

WHY SOME PAY FOR PLEASURE WHEN OTHERS DO NOT: A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF SKATERS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores why some consumers choose to pay for hedonic consumption instead of consuming for free. Consumer decision making processes, the nature of retailing hedonic consumption and major factors influencing purchase intention literature is reviewed. Common models on the decision-making process tend to outline several broad phases or levels such as problem recognition, information search and evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase behaviour (Craig-Lees, Joy & Browne 1995; Statt 1997). However, hedonic consumption is associated with pleasure, arousal (Holbrook & Gardner 1993), and is primarily characterized by an affective and sensory experience of aesthetic or sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). This differs to normal consumption motives because, consumers characterise some products as primarily hedonic and others as primarily utilitarian. Analysis of data from focus groups show that choosing to pay for hedonic consumption might be result of utilitarian value, value adding, perceptions of quality and identity. Further testing is suggested.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Skating (i.e. the act of rising on a skateboard) now seems to have evolved from the underground to the mainstream, at least in terms of fashion and style within recent years (Beal 1995). In Australia, the proliferation of outdoor parks has been evident with new park construction increasing almost every year (Gembeck 2000). With accessibility and high participation on free skate parks observers have been lead to ask two common questions:

- 1) "Maybe we should open a skatepark ourselves and charge them all money to skate?" (Gembeck 2003).
- 2) "Why are kids paying to skate when public skateparks are popping up faster than a flip-kicking pro?" (DiFilippo 2004).

Research by DiFilippo (2004) showed that a large proportion of indoor skateparks were established simply because there is ever increasing numbers of skaters. Consequently, many parks have since closed due to lack of attendance. Understanding consumer choice determinants is of interest to potential investors taking advantage of one of the fastest growing sports (DiFilippo 2004), and academically it provides a basis to answer the second question.

Research Problem

Skaters are a subculture which has been identified by one researcher as having its genesis based on the philosophy of pursuing experiences that provide pleasure (Beal 1995). The experience of skaters serves to highlight that it is unknown why some consumers choose to pay for hedonic consumption instead of consuming for free. Thus, the purpose of this study is to discover *what factors lead some skaters to choose to pay retailers of hedonic consumption to skate when they can choose to skate for free.*

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE FOR THIS STUDY

Hedonic and experiential consumption literature includes discussion on leisure activities, sports and play, as well as other tangible goods that posses hedonic dimensions, and focuses generally on why consumers seek hedonic consumption (Babin 1994) This literature, however, has not yet been extended sufficiently to bring to light explanations for the research problem here, since it is not the pursuit of pleasure that is the focus of this study, but rather why some would pay for it when it can be consumed freely. After perusing a wide range of literature, it was determined that relevant explanatory factors are discussed to some extent throughout all the body of knowledge relating to consumer behaviour and decision making, including psychological research perspectives. It was also recognises the arguments that understanding of consumer choice behaviour is far from complete (Ahtola 2001) and that additional work to better understand this type of choice behaviour is still needed.

Possible Problems With Traditionally Accepted Theories

It has been stated that "none of the existing models have been proven empirically accurate" (Crozier & McLean 1997 p. 47) and none have a specific focus on services. Applicability to services and experiential products, or lack thereof, may be due to the linear approach of these and other consumer behaviour models. Such an approach does not consider the potential complexity and richness of the consumer behaviour process nor the phenomena of consumption itself (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). Implications for marketing planning may be ignored or lost, then, through the features that popularised such models (Lysonski, Durvasula & Zotos 1996). This constrains, by its narrowness and simplicity, the understanding of consumers (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). Therefore, this paper presupposes that such models are ill equipped to capture the true nature of decision making and the important aspects of consumption by those valuing the hedonic and experiential nature of products and services.

Attitudes as an influencing factor in decision making and behaviour has been well researched and is another aspect of consumer behaviour that is coming under increasing debate (Ahtola 2001). The major criticisms of traditional models of attitude (see original works by Likert 1932, and Tannenbaum 1957 for a detailed discussion) again reflect the simplicity and narrowness of their explanations, especially in regard to their limitations on explaining attitudes

during hedonic consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). Unidimensional work (such as Fishbein's 1976) refers heavily to preferences and behaviours but contemporary researchers in psychology have tended more towards feelings, emotion and aesthetic values (Ahtola 2001). Furthermore, utilitarian aspects of consumption, combined with a correlational relationship with hedonic aspects of consumption determine the general attitude aspect to that consumption (Ahtola 2001). This leads onto a need to further understand the nature of hedonic consumption.

Hedonic Consumption

Hedonic consumption takes its lead from the concept of hedonism which is "pursuit of or devotion to pleasure, especially to the pleasures of the senses" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). Seminal research conducted by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) have provided a strong foundation for understanding the nature of hedonic goods as being ones whose consumption is primarily characterized by an affective and sensory experience of aesthetic or sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun.

Identity and discovery of self through hedonic consumption

Hedonic consumption provides, for the consumer, a set of meanings for which the consumer uses to either discover or express their identity. Thus hedonic products are both consumed and produced concurrently and, as with services, this necessitates active participation and involvement by the consumer in ensuring the quality of their own experience (Fournier, 1991; Hopkinson & Pujari 1999; Holbrook & Gardner 1993). Such a focus on one's self may go some way to explain why hedonic consumption is argued to play a key role in the creation of one's own identity (Scheibe, 1986) and why such forms of consumption are extremely potent in the realisation of "the extended self" (Belk, 1988).

Dimensions and framework for hedonic consumption

Some studies on hedonic consumption are worth commenting on here as they have made attempts to ascribe a conceptual framework for understanding and further discovery. The two attempts mentioned here. Firstly, Hopkinson and Pujari (1999) have posited five dimensions to hedonic consumption. These are: relationship to environment (social and natural), challenge or personal growth, community, addiction and danger. Secondly, Eliashberg and Sawhney (1994) have added to the literature by focusing on what constitutes enjoyment or levels of enjoyment when hedonic consumption is the goal.

Despite these gains in the literature, there has been little contribution to actually measuring hedonic consumption itself. That is, because consumers seek it out of emotive needs for arousal, fun and fantasy, it has been difficult to actually measure this in a concrete manner, useful for statistical analysis (Ahtola 2001). Thus, hedonic consumption might not be explainable using economic exchange theories, but rather it might be best to be considered based on the extent to which it provides escape from "the panopticon of the market" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995 p. 242). Additional perspectives that may add towards understanding this phenomena is the identification that hedonic consumers can also consist of a wide typology of consumer such as the "non-materialists" who are hedonically oriented (Richins, 1994), and the older groups of consumers (Schiffman & Sherman, 1991).

Factors Influencing Purchase Intention Towards Hedonic Consumption Retailing

Whilst this review has shown the existence of research regarding factors that influence why consumers seek hedonic benefits, there is little that discusses the factors that influence purchase intention of hedonic products. However, a range of models and constructs from broadly related literature can be used as a starting point for more qualitative research. Some of the variables already measured include: Value and Lifestyles (Kahle, Beatty, & Homer, 1986), hedonic and utilitarian value (Babin & Darden, 1994), determinants of store trust (Macintosh, & Lockshin, 1997), Life satisfaction, Self esteem, Self monitoring and Public self consciousness (Richins & Dawson, 1990), and Perceived return, risk and bounded rationality (Srinivasan, 1987), just to name a few that was consulted.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The current literature contains within it a range of possibilities for replication of previous studies useful for testing its applicability in a new context or even extending it given the new context. A mixed methods approach provides scope for better understanding of the nature of the phenomenon through qualitative research, and yet makes use of reliable quantitative frameworks (Leedy & Ormrod 2005).

Framework For The Focus Group

Focus groups used previously proposed constructs and frameworks as a basis for probing into the words and the meanings associated with them that relate to skater's perspectives of hedonic consumption in skate parks (Krueger 1988). Another objective is to obtain group data that can be used later in individual interviews to explore more broadly (Berg 2004) the possible influencing factors for making decisions to pay for hedonic consumption.

A screening questionnaire ensured that participants were able to converse accurately and deeply on the issues being raised (Malhotra et al 2004). Because indoor skate parks in Australia are few in number, a number of stratified techniques were employed so that focus groups were conducted in differing locations and subject to varied environmental conditions (Calder 1977). Specifically the two sites included; 1) in Queensland where the weather is generally hotter and there is less rainfall, and 2) in Melbourne where the weather is normally more subject to rain. The focus groups went for about 90 minutes, and although Berg (2004) states that they can maintain effectiveness up to three hours, they were not stretched that far. The recorded focus groups were transcribed and participants de-identified for ethical reasons. The findings result from the interpretation of the analysis of the common themes that emerged (see approach taken by O'Cass & Frost 2002), as well as the field notes taken at the time.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH

The focus groups focused largely on external factors that lead to the choice to pay for hedonic consumption that is otherwise free such as because of weather conditions etc. However, it was the desire to move away from those considerations. Eventually, the discussion seemed to focus on 4 main themes: 1) that wood constructions provide better flow than 'Crete', especially for learning new tricks, 2) atmosphere and value added 'feel', 3) perception of quality of facilities, and 4) identity of the venue. It was sensed that these skaters did not tend to articulate deeper feelings, which creates a need for further interpretation of comments made in the focus groups. These are now discussed.

1) Benefit from skating on wood

It was generally agreed that wooden constructions provide a better feel, is safer and enables more control, albeit some complaints about the maintenance at some parks. This discussion met with divergent points of views and anecdotal evidence for support but is seen to have one underlying concept that was not actually stated. This is the additional utilitarian benefit gained. Skaters seemed to enjoy the hedonic experience of skating but also could appreciate the vehicles which provided utilitarian value that increased the hedonic experience. Often in this discussion the concept of flow was raised. However, upon probing further to what it meant, one participant said "its like, ya know, a moment of clarity". Others tended to agree and this seemed to sum up the general feeling. So skaters will use a skate park if they feel there is sufficient utilitarian value in it that enhances the opportunity for flow (or clarity).

2) Atmosphere and value added 'feel'

Skaters would tend to use a skate park depending on how they felt. Or more precisely what they felt they needed to feel. This reinforces the concept of skating for hedonic goals. There were a number of attributes that could influence the feel, one was music, the other was weather conditions and the other was how 'pumped' every one was. A good indoor skate park would have a "good number of skaters all pumped to throw down some hammers" was the way one skater stated it. However, this also met with debate because it was argued that it's not about hammers (big tricks) but about stease (a mixture of style and ease). A good skate park seemed to be able to inherently provide this.

This seemed odd, and probing was used to try and understand how a skate park could provide it which was met with some resistance, possibly because the belief was that its not meant to be manufactured. This then lead to the most salient point which provides the best summation of what skaters are actually meaning. This is the concept of freedom. Apparently a good skate park gives a sense of freedom. This is critical because one of the major reasons not to go into a skate park is because of the desire for freedom. Skaters talked a lot about the fresh air, the sun and the wind. Therefore indoor skateparks wishing to attract skaters need to value add with freedom.

3) Perception of quality of facilities

Skaters were not definite on what the facilities should also include, except for the agreement that BMXers tend to ruin a skate park. Thus perception of quality tended to relate to who used the park as much as what type of design, features and layout it had. A part of this, which is connected to the next point and somewhat linked with the last is the inclusion of events at the skate park such as competitions, movie premiers and other community bonding activities.

4) Identity of the venue

This was a sensitive point for some skaters because in their experience some skate park owners were not skaters and knew nothing about them. This seemed to be important to only some, but when it was important it was with a passion. Others recognised if the identity was bad but may overlook it if other aspects were good. The skate park needed to maintain a type of identity as well as the owner. This was not clear but it did not indicate that certain brands needed to be shown or that the owner needed to where any type of fashion. It seemed to be a criteria that the skaters least knew how to judge. However, they had a strong ability to know when the identity was appropriate and this linked in strongly with the perception of quality.

CONCLUSIONS

Skating is a popular sport that is increasing in acceptance as a sport. Accordingly, many entrepreneurs have been attempting to access the profit potential from this market through the sale of hedonic consumption. The issue is that some skaters will pay to consume whereas many others will consume hedonically for free. The question this research starts to answer is why does this occur? This initial stage of the research shows four key criteria that skaters use. This can be applied to existing literature to show that choosing to pay for hedonic consumption might be result of utilitarian value, value adding, perceptions of quality and identity. Further investigations might show that identity could be related to a relationship construct. This warrants further investigation. The implications for research is that additional qualitative study is required to obtain a more meaningful understanding before further interpretations can prove reliable. This could be in the form of semi structured interviews. For managers, this study shows that there is more to success in this industry then simply replicating what skaters have for free and making a few extra conveniences. Skaters are difficult to understand and will bring managers to accountability if they do not fit in.

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