

# The role of positive emotions in experiential decisions

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First received in October 10, 2006 and was under review for 5 months

## Abstract

This research examines how consumers experience decision making for experiential products such as vacations. We combine data from 1) ethnographic interviews, 2) online community discussion forums, and 3) an introspective vacation-planning task to explore the experience of emotion in the decision process and to develop a new model of decision making that extends extant decision theories. We find that consumers experience a variety of positive emotions as they plan vacations, from *facilitative feelings* that guide the plan to *fantasy feelings* consumed for pleasure. Positive emotions are most evident in reaction to imagery and when the consumer's self identity is salient, and often precede more analytic information processing. Overall, this research offers a richer understanding of the emotional nature of consumer decision making for experiential products and services.

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*Keywords:* Emotion; Imagery; Self-identity; Consumer decision making; Experiential products

## 1. Introduction

Consumers do more than cogitate to solve consumption problems; they also desire (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003), feel (Pham, 1998), imagine (Shiv & Huber, 2000), and construct self identity (Ahuvia, 2005). However, traditional choice models and reason-based decision strategies (c.f., Bettman, Johnson, & Payne, 1991) do not fully capture the factors that influence consumer decisions in contexts that are more experiential in nature. We strive to extend choice theory by listening for emotion, particularly positive emotion, in consumers' decision narratives. Our research objective is to better understand how, when, and why consumers experience positive emotions during the decision making process, and in what way these emotions influence their choices.

The call for research on emotion and consumer experience is not new (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Scholars have shown that consumption often *results in* affect, such as anger or satisfaction, and that emotional reactions to advertising are often homogenous, reliable, and predictive of attitudes and judgments (Pham, Cohen,

Pracejus & Hughes, 2001). Typically, though, when affect has been studied as an *input to* decision making, it has been as a mood unrelated to the decision, not as an emotion elicited by the target and/or task. This distinction is important because emotions and moods can influence decisions, yet each provides different information to decision makers (Cohen & Areni, 1991; Isen, 1993; Schwarz & Clore, 1996). Some studies have shown that consumers monitor their feelings when making decisions (Pham, 1998; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999; Yeung & Wyer, 2004). However, much remains unknown about emotion and decision making, in particular by what mechanism feelings inform judgments, i.e., through mere affect transfer or through perceiving feelings as valid sources of information in their own right (Pham, 2004).

Proponents of the experiential view of consumer behavior have argued for extending information-processing theories by integrating feelings into extant decision models (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Peterson, Hoyer, & Wilson, 1986). We strive for this integration by using qualitative research methods to explore how emotions are engaged in the experiential-decision context, how they are lived and revealed by the consumer, and how they are consumed, both as information and as inputs to hedonic experience. Our main contribution is a phenomenological view of experiential decisions and the nature of emotion in the process.

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We begin by briefly reviewing the consumer decision-making literature, though we refrain from developing *a priori* theory and instead enable our theoretical understanding to emerge from the data. We then describe our methodology, present an emergent model, and report findings grounded in consumers' experiences that extend extant theory. We close with a discussion of key themes and implications for marketing theory and practice.

## 2. Emotion in consumer decision research

Consumer-choice theories have long relegated emotion to a secondary or subsequent role. Studies of emotion and decision making have largely focused on negative emotions (e.g., Luce, 1998), though the more common reactions to anticipation of consumption are joy, happiness, excitement, and similar expressions of positive feelings (Derbaix & Pham, 1991; Richins, 1997). The notion that making a choice can be enjoyable runs counter to the behavioral-decision-theory view that consumers perceive decision making as unpleasant and effortful (Bettman et al., 1991). Studies of automatic, visceral affective reactions suggest that a desire for positive emotional experiences can motivate choice behavior (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Research looking at controlled processing of affective information also found that anticipation of satisfaction (Shiv & Huber, 2000) and emotional expectations (Neelamegham & Jain, 1999) impact choice. Pham (1998) reported that consumers use affect as information when feelings are viewed as representative of a target under consideration and relevant to the judgment task. Yeung and Wyer (2004) showed that consumers' appraisals of product images produced affect-based impressions that influenced later evaluations, regardless of judgmental criteria normally used. Researchers have also described a motivational role for intense emotions (e.g., thrill, joy, and flow) in decisions to participate in extraordinary experiences such as river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993). Thus, the pleasure of consumption can begin *before* the act of consuming; that is, the consumer has fun anticipating consumption and in the experience of choosing, and rationalizing during decision making sometimes takes the fun out of it.

There has been considerable debate about the emotional system and the timing of emotions. Zajonc (1980) argued that affective reactions to stimuli often precede extensive cognitive processing. This affect-primacy view is consistent with evolutionary psychology and the theory that emotions serve to ensure a readiness to respond, such as with approach/avoidance behaviors or by motivating and guiding further information processing. Research from neurophysiology (Damasio, 1994) and consumer behavior (see Pham, 2004) supports the view that affect can encourage "thought mobilization" by directing attention to information that confirms initial feelings. In contrast, appraisal theorists argue that emotions are a response to meaning that results from the cognitive evaluation of something relative to desired end states, goals, or beliefs (e.g., Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Lazarus, 1991). Extensions of this theory, such as Bagozzi, Baumgartner, and Pieters (1998) model of goal-directed *anticipatory emotions*, similarly posit that emotions serve as a feedback mechanism for the behavioral system, with progress toward a goal eliciting positive emotions.

Traditional decision research assumes that consumer goals conform to a utility construct, which Hirschman and Holbrook (1982, p. 94) contended is "inappropriate for products whose selection and use are based upon satisfying emotional wants, rather than fulfilling utilitarian functions." This overlooks a rich set of goals, such as consumption for "phatic communion" among group members (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993), for "self-illusory imaginative hedonism" (Campbell, 1987) or for self-extension (Belk, 1988). Likewise, studies of tourism reveal an array of goals: achievement, fun, bonding, relaxation, escape, nostalgia, novelty, and otherness (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Pearce & Lee, 2005). Though pursuit of pleasure has face validity as a goal of hedonic consumption, research suggests that a pleasure motive is less important as higher-order goals related to self-identity become salient (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993). As Averill and More (1993, 620) asked, "Do people engage in activities in order to be happy, or are people happy because they engage in activities that successfully lead to goals other than happiness (fame, fortune, or whatever)?" Scholars generally agree that a goal is an end state toward which behavior is directed, whereas a motivation is an inner drive that moves a person to goal-directed action (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999). Though goals such as happiness and pleasure are defined as positive emotions (Lazarus, 1991), emotions are more often cast as motivations that influence goal-directed behavior (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999). Research is needed to unravel the relationship between decision goals and emotions.

Scholars have offered conceptual arguments for the role of emotion in consumer decision making (Campbell, 1987; Cohen & Areni, 1991; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Peterson, Hoyer, & Wilson, 1986); however, limited empirical research exists that gives form to these ideas (for exceptions, see Pham, 1998; Tsai, 2005; Yeung & Wyer, 2004). Researchers have generally inferred the presence of decision emotions from consumers' revealed preferences (Pham, 2004). The study that follows is designed to advance knowledge by focusing on the phenomenology of decision emotion, including its form, timing, influence, and lived experience, to construct a richer view of consumer choice that highlights emotional experience.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research context: *Experiential products*

Products in choice research tend to lack experiential dimensions (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Shiv & Fedorikhin 1999), despite criticism that this omits important types of consumption, such as entertainment and leisure (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). It is not surprising, then, that researchers have found little role for positive emotion in decision making. Many products can be hedonic, but some are more emotionally involving (Campbell, 1987). For example, Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) found that experiential purchases (e.g., dining and travel) made people happier than material possessions. We conceptualize an *experiential product* as fusing tangible (sensory) and intangible (symbolic) attributes and co-produced by consumer and marketer to create an event that is pleasurable, meaningful, and memorable. The

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