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Personality effects on experiential consumption

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between personality and experiential consumption. A research model was constructed through the use of the personality traits as exogenous and the experiential-activity preferences as endogenous variables. The necessary data were collected from 1000 individuals in 2011 in Norway using questionnaires. The research model was subsequently tested utilising partial least squares path modelling. The results indicated that each of the five personality traits exerts significant influence on one or several of the experiential-activity preferences even having controlled for socio-demographic data. Openness is however the personality trait that appears to be associated with most of the experiential-activity preferences. Overall the study results suggest that personality is a highly relevant psychological construct for the study of experiential consumption as well.

1. Introduction

Experiences have appealed to human beings for ages. Van Boven and Gilovich (2003, p. 1200) provide us with three convincing clues as to why this may be the case. The first is that experiences are more open than material possessions to increasingly favourable interpretations and evaluations with the passage of time. The second reason is that experiences are considered to be more central to one's identity in that they are what constitute a person's life after all. The final explanation is that experiences are pleasurable to talk about, and they more effectively foster successful social relationships, which again contributes to people's psychological well-being.

One may assert that these same reasons may also contribute to an explanation of why a strong focus on experiences was also increasingly becoming apparent in people's consumer behaviour in the second half of the nineteenth century, an era in which the demand for experiential activities (e.g., vacationing) were enabled by people's ever growing discretionary income and time. As these assumptions still hold, it is logical to expect a sustained preference for hedonic or experiential goods. It should therefore be (both from an academic and practical point of view) worthwhile to examine the drivers for this common interest on an individual level as well.

Nevertheless, this examination requires the inclusion of other concepts than traditional ones (e.g., socio-demographics) in our empirical models. This author suggests that one highly relevant and powerful concept is that of *personality*, as it already has been shown to exert significant effects on various kinds of behaviour that are affectively driven (see for instance Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; Barnett, 2006; Burke, Matthiesen, & Pallesen, 2006; Costa & McCrae, 1980; Peeters, van Tuijl, Rutte, & Reymen, 2006) in the manner that experiential consumption does. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to examine whether personality also has significant effects on experiential consumption.

2. Literature

2.1. Experiential consumption

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) were among the first to advocate the 'experiential view', and they argued it could usefully supplement the prevailing 'information processing model' proposed by Bettman (1979), and accordingly could extend our understanding of consumer behaviour. The information-processing model regards the consumer as a problem-solver involved in the goal-directed activities of searching for information, retrieving memory cues, weighing evidence, and arriving at carefully considered judgemental evaluations; in contrast, the experiential view emphasises the salience of primary-process thinking in accord with the pleasure principle (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 135).

This specific focus on the pleasure-orientated consumption has led to the establishment of two distinct categories of consumption: goal-directed and experiential (see Novak, Hoffman, & Duhachek, 2003). Goal-directed consumption (or purchase) represents those made with the primary intention of acquiring a material good to be kept in one's possession, while experiential consumption covers those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience that one lives through. These two consumption types can further be contrasted along at least three other but interrelated

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dimensions (see Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Novak et al., 2003; van Boven & Gilovich, 2003): utilitarian/hedonic benefit, extrinsic/intrinsic motivation, and cognitive/affective.

First, utilitarian benefits drive goal-directed consumption whereas hedonic benefits stimulate experiential consumption. The criterion employed to judge the success of a goal-directed consumption reflects a work mentality in which objects gain value primarily by virtue of the economic benefits they provide, while in the experiential view the consequences of consumption appear in the fun or enjoyment that a consumer derives from a product (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 138). Secondly, goal-directed consumption can be considered extrinsically motivated (van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) because an activity is done not for its own sake but for the satisfaction derived from the result of some pay-off from doing the activity (Neulinger, 1974), but experiential consumption is intrinsically motivated (Calder & Staw, 1975; Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva, & Greenleaf, 1984) because an activity is done for its own sake (Neulinger, 1974). Finally, goal-directed consumption is cognitively and experiential consumption is affectively driven (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). One can consider, then, goal-directed consumption to be a left-brain phenomenon and experiential consumption a right-brain phenomenon (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Much of consumer-behaviour research has in fact been mainly cognitive in nature (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). The relatively poor performance of personality measures in predicting consumer [cognitive] behaviour has encouraged their gradual abandonment in favour of the subcategory of psychographics known as lifestyle variables (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 136). Nevertheless, owing to the proven relationship between personality and affective states (see for instance Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991; Mooradian, 1996), experiential consumption offers considerable scope for the revival of personality (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) as a salient predictor. This renaissance has also been catalysed by the elevated status of personality research over the past three decades (see Nettle, 2007).

Further support for the assumption that personality dimensions may be highly relevant for predicting experiential consumption can also be derived from the research that has proven a strong relationship between personality dimensions and sensation seeking behaviour (see Aluja, García, & García, 2003), a phenomenon which is closely related to experiential consumption. Though being related, these two behavioural phenomena differ from each other in that sensation seeking involves an element of a person's willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of experiences (Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, & Donohew, 2002; Zuckerman, 1994), an assumption which has also empirically been confirmed in several studies (see Lissek et al., 2005). In contrast, experiential consumption does not necessarily involve the risk element. Furthermore, sensation seeking behaviour is associated with a high degree of impulsivity (McDaniel & Zuckerman, 2003), novelty and active participation (Pizam, Reichel, & Uriely, 2002), while experiential consumption encompasses activities that may contain a low degree of these features. For instance, as proposed elsewhere (Zuckerman, 1994), high sensation seekers would prefer to travel to exotic places, on their own, and without prior planning, whereas low sensation seekers would like to travel to familiar destinations, in group travel that is pre-planned in order to avoid unexpected events. On the basis of the argument provided so far, it is proposed that consumption related to sensation seeking behaviour can be considered a subset of the more overarching concept of experiential consumption, a proposition which is also implied by Lacher (1989).

2.2. The 'Big Five'

The 'Big Five' model consists of five broad personality traits – extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience – and represents personality at the broadest level of abstraction (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). These traits are continuous, like height is, rather than discrete, implying the fact that every individual has all of the five traits of personality but with varying degrees (Nettle, 2007). Many studies have found that individuals' scores on these personality traits are also significantly associated with various kinds of outcomes in real life (e.g., divorce, happiness, cultural participation, career success, etc.) (Nettle, 2005, 2007).

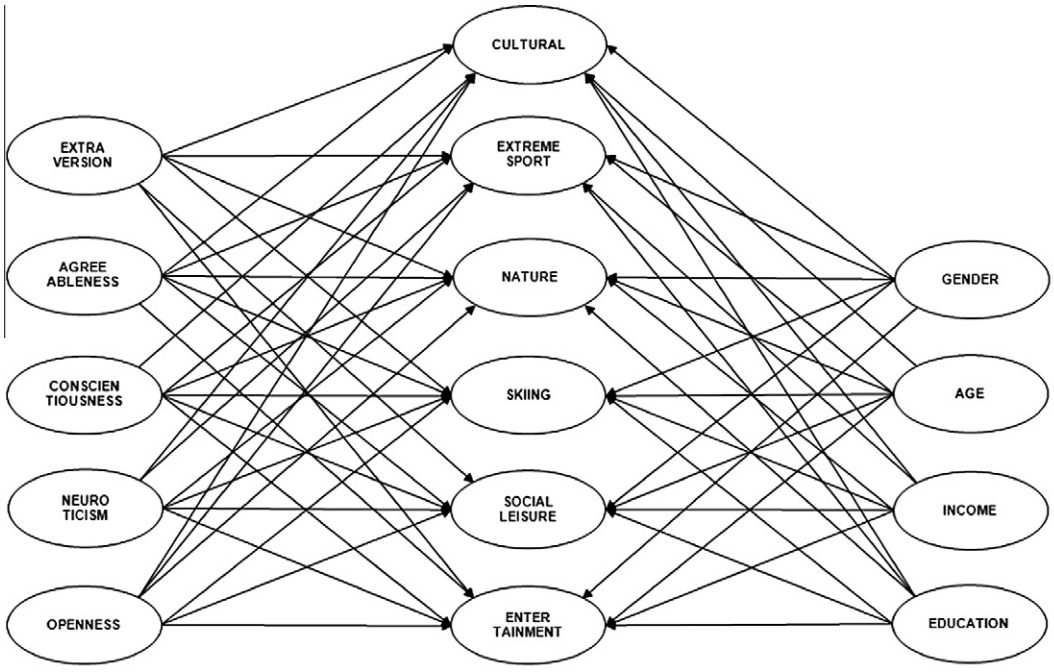

Fig. 1. Research model.