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Imaginal and emotional experiences in pleasure-oriented IT usage: A hedonic consumption perspective

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ABSTRACT

Based on the marketing theory of hedonic consumption, this study examines the effects of six types of imaginal and emotional experiences on using pleasure-oriented IT. Associated hypotheses are tested using questionnaire responses from 443 online game players. The results provide strong support for the major hypotheses and indicate that the determinants of behavior may differ in using pleasure-oriented versus productivity-oriented IT. This paper contributes not only to the application of a marketing theory to IS research, but also to improved understanding of using pleasure-oriented IT and of why people use technologies that are not particularly useful from a productivity standpoint.

1. Introduction

Information systems (IS) research traditionally investigates user behavior in the context of productivity-oriented (or utilitarian) systems, such as word processing [1], spreadsheets [3,63], operating systems [48], customer account management systems [85], groupware [77], and electronic tax-filing systems [86]. The identified salient determinants of system-use behavior are primarily perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU), both of which reflect the utilitarian nature of productivity-oriented systems [90,82].

PEOU is defined as the degree to which a person believes that using an information system would be free of effort, whereas PU refers to the degree to which a person believes that using an information system would enhance his or her job or task performance [20]. These definitions suggest that PEOU and PU are of importance because the former reduces user efforts and the latter helps improve productivity or performance. Productivity, in general, refers to the effectiveness in bringing forth results or benefits [51]. Applying this definition in the context of information systems, productivity can be defined as the effective use of an information system in bringing forth job- and task-related results.

However, many of the information technologies (IT) integrated into our daily lives have substantial pleasure-oriented qualities and are mainly used for fun and relaxation [10]. Typical examples of such technologies are virtual worlds, online gaming websites, and social networking systems. These technologies aim to provide self-fulfilling value to users and are employed in homes and leisure settings for pleasure and breaks from the daily grind [74]. Consequently, IS researchers have expressed concern that the usage of such pleasure-oriented (or hedonic) systems may not be fully explained by PU and PEOU, which are conceptualized as motivators for using utilitarian systems in workplace settings [82,45,52,89].

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This concern calls for research to empirically investigate the motivators for using pleasure-oriented IT and the issue of the fit between system-use contexts and research models [74,7].

Such an investigation is of managerial and technical value in two ways. First, it helps researchers ascertain whether the determinants of system-use behavior differ in the context of pleasure-oriented versus productivity-oriented IT [89]. The results of such an investigation can shed light on the issue of whether special system-use models for pleasure-oriented IT are needed. Second, it offers an organization's system developers valuable guidance about improving their designs of both pleasure-oriented and productivity-oriented systems. Therefore, such an empirical investigation is important not only for scholars eager to identify paths through which behavior manifests but also for practitioners striving to leverage IT to enhance their system results and their business strategies.

Not surprisingly, prior research shows an effort in this direction. In particular, researchers have focused on intrinsic motivators to capture the recreation facet of using pleasure-oriented IT [82,45,52,59]. Two primary examples of such motivators are flow and enjoyment. Nevertheless, IS researchers have paid little attention to theories that may shed more light on using pleasure-oriented IT and have placed even less emphasis on studying other intrinsic motivators, such as escapism and fantasy. Given the increasing importance and popularity of pleasure-oriented IT, additional studies that have their bases in relevant and established theories are necessary [82].

The present work is one such study. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to (1) examine the effects of six types of imaginal and emotional experiences on system-use behavior and (2) provide a substantial foundation for follow-up studies on pleasure-oriented IT. This research draws on a key marketing theory—the hedonic consumption perspective—to capture the entertainment nature of the technology of interest. By integrating marketing theory with a traditional technology acceptance framework, our research model reflects that in the context of pleasure-oriented IT, an individual often has a double identity as a consumer and a technology user. We test the research model and hypotheses using data collected from users of online gaming technology, the pleasure-oriented IT examined in this study.

The research described here makes several primary contributions. First, this study extends and advances Van der Heijden's [82] work by not only classifying systems as productivity- and pleasure-oriented but also tracking back to the underlying marketing theory for the classification—the hedonic consumption perspective—and applying it to system-use behavior. Therefore, this paper contributes to the theoretical foundation of IT acceptance. Second, the study reported here uses the theory to focus on six types of imaginal and emotional experiences and to identify key determinants for using pleasure-oriented information systems. Thus, the study contributes to the IS literature by introducing some potentially important but under-studied intrinsic motivators, such as escapism and fantasy. Third, measures of these constructs are adapted from the marketing literature and are further refined during the research process. Thus, other scholars can conveniently employ these measures for future research. Finally, this study finds that in the context of online gaming, a type of pleasure-oriented IT, behavioral intention is predicted by enjoyment but not by perceived usefulness. This finding not only contributes to a further understanding of the fit between system-use contexts and research models but also conveys an important theoretical meaning to researchers and practitioners. That is, pleasure-oriented IT is useful not mainly because of its ability to improve job- and task-performance, as described by perceived usefulness, but rather largely because of its function of providing end users with pleasure, as manifested through enjoyment, escapism, and arousal.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Two types of information technology

In general, information technology can be categorized into two non-mutually exclusive types: productivity-oriented and pleasure-oriented [82,45]. Performing specific information processing jobs for end users, productivity-oriented IT aims to improve individual, group, and organizational productivity. Usually, the technology achieves such a goal by enhancing end users' abilities to acquire, create, store, retrieve, distribute, and otherwise process knowledge needed for performing relevant tasks, such as decision making [41].

For the purpose of this paper, we define pleasure-oriented IT as information systems that aim to provide end users with pleasure. With such an aim, pleasure-oriented IT often incorporates hedonic elements, such as enjoyable content, animated images, appealing sounds, and aesthetically pleasing visual layouts [41]. Most of this type of IT has been developed recently and is based on the Internet. The current research focuses on online gaming, a technology situated far to the pleasure side. Other very important and popular pleasure-oriented IT includes virtual worlds (e.g., *Second Life*), video sharing (e.g., *YouTube*), social networking (e.g., *MySpace*), and Internet Protocol Television (*IPTV*).

However, productivity- and pleasure-oriented IT may not necessarily be at opposite ends of the spectrum [15]. Some computer technology may be used for both work and fun [73]. For example, as an enjoyable medium, instant messaging can also be used at work for communication. Therefore, it is reasonable to accept that some information systems can play dual roles in human life, improving productivity and providing pleasure—which, perhaps, can reinforce each other. Fig. 1, adapted from Chesney [15], illustrates the information technologies classified in a two-dimensional diagram of productivity versus pleasure.

2.2. The hedonic consumption perspective

During the 1950s, marketing researchers noted that "People buy products not only for what they can *do*, but also for what they *mean*" ([58], p. 118), and thus have become concerned with the symbolic aspects of products [29]. To help explain the phenomena observed, Hirschman and Holbrook ([38], p. 93; [39]) developed the hedonic consumption perspective, in which "the researcher is concerned not so much with what the product is as with what it represents. Product Image, not strict reality, is a central focus." This perspective encourages marketing researchers to view products not as objective entities, but rather as "subjective" symbols. More importantly, it helps in understanding such consumer behaviors as appreciating the arts or watching sports games, which have often been overlooked [42].

According to the perspective, hedonic consumption can be defined as consumption that emphasizes the multi-sensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of a consumer's experience with products [38]. By multi-sensory, Hirschman and Holbrook mean

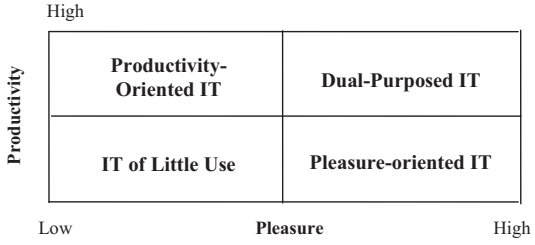

Fig. 1. IT classified in a two-dimensional diagram of productivity vs. pleasure.