

# Consumption, Experiential

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The hallmark of experiential consumption is individualized, subjective construction of value. The observer's personal and subjective point of view motivates and rewards consumption and is the focus of study (Holbrook, 1997). In contrast, classical perspectives on consumption assume that value has objective properties; value derives from collective agreement, rational analysis, or problem-solving utility. For experiential consumption, value is in the eye of the beholder. Such a perspective is essential for understanding common consumer phenomena, such as fantasizing, daydreaming, or mind-wandering, which seem trivial or purposeless from a classical standpoint. Other activities, which have clear consumer demand but equivocal utilitarian function, are clearly suitable topics for study, including leisure activities, performing and visual arts, and high-risk hobbies, among others.

From the consumer's perspective, virtually any stimulus can provide an experience. Experiential value is derived by "living through" a stimulus, and evaluating subjective criteria, which include:

- symbolic representations (e.g., What does the stimulus represent? Are these representations personally meaningful to oneself?);
- aesthetics (e.g., Are aspects of the stimulus beautiful?);
- multisensory consumption (e.g., Are one or more senses stimulated?);
- emotions (e.g., How does the stimulus make one feel?);
- hedonics (e.g., Does the stimulus provide pleasure?).

From this perspective then, value is obtained when stimuli deliver symbolic, subjective, and multisensory experiences, which appeal to

consumers' aesthetic, hedonic, and emotional preferences.

Experiences can be bought and sold, as commodities might be bought and sold. There are four ways that this occurs. First, firms can specialize in marketing experiences per se (e.g., a trip to the Bahamas, art exhibitions, and theater performances). Interested customers then pay for the experience, allow the experience to occur, and leave with memories. Some scholars argue that the memory itself is the product in these cases. Second, firms can specialize in selling tangible goods whose function is to provide experiences (e.g., video games, art for the home, candy and sweets). Third, firms can draw attention to a product's experiential qualities when marketing to certain segments and can draw attention to non-experiential qualities when marketing to other groups (e.g., focusing on thrill-seeking qualities of a car, to thrill-seeking customers). Fourth, in an "experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore 1998), companies compete by engaging customers with personalized, memorable, sensory events in addition to the products and services they are already paying for.

Experiential consumption need not be commoditized. In addition to private experiences available only to the introspecting consumer, such as daydreaming, consumers seek out freely available experiences such as visiting parks, window-shopping, or joyriding automobiles. In some cases, experiential consumption may in fact be antithetical to commoditization. For example, in most cultures it is considered taboo to pay for the experience of sex. Artifacts imbued with symbolic or historic importance (e.g., souvenirs from one's honeymoon) may be considered priceless. Other physical landmarks may be designated as sacred; pilgrimage experiences to these sites might be considered tainted if an admission fee is charged.

Scholars interested in this topic represent the fields of marketing, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. For much of the twentieth century, the topic fell out of scientific favor, for two reasons. First, by definition, experiential

consumption focuses on observers' subjective perceptions of products and stimuli. Being personalized and unique to observers, subjective perceptions need not generalize to any form of objective truth and can therefore never be falsified (or confirmed). Second, experiential research methods depend on introspection, which critics argued was an unreliable source of data suitable for psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In place of studying subjective experiences, behaviorist and information-processing approaches dominated the scientific landscape of the twentieth century, utilizing experimentation and assessing overt behaviors and measurable cognitive processes. It was not until the mid-1980s that the experiential perspective was seen as necessary to explain highly demanded experiences such as hedonic activities, emotionally intense experiences, and play, among other activities (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

A flurry of subsequent studies starting in the 1990s attempted to deeply understand the phenomenology of immersive and extraordinary experiences such as multiday rafting trips, high-risk activities such as skydiving, and multiday "escapist" festivals such as Burning Man and Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. The most influential studies used multimethod research models, blending field observations, participant observation (in which researchers surreptitiously take part in the activities being studied), standardized survey assessments, and multi-informant interpretations. The resulting research offered comprehensive accounts of the subjective experiences of participants over the whole course of the extended experience. Across studies, developing a sense of community, encouraging meaningful self-expansion and personal growth, finding harmony and experiencing awe with nature, and developing new skills, perspectives, and memories emerged as the experiential outcomes most important to consumers.

SEE ALSO: Aesthetics; Consumption; Happiness; Idiographic/Nomothetic; Phenomenology; Subjectivity; Value

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## Further Readings

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