



Pleasure now, meaning later: Temporal dynamics between pleasure and meaning[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine whether values of pleasure and meaning vary with temporal distance.
- We suggest a hierarchical level of construal between pleasure and meaning as an underlying mechanism.
- Subordination test reveals that meaning constitutes a higher level of construal than pleasure.
- Following studies show that pleasure is favored as temporal distance decreases, whereas meaning is favored as temporal distance increases.

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigated temporal dynamics between pleasure and meaning such that pleasure is favored in the near future, whereas meaning is favored in the distant future. As an underlying mechanism for this temporal effect, Study 1 demonstrated that pleasure was subordinate to meaning, suggesting that meaning constitutes a higher-level construal than pleasure. Consistent with construal level theory, Studies 2 and 3 found time-dependent changes in the relative weight of pleasure and meaning. Participants evaluated a meaningful life more positively than a pleasurable life as temporal distance increased (Study 2). They were also more likely to choose meaningful options in making distant- versus near-future decisions, compared to pleasurable options (Study 3). Implications and future research were discussed.

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Yet he continued to live, think, and feel, had even at that very time got married, experienced many joys, and been happy whenever he was not thinking of the meaning of his life.

[Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*]

Both pleasure and meaning have been treated as critical factors in understanding human life. Freud (1920/1952), for example, claimed that all psychological activities that operate unconsciously are dominated by the motivation to approach pleasure and avoid pain. Contrary to the pleasure principle, Frankl (1959) asserted that the search for meaning

in life is a fundamental motive beyond the need for pleasure. More recently, with a growing interest in positive psychology, the importance of both pleasure and meaning has been well recognized. Pleasure and meaning are both essential ingredients for a good life (King & Napa, 1998), core components of authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002), and important psychological needs for experiencing life events as highly satisfying (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

Evidence suggests that pleasure and meaning are not entirely independent of each other. Rather, they are deeply intertwined (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). For example, most pleasurable events can evoke feelings of both pleasure and meaning because experiencing a positive affect often enhances the experience of meaning itself (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Even for an action whose ultimate goal is to experience pure pleasure, it is possible for humans, who are natural meaning makers, to discover meaning from it (King & Hicks, 2009).

Nonetheless, pleasure and meaning are often distinct and *compensatory*, creating a trade-off in which the need for pleasure or meaning should be sacrificed at the cost of the other need. Hence, one can live a

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highly meaningful but unpleasant life or a highly pleasant but meaningless life (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). Baumeister et al. (2013) depicted the meaningful but unpleasant life as “seriously involved in difficult undertakings, marked by ample worry, stress, argument, and anxiety” (e.g., religious missionary). In contrast, the pleasant but meaningless life was depicted as “a relatively shallow, self-absorbed, or even selfish life, lacking in worries and anxieties.” In fact, it is not rare in everyday life for an individual to face a trade-off between pleasure and meaning. For instance, one sometimes has to choose between going to a party and volunteering at an orphanage for weekend or between a comedy show and a documentary about global warming when selecting a TV channel.

Then, what determines one's choice between pleasure and meaning? Past research has demonstrated that one's own ideas about the nature of true well-being are critical: Lay hedonists, believing pleasure to be the key to happiness, engage in pleasant activities more than lay eudaimonists, believing meaning to be the hallmark of happiness, and vice versa for meaningful activities (Kang, Kim, Lim, & Choi, unpublished manuscript; McMahan & Estes, 2011). It is somewhat intuitive that there are meaning-people and pleasure-people. The present research, then, shifts research focus from individual differences to a contextual factor that may influence the differential weighting of pleasure and meaning: *time*. Specifically, we suggest the importance of temporal dynamics between pleasure and meaning, in which meaning is increasingly valued as temporal distance increases, while pleasure is increasingly favored as temporal distance decreases. For example, “donating one-year of savings to orphans” might be perceived as more appealing when the donation will occur in the next year compared to the next day. On the other hand, “eating a rich chocolate pudding as a dessert tonight” may seem more appealing than “eating a rich chocolate pudding as a dessert a year later.”

This temporal dynamics hypothesis is derived from construal level theory (CLT), which assumes that abstract, high-level construals are more salient in the distant future than in the near future, while concrete, low-level construals are more salient in the near future than in the distant future (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Based on CLT, we will argue and demonstrate that the tendency to seek pleasure versus meaning varies with temporal distance and that meaning is valued more in the distant future, whereas pleasure is valued more in the near future.

Construal level theory

CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2003) posits that information can be construed at either a high or low level, depending on its abstractness. High-level construals are abstract mental representations that contain essential qualities of given information. These construals consist of primary, superordinate, goal-relevant, and decontextualized features. In contrast, low-level construals are relatively concrete mental representations and include more details that consist of secondary, subordinate, goal-irrelevant, and contextualized features of given information. According to CLT, distinctions between levels of construal are mainly determined by temporal distance, in which distant-future events are construed at a higher level than near-future events. For instance, Liberman and Trope (1998, Study 1) revealed that a daily activity (e.g., watching TV) was more likely to be described in superordinate terms (e.g., being entertained) rather than in subordinate terms (e.g., sitting on the sofa, flipping channels) when it was expected to occur in the distant future (e.g., the next year) compared to the near future (e.g., tomorrow).

Turning to the issue of temporal changes in preference, CLT further proposes that options positively associated with high-level construals receive greater preference in distant-future decisions than in near-future decisions, whereas options positively associated with low-level construals receive greater preference in near-future decisions than in distant-future decisions (Trope & Liberman, 2000). For example, in a series of studies that pinpointed desirability as a high-level construal and feasibility as a low-level construal (Liberman & Trope,

1998; Sagristano, Trope, & Liberman, 2002), it was shown that an activity high in desirability (e.g., an interesting guest lecture) but low in feasibility (e.g., inconvenient time to attend) was more preferred when it was believed to occur next year than on the next day, while an activity high in feasibility (e.g., convenient time to attend) but low in desirability (e.g., a tedious guest lecture) was more favored when it was believed to occur on the next day than next year.

Levels of construal between pleasure and meaning

Our temporal dynamics hypothesis posits that there is a hierarchy in levels of construal between pleasure and meaning. We specifically assume that meaning constitutes a high-level construal, while pleasure constitutes a low-level construal. We offer three possible reasons why this might be so: pleasure-as-affect and meaning-as-cognition, the *why* aspect of meaning, and context-dependent desirability of pleasure.

Pleasure-as-affect and meaning-as-cognition

The first reason for the different levels of construal between pleasure and meaning underscores their fundamental characteristics: Pleasure is a desirable affective state (Rozin, 1999), but meaning is a unified cognitive system (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) whose primary function is relating concepts (Baumeister, 1991). According to past research (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989), affect is more closely related to low-level construals and cognition is more strongly associated with high-level construals. Metcalfe and Mischel (1999) proposed, in their hot/cool system framework, that the affective (hot) system has concrete properties and the cognitive (cool) system has abstract properties. For example, when reading a comic book, its affective value is featured more concretely (e.g., funny illustrations), while its cognitive value is more pronounced with abstract features (e.g., relieving stress). Thus, it seems that pleasure is construed at a low level because of its affective nature, whereas meaning is construed at a high level because of its cognitive nature.¹

The why aspect of meaning

Another feature that distinguishes levels of construal in CLT is goal-relevance. Specifically, goal-relevant features (i.e., *why* aspect) constitute a high-level construal, while goal-irrelevant features (i.e., *how* aspect) constitute a low-level construal (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). This goal-relevance distinction can be used to explain why meaning constitutes a high-level construal and pleasure constitutes a low-level construal. Among its diverse facets, meaning has the *why* aspect, which is associated with purpose (Ryff, 1989), the goal of action (Leontiev, 2005), and finding meaning in life events (King & Hicks, 2009). Meaning in life is defined as a subjective sense of one's life being purposeful and having attained valuable life goals (King et al., 2006). In contrast, pleasure is relatively weakly associated with ultimate goals and *why* questions. Hence, compared to meaning, pleasure is more likely to constitute a low-level construal because of its limited relevance to the *why* aspect.

Context-dependent desirability of pleasure

Although both pleasure and meaning are positive states, the desirability of pleasure depends more on context than the desirability of meaning does. Pursuing pleasure can sometimes be considered

¹ Note that pleasure has a cognitive function and meaning has an affective aspect as well. According to research and theory on the role of mood in cognitive processing (Schwarz & Clore, 1996), positive affect signals that all is well and it is safe to use heuristics (Clore et al., 2001; Schwarz, 2001). In addition, meaning is not only a cognitive product but also a subjective sense of feeling (Hicks, Cicero, Trent, Burton, & King, 2010). Nevertheless, even if pleasure can be used as information and meaning has an affective value, informative usage of pleasure is concrete rather than abstract (Sloman, 1996), and the feeling of meaning remains abstract because of its intuitive information processing (Hicks et al., 2010).

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