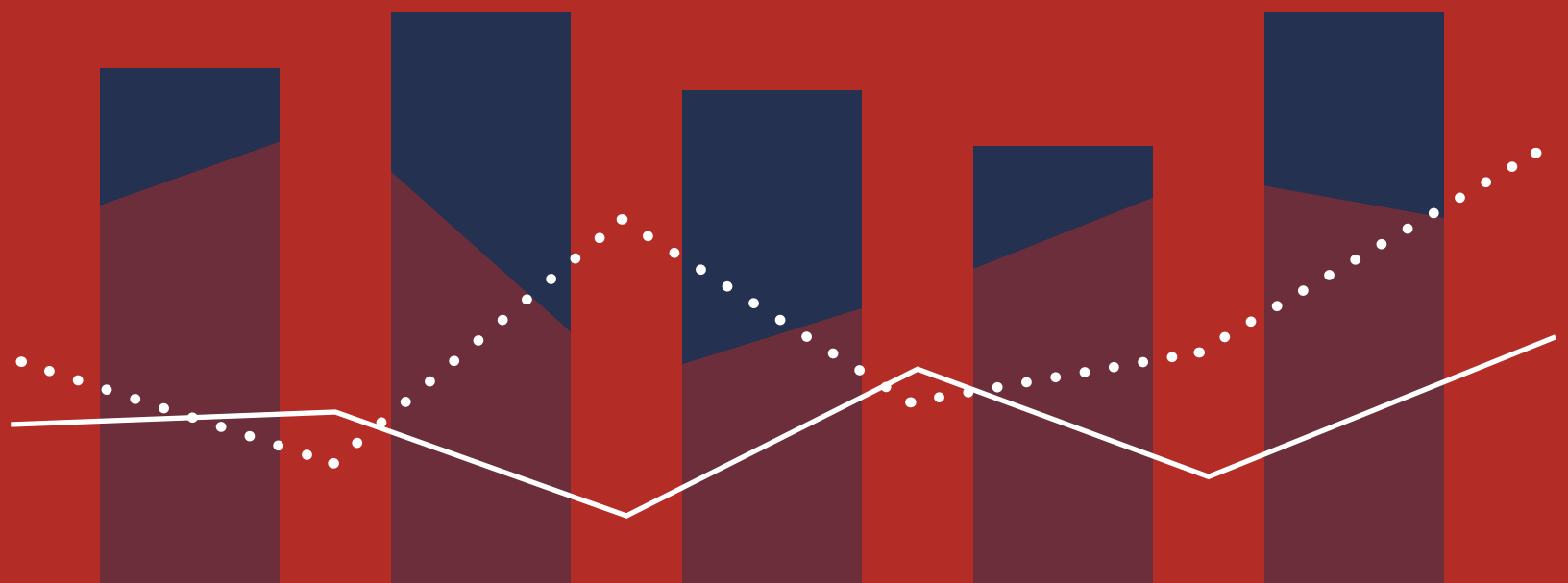


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Shared Consumption Experiences

By Rebecca W. Hamilton | 5.12.2021

Nearly 70% of U.S. adults go to movies, sporting events, and museums every year, and consumers are more likely to engage in public leisure activities in the company of friends or family than alone (Ratner and Hamilton 2015). Some estimates suggest more than 90% of movie visits occur with others, and the tendency to consume activities such as movies jointly with other consumers affects their diffusion and the effectiveness of advertising them (Delre, Broekhuizen, and Bijmolt 2016).

Despite the frequency with which consumers engage in shared experiences, consumer behavior research has focused on individual consumer journeys rather than on shared journeys (Bhargave and Montgomery 2013; Hamilton et al. 2021). Moreover, the limited research on shared journeys has examined shared decision making (e.g., Simpson et al. 2012) more than shared consumption experiences. Shared consumption experiences may result from either individual decisions or joint decisions (Gorlin and Dhar 2012). We focus here on shared experiences in which consumers engage with proximal, identifiable others rather than merely observing or being observed by distal others.

In addition to the frequency with which consumers engage in shared experiences and the time and money they spend on them, shared

experiences merit attention because they differ from individual consumption on several dimensions. The sections below highlight affective, motivational, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions on which shared and individual consumption experiences differ.

The Affective Dimension: Sharing Experiences Can Intensify Emotional Responses

When consumers share an experience, their attention is drawn more tightly to focal stimuli, intensifying their emotional reactions (Boothby, Clark, and Bargh 2014). Physiological evidence from electroencephalogram recordings suggests consumers' attention is more polarized toward emotionally significant stimuli when they engage in an experience with others than alone (Pozharliev et al. 2015). Pozharliev and colleagues

found that consumers directed more motivated attention to luxury branded products than basic products when they viewed them with another person, whereas they did not observe this difference when consumers viewed the products alone. However, consumers' intense emotional reactions to stimuli may decay more quickly over time during shared consumption experiences than solo experiences, a phenomenon Bhargave, Montgomery, and Redden (2018) call the "collective satiation effect."

Congruency in consumer reactions plays an important role in enjoyment of shared experiences. Ragunathan and Corfman (2006) found consumers enjoyed a shared consumption experience, such as tasting juice, more than a solo experience when their partner rated the stimulus similarly to them. Whether the experience was pleasant or unpleasant, ratings congruency increased enjoyment. When partners watched a movie together and provided moment-by-moment evaluations, Ramanathan and McGill (2007) found that consistency in the partners' evaluations led to more favorable retrospective evaluations.

The Motivational Dimension: Sharing Experiences Can Motivate Different Choices

Because they expect to enjoy experiences with friends or family more than alone (Caprariello and Reis 2013), consumers often forgo solo leisure activities (Ratner and Hamilton 2015). For example, Ratner and Hamilton found that consumers from the United States, India, and China—cultures differing on dimensions like individualism-collectivism and power distance—all expressed significantly

less interest in going to a movie alone than in going to see the same movie with friends. Consumers were reluctant to engage in leisure activities alone because they believed they would seem less socially connected. In contrast, being accompanied by others can increase perceived status (McFerran and Argo 2014).

Sharing experiences with others can influence the amount of money consumers spend, how much they consume, and what they consume. Agency-oriented consumers (positively correlated with being male) spend more on themselves when they shop with a friend instead of alone, while communion-oriented consumers (positively correlated with being female) spend less when they shop with a friend (Kurt, Inman, and Argo 2011). When consumers were given the opportunity to eat chocolate candies while watching a video with a partner, Lowe and Haws (2014) found that the actions of the partner significantly influenced how much consumers indulged. Partners were more likely to co-abstain (45%) or co-indulge (33%) than make different decisions (22%). Mende and colleagues (2019) showed that even the presence of anthropomorphized robots increased status-oriented and food consumption.

Consumers' motivation to adjust their own consumption to that of their partners may depend on which dimension is compared (Liu, McFerran, and Haws 2020). Liu, McFerran, and Haws demonstrate that consumers tend to choose similar quantities (ordinal attribute) to their consumption partners but different flavors and colors (nominal attributes). As an illustration of this pattern, Ariely and Levav (2000) found that although

restaurant patrons tended to order similar items to those others selected, they intentionally ordered distinct varieties of the items, even if it reduced their enjoyment.

The Cognitive Dimension: Sharing Experiences Gives Consumers Access to More Information

Multiple consumers have access to more information and experiences than single consumers. Groups of consumers working together create narrower categories than individuals categorizing the same items because their pooled expertise allows them to use more dimensions to draw distinctions among the items (Hamilton, Puntoni, and Tavassoli 2010). Similarly, discussing wine or food consumption with others can highlight flavors a single taster may not notice. Expertise increases the perceived benefits of leisure activities and the value consumers derive from them (Luo, Ratchford, and Yang 2013), suggesting that greater collective expertise may enhance enjoyment of shared activities.

Although groups can benefit from greater collective expertise, group settings may not encourage knowledge sharing. For example, when responding to queries on group discussion boards, members tended to repeat information that had already been shared rather than provide new information, even if they had access to information relevant to answering the query (Hamilton, Schlosser, and Chen 2017). One reason consumers may focus on attributes mentioned earlier in discussion threads is that shared experiences induce more holistic information processing and greater reliance on

initial items when forming integrative judgments (Bhargave and Montgomery 2013). When interacting with others, consumers also tend to prioritize affiliation with others over decision quality (Hamilton, Schlosser, and Chen 2017). For example, Liu and Min (2020) found that consumers asked their preferences by a partner making a decision (e.g., “which restaurant do you prefer for dinner?”) focused more on being agreeable than providing helpful information.

The Behavioral Dimension: Coordinating Interdependent Actions

Some experiences, such as playing tennis, riding a seesaw, playing a board game, or ballroom dancing, are only possible when multiple consumers participate. Other activities, such as rock climbing or going out to dinner, are done more effectively or enjoyably when multiple consumers participate.

If a shared experience involves interdependent actions, joint navigation (i.e., decisions about pacing, sequencing, and interacting with another) may be required (Wu et al. 2021). For example, a consumer visiting an art gallery with a friend might wonder how much the friend wants to talk or remain close together. Wu and colleagues found that navigation decisions were more difficult when consumers were not clear about their partner’s level of interest during a shared experience, reducing their own ability to focus on the activity and inhibiting enjoyment. However, simple interventions, such as asking partners to share or discuss their interests before an activity, increased consumers’ ability to focus and enjoyment of shared activities. The

findings suggest interventions service providers can use to retain customers and benefit from positive word-of-mouth.

Summary

Consumers are inherently social, and many of their consumption experiences involve others. However, research on consumer behavior primarily has focused on individual consumption journeys, rather than journeys involving multiple people (Hamilton et al. 2021).

This curation brings together recent work highlighting affective, motivational, cognitive, and behavioral differences between shared experiences and individual consumption experiences. Consumers expect shared experiences to be more enjoyable than solo experiences, and they often are, especially if the

consumers observe others reacting similarly to them. However, the nature of shared and solo experiences is likely to differ; sharing experiences with others influences the amount of money consumers spend, how much they consume, and what they consume. On some dimensions, consumers tend to choose similarly to others, while on other dimensions, they are motivated to be distinct.

Although consumers have collective access to more information during shared experiences, they may not share relevant information because they tend to prioritize affiliation over information sharing. Finally, when shared experiences require coordinated interdependent actions, consumers can be distracted by not knowing their partner's level of interest, reducing their own ability to focus and their enjoyment of a shared experience.



AUTHOR

Rebecca Hamilton is the Michael G. and Robin Psaros Chair in Business Administration, Senior Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, and Professor of Marketing and Marketing Area Coordinator at the McDonough School of Business, Georgetown University.

CITATION

Hamilton, Rebecca (2021), "Shared Consumption Experiences," *Impact at JMR*, (May), Available at: <https://www.ama.org/shared-consumption-experiences/>

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