



## **Hedonism and Culture: Impact on Shopper Behaviour**

**Subhashini Kaul**

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# Hedonism and Culture: Impact on Shopper Behaviour

Subhashini Kaul<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Increasingly consumer shopping behaviour is being seen from the holistic perspective of the entire shopping experience. The experiential view of shopping takes a far more holistic approach to the consumption process, right from involvement to post purchase usage, and incorporates the hedonistic perspective into the existing, primarily cognitive-rational information processing view of consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Hedonic shopping value refers to the sense of enjoyment and pleasure that the consumer receives from the entire buying experience associated with shopping at a store (Griffin, Babin and Modianos, 2000) and this value perception could vary depending on individual shopping orientations, the cultural orientations as well as the economic and competitive environment in which the consumer shops (Woodruffe, Eccles and Elliott, 2002). This paper attempts to understand the impact of all three factors on the purchase behaviour of shoppers by examining hedonic value across different product categories signifying different shopping orientations; across culturally distinct countries; across developing and developed economies; and across different stages of retail evolution.

## Theory of Shopping

The concept of shopping can be examined according to three different dimensions in order to develop provide a holistic view of shopping and shopping behaviour: the

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral Student (Marketing), Indian Institute of Management,, Ahmedabad  
Email: [subhak@iimahd.ernet.in](mailto:subhak@iimahd.ernet.in)

shopping environment, the socio-cultural context and the individual motivations (Woodruffe, Eccles and Elliott, 2002).

#### The Shopping Environment:

This refers to the landscape of shopping, changing as it did from the first departmental store to present-day malls to virtual shopping through the Internet. It has been found that shoppers behave differently depending on the type of shopping situations (Sinha and Uniyal, 2004).

#### The Socio-Cultural Context:

Culture has been defined in different ways depending on the theoretical perspective of the researcher (Smircich, 1983). Rather than define culture, we instead state the commonly accepted view of the components of culture which include values, symbols/artifacts, actions, and cognitions, emotions and meanings (Ashkanasy, Wilderom and Peterson, 2000). In our context, culture is similar to the Geertz's symbolic anthropological view by which culture is defined a system of shared symbols and meanings impacting behaviour (including shopping behaviour).

#### The Individual Motivations:

A fairly extensive amount of research examining individual shopping orientations indicates that orientations impact shopping behaviour including store choice based on several factors such as consumer demographics and psychographics (Cheung, Yee-Man and Hui, 2002; Darden and Ashton, 1974; Hansen and Deutscher, 1977), usage situation (Moye and Kincade, 2002); price sensitivity (Magi, 2003); social referents (Evans, Christiansen and Gill, 1996), involvement (Williams, Nicholas and Painter, 1978), need

recognition (Bruner, 1986) and so on. Product category differences are also known to impact shopping orientations though studies in this area have been primarily limited to online purchase behaviour (Vijayasathy and Jones, 2000).

### **Hedonic consumption: How the perspective evolved**

Consumer value from the shopping experience is believed to have two distinct forms: hedonic and utilitarian (Babin, Darden and Griffin, 1994). There is some evidence that there are two aspects of product performance predictions that interest consumers: hedonic and utilitarian (Batra and Ahtola, 1991).

The term hedonic was first used in correcting price indices for quality (Cowling and Cubbin, 1972). Hedonic prices were the implicit prices of attributes 'revealed to economic agents from observed prices of differentiated products and the specific amounts of characteristics associated with them' (Rosen, 1974, p 34). Studies of this stream found that hedonic rather than utilitarian attributes of a product explained greater amount of variation in prices (Rosen, 1974). Hence hedonic term was used in an economic sense to indicate that the index was computed taking into consideration not just the objective aspects but also the qualitative utility obtained from a product. Most of the effort was then devoted to making the hedonic price model more robust in a variety of contexts; household production model, pediatric services demand, real estate valuation (value of quiet; value of pollution, value of neighbourhood externalities), job satisfaction, digital computer industry and computer services demand, demand for cable television, breakfast cereals and valuation of public goods. The application was to generic product categories rather than brands, a product rather than a consumption view, and to express in objective terms the subjective valuations of the consumer.

It was in 1982 that the term hedonic was first used the term in a consumption sense (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Hedonic consumption referred to those ‘facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products’ (p 92). As a result consumer motivation research included the hedonic consumption view to the hitherto primarily utilitarian view. Hedonic value or the hedonism concept referred to the esthetic and experience-based subjective aspects of consumption and meant regarding products as symbols.

The experiential view associated with hedonism takes a far more holistic approach to the consumption process, right from involvement to post purchase usage, and incorporates the hedonistic perspective into the existing, primarily cognitive-rational, problem-solving information processing view of consumption. Emotional arousal - seen as a type of consumer response related to hedonic consumption is considered a major motivation for at least some products and hedonic value as determining the level of involvement with the purchase of the products. It reflects across all stages of decision-making; in the involvement (emotional as opposed to thought based), in the task specification (experience oriented rather than problem-solving), in the motivation to search for information (more affective than cognitive), and finally in terms of how products are perceived and evaluated (symbolic meaning rather than feature based evaluation).

The view of hedonism as proposed by Holbrook and Hirschman continued in further research (primarily by the authors themselves; Hirschman, 1982; Chestnut, Oliva and Greenleaf, 1984) parallel with the hedonic price value models application to market equilibrium studies.

This paper explores into the consumer characteristics across different cultures and economies to understand the extent to which they impact hedonistic retail shopping behaviour of consumers.

### **Hedonism and Product symbolism**

The experiential perspective of consumption is 'phenomenological in spirit and regards consumption as a primarily subjective state of consciousness' (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, p 132). All products have a certain degree of hedonism. This is because all products have some degree of symbolic meaning and arouse at least some degree of hedonic motivations among individuals (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982a, 1982b; Kleine, Kleine and Kernan, 1993; Schlosser, 1998).

If products are varying in the extent of inherent symbolism, then one can expect that the hedonic value would vary across product categories. This is supported by research examining the extent of hedonism in different products (Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Bloch, Sherrell and Ridgway, 1986; Babin, Darden and Griffin, 1994; Lofman, 1991).

Hedonic value across products seems to vary depending on the intrinsic and extrinsic attributes of the product (Dodds and Monroe, 1985). Utilitarian value is associated with tasks that are easily completed. Thus any product associated with simple routine task completion like purchase of coffee or detergents is likely to be less in hedonic value as compared to a product with higher degree information processing and involvement such as cellular phones where the outlay is much larger and bargain seeking behaviour may impact product purchase (Thaler, 1985; Monroe and Chapman, 1987). This leads us to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Hedonic value will differ across different product categories with products of routine purchase such as coffee and detergents having lesser hedonic value as compared to non-routine purchases such as cellular phones and watches.

### **Hedonism and Cultural Influence**

Dworkin, 1984 explored into the individual differences in hedonic capacity which he defined as 'an individual's ability to experience pleasurable affect' (p 620). Consumption has been linked to 'symbolic meanings, values and lifestyles - all of which are likely to be specific to local cultures' (Shaw and Clarke, 1998). Several studies have examined and recognized the strong impact of values in shaping consumer motivations and product choices (Carman, 1978; McCracken, 1986, Yau, 1988). Several motives of shopping are socially and culturally anchored (Tauber, 1972; Siu et al., 2001) including ethnic identifications (Eun-Ju, Fairhurst and Dillard, 2002) and acculturation effects (Ownbey and Horridge, 1997). Products associated with health seem to have a mix of utilitarian and hedonic values which may be impacted by the cultural influences (Ximing and Collins, 2002). This leads us to the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Cultural differences amongst consumers and their perceived hedonic value of a product such as orange juice would be strongly correlated.

### **Hedonism and Economic development**

It has been argued that the consumer would place greater emphasis on utilitarian value of products in a developing country rather than hedonic value which would be more important for consumers in developed countries (Malhotra et al, 1994). This leads us to our next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: A personal product such as shampoo would primarily provide hedonic value to consumers in developed economies and primarily provide utilitarian value to consumers in a developing economy.

### **Hedonic Value and Shopping Environment**

Another dimension that can be used to study consumer shopping behaviour is the shopping environment (Woodruffe, Eccles and Elliott, 2002). Consumers tend to change their information search process depending on the type of store, even when the same product and in some cases even the same brand is being bought (Sinha and Uniyal, 2004). Since information search and related shopping orientations are closely linked (Westbrook and Black, 1985), we formulate our final hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 4: Hedonic value from shopping would be high (low) when retailing is in a mature (nascent) stage of evolution.

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