group that first thought about the long-term benefits of using sunscreen ($\exp(\beta) = 2.25$; $p < .05$). This supported our prediction that people would be more likely to choose the hedonic brand when greater distances are activated.

A second binary logit of choice of utilitarian brand (1 = Neutrogena, 0 = something else) on distance (0 = “near,” 1 = “far”) showed that the odds ratio of choosing the utilitarian Neutrogena brand over something else was marginally higher in the group that first thought about the immediate benefits of using sunscreen ($\exp(\beta) = .56$; $p = .10$). This

directionally supported our prediction that people would be more likely to choose the utilitarian brand when closer distances are activated.

STUDY FOUR:

PREFERENCE FOR ICE CREAM OVER THERE, BUT RIGHT HERE FOR DIETERS

In Study Four, we introduce the construct of perceived harm as a moderator to our proposed main effect of psychological distance on hedonic choice. This behavioral lab experiment compared two sets of participants: one neutral group, and one which would presumably perceive more harm in choosing the hedonic alternative. We experimentally manipulated distance temporally and spatially, and demonstrate that the preference for an ice cream with hedonic qualities was relatively stronger when greater distances were activated, but among those who were watching their weight preferences for the ice cream was stronger when closer distances were activated.

Design

Study Four was a behavioral lab experiment conducted with 171 students enrolled in introductory business courses at a university in the western US: 91 of whom self-reported that they were not interested in losing weight, and 80 who self-reported that they were watching their weight. They were given a hypothetical scenario where they were attending a workshop, and they were given a choice between two alternatives for a refreshment. They were shown images of a “premium ice cream with a rich flavor and

smooth texture" which was the hedonic choice, and a "healthy frozen yogurt with probiotics to enhance immune health" which was the utilitarian choice. They indicated their preferences between the two alternatives on a 6-point scale (1 = "definitely the (left choice)" to 6 = "definitely the (right choice)").

The study employed a 2 placement ("left" versus "right") x 2 distance ("far" versus "near") between-subjects design. "Placement" referred to the positioning of the hedonic item in the visual image, as well as the 6-point preference scale. In the "right" condition, the hedonic item appeared as the right alternative in the visual image, and higher numbers on the 6-point scale indicated stronger preferences for it. In the "left" condition, the hedonic item appeared as the left alternative in the visual image, and lower numbers on the 6-point scale indicated stronger preferences.

"Far" versus "near" distances were activated temporally and spatially. In the "far" condition, the two alternatives were presented as choices for a refreshment during a workshop that was to take place "next month at the campus center," and in the "near" condition, the workshop was to take place "next week in this classroom." Our prediction was that among those who were not concerned about their weight, our proposed main effect would obtain, and the hedonic ice cream would be relatively preferable as a refreshment in the more temporally distant next month at the more spatially distant campus center. We further predicted that among the weight watchers, who would presumably perceive more harm in eating ice cream, the directionality would reverse, and the hedonic alternative

would be relatively preferable for a refreshment in the more temporally proximate next week in the more spatially proximate current classroom.

Results

"Placement" had no effect. There was no difference whether the ice cream was presented as the option on the "right" or the "left," so we do not discuss this factor in our analysis. We further converted the scale responses to the "right" condition, so 1 = "definitely the healthy yogurt" and 6 = "definitely the premium ice cream" and greater numbers indicate more hedonic preferences in our further discussion.

The preference for the hedonic ice cream was 3.2 out of 6 overall. There were 91 participants who indicated that they were not concerned about their weight, and this neutral group indicated a stronger preference for the hedonic ice cream than the 80 weight watchers ($M_{neutral}$ = 3.5 vs. M_{harm} = 3.0; t = 2.44, p < .01), which is intuitive. Weight watchers presumably would perceive more harm in consuming a hedonic ice cream, which naturally would curb choice.

A regression of the preference for hedonic ice cream (1 to 6) on "distance" (0 = "near", 1 = "far"), weight-watching status (0 = not watching one's weight, 1 = weight watcher), and the interaction between the two factors indicated that in the neutral group of those who were not watching their weight, the relative preference for the hedonic ice was stronger for consumption in the farther temporal and spatial distances, but among weight watchers the directionality reversed and the relative preference for the ice cream was stronger when it was temporally and spatially more proximate (β = -1.8, *S.E.* = 0.6; t = -

3.22, $p < .01$). This finding supports our prediction that activating greater distances promotes hedonic choice, but among people who perceive harm in the hedonic item, the directionality reverses, and distance hinders hedonic choice.

Next, we analyzed the data for the neutral group and weight watchers separately. In the group that was not watching their weight, a regression of the preferences for the premium ice cream (1 to 6) on "distance" (0 = "near", 1 = "far") showed that the more hedonic ice cream became relatively preferable when it was farther away in time and space ($\beta = .9$, *S.E.* = 0.4; $t = 2.23$, $p < .05$). This supports our prediction of the main effect of distance on hedonic choice. When the alternatives are placed at greater distances, hedonic choice becomes more likely.

But the directionality reversed among the weight watchers. A similar regression of the preferences for the premium ice cream (1 to 6) on "distance" (0 = "near", 1 = "far") showed that the more hedonic ice cream became preferable at closer distances ($\beta = -0.9$, *S.E.* = 0.4; $t = -2.36$, $p < .05$). This supports our prediction of the moderating effect of perceived harm on our proposed main effect. Among people who would perceive harm, distance hinders hedonic choice.

Our study findings support our theoretical predictions, but weight watchers may differ from non-watchers in ways other than the extent to which they perceive harm in consuming an indulgent refreshment. In part to mitigate such alternative explanations, in Study Five we experimentally primed harm.

STUDIES FIVE:

GREATER (CLOSER) DISTANCES PROMOTE HEDONIC CHOICE IN THE ABSENCE (PRESENCE) OF PERCEIVED HARM

Study Five presented a common choice scenario. In this behavioral lab experiment, participants were attending a conference out of town, and chose a hotel for the trip. The study design complements our previous study by experimentally activating harm.

Design

Study Five was conducted with 151 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory business courses at a university in the western US. The study involved two parts and employed a 2 distance ("near" versus "far") x 2 harm ("neutral" versus "heightened") x 2 order ("former" versus "latter") between-subjects design.

The first part of the study presented the participants with a hypothetical scenario where they were traveling out of town to attend a conference, and asked participants to write brief two-to-three-line stories about the trip. There were two variations to the scenario. In the "far" distance condition, the conference was taking place "next month." In the "near" distance condition the conference was "next week."

We experimentally manipulated perceived harm in choosing the hedonic hotel. In the "neutral" condition, participants were asked to write a short story about "balancing work and play to get the most out of the trip." Participants in the "heightened" harm condition were asked to write a short story about "focusing exclusively on work to get the most out of the trip."

In the second part two hotel options were briefly described, and participants indicated their preferences between the two alternatives on a 6-point scale (1 = "definitely the [former choice]" to 6 = "definitely the [latter choice]"). The two choices were a hedonic alternative that was superior on a hedonic attribute: it offered a magnificent view of the city skyline and mountains, but was a 7-minute walk from the conference venue; and a utilitarian alternative that was superior on a utilitarian attribute: it was conveniently located across the street from the conference venue, but looked out into a city street. "Order" referred to the order in which the hedonic alternative was presented in the scenario. In the "former" ("latter") condition, the hedonic hotel was presented first (after the utilitarian hotel), and lower (higher) numbers on the 6-point scale indicated more hedonic preferences.

Results

"Order" had no effect. There was no difference whether the hedonic hotel was presented as the "former" or "latter" alternative, so we do not discuss this factor in our analysis. We further converted the scale responses to the "latter" condition, so 1 = "definitely the convenient hotel" and 6 = "definitely the hotel with the view" and greater numbers indicate more hedonic preferences in our further discussion.

The preference for the hotel room with the view was 3.0 out of 6 overall. The 73 participants in the "neutral" group had a marginally stronger preference for the hotel with the view than the 77 in the "heightened" harm group ($M_{neutral}$ = 3.1 vs. $M_{heightened}$ = 2.8; t = 1.45, $p < .10$).

A regression of the preferences for the hotel with the view (1 to 6) on distance (0 = "near," 1 = "far"), harm (0 = "neutral", 1 = "heightened"), and the interaction between the two factors indicated that in the "neutral" group, the relative preference for the hedonic hotel was stronger when the conference was in a more distant future, but in the "heightened" harm group the directionality reversed and the relative preference for the hedonic hotel was stronger for a conference that was closer in time (β = -1.6, *S.E.* = 0.6; t = -2.93, $p < .01$). This finding supports our prediction activating greater temporal distances promotes hedonic choice. Furthermore, when harm is heightened, the directionality reverses, and distance hinders hedonic choice.

Next, we analyzed the data for the "neutral" and "heightened" harm groups separately. In the "neutral" group, a regression of the preferences for the hotel with the view (1 to 6) on distance (0 = "near," 1 = "far") indicated that the more hedonic hotel became relatively preferable for a conference in the more distant future (β = .9, *S.E.* = 0.4; t = 2.26, p = .02). This supports our prediction of the main effect of temporal distance on hedonic choice. When the alternatives lie at greater temporal distances, hedonic choice becomes more likely.

But the directionality reversed in the "heightened" harm group. A similar regression of the preferences for the hotel with the view (1 to 6) on distance (0 = "near," 1 = "far") indicated that the more hedonic hotel became marginally preferable for a conference in nearer future (β = -0.7, *S.E.* = 0.4; t = -1.89, p = .06). This supports our prediction of the moderating effect of harm on our proposed main effect. When people

perceive greater harm in consuming the hedonic alternative, distance hinders hedonic choice.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our current research builds on the definition of hedonic goods as items that are consumed primarily for enjoyment. We first demonstrated that activating greater social, spatial and temporal distances enhances hedonic choice. To our knowledge our proposed theoretical framework is the first to map hedonic goods to greater psychological distances, based on the *primary* characteristic of "hedonic" goods.

Hedonic goods can have a secondary characteristic of causing harm to the consumer. We further illustrated that when an item with hedonic qualities becomes primarily a cue for harm rather than joy, the effect of distance on choice is moderated. Closer rather than greater distances prompt mobilization of concrete protective actions to mitigate the harm, and promote hedonic choice.

We presented hedonic goods as a category of items that are consumed primarily for enjoyment, and our theory rests on the importance of enjoyment as a driver of choice. There can be varying degrees of hedonicity. For example, though both can be quite enjoyable, premium ice cream can bring even more joy than chocolate cake. In that example, we would presume that distance should promote the choice of either hedonic item, but it may have an even greater effect the even more enjoyable premium ice cream.

Our studies compared items that are typically hedonic to comparably desirable alternatives but typically for more practical reasons. Outside our lab hedonicity is in the eye of the beholder: people find varying levels of joy in different goods and situations. We propounded as our theoretical framework and research finding that what brings joy to some may evoke harm in others. But beyond that and more generally, different consumers derive joy from different things. We agree that not all consumers enjoy ice cream or magnificent views. If wheat germ brings joy to some consumers, and they consume wheat germ primarily for gustatory and/or olfactory enjoyment, for *those* consumers *that* choice should be enhanced when greater psychological distances are activated. In fact, one author enjoys the texture and flavor of whole wheat bread, and that author's choice of whole wheat over white bread is primarily for taste rather than health. Our research findings extend to whatever consumer choose primarily to bring *them* joy.

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