PEAK EXPERIENCES: LATENT DIMENSIONALITIES IN CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Although psychologists have described self-actualization (Maslow) as a spiritual rather than a materialistic state, there is evidence to suggest that some material possessions can lead to a "partial" form of actualization or peaking in some mode or style of living. Since this can lead to the modification of existing appeals or contribute to the development of more effective promotional programs (promotional synergies between products), a study was undertaken to investigate the phenomenon.

Subjects were surveyed to determine if they were likely to experience peaking in response to a variety of items within four product/service classes. MANOVA analysis showed significant differences in peaking among items, as well as significant effects of age and sex jointly (covariates), but no differences were observed on the basis of product/service class.

Finally, regarding the peaking experiences investigated, a factor analysis revealed that the greatest variability in reported peaking was associated with a food product category. Thus, greater variability in reported peaking occurred for products which predominantly satisfy more basic, rather than higher level, needs.

INTRODUCTION

Maslow (1962) has been credited with giving wide dissemination to peak experiences, as a derivation of James' (1943) "mystic experiences," by describing the experience as one of "Moments of highest happiness and fulfillment" (Maslow, 1962, p.69). However, it is Thorne who first attempted to categorize the experiences and formalize an operational definition of peak experiences as "A systematic experiencing of what is subjectively recognized to be one of the high points of life, one of the most exciting, rich and fulfilling experiences which the person has ever had" (Thorne, 1963, p. 248). As a result of his efforts to categorize the experiences into seven major and 13 secondary categories, other authors have factor analyzed the experiences (Hallaq, 1977; Panzarella, 1980) or measured the level of the experiences among respondents, making statistical comparisons based on some respondent demographic characteristics such as sex, and a variety of personality dimensions (Tolar, 1978; Panzarella, 1980).

Since the original exposition by Maslow, psychologists have gone beyond the mere description of these experiences into a study of the characteristics of those individuals who, to a greater degree, are likely to experience "Peaking." Most psychologists seem to agree that experiencing peaking is positively related to some form of self-actualization. Wuthnow (1978), for instance, concludes from his study that "Peakers are less likely than nonpeakers to say they value material possessions, high pay, job security, being famous, and having a lot of friends" (Wuthnow, 1978, p. 59). Nevertheless, in a study by Stewart (1976) involving college students, the respondents perceived peaking to be more frequently experienced by people in the middle age (what he calls the command generation) stage of the life cycle. Accordingly, the authors of this paper contend that by this stage in the cycle, individuals have satisfied or are in the process of fully satisfying many of their material needs in life. Therefore, it can be suggested that some types of possessions may be a prerequisite to, if not the source of, the attainment of some peak experiences. As a result of such contemplation the authors felt that a study of some products and their potential contribution to experiencing some level of peaking may help marketers in the development of more effective promotional appeals. Furthermore, the methodology may prove useful in suggesting possible modifications of some existing appeals which have been based on traditional notions of patterns of consumer behavior, which may have changed due to many dynamic social changes that have taken place in our society in the last decade or so.

PURPOSE

It was pointed out in the previous section that most psychologists agree that peaking is more closely associated with self-actualization than with the satisfaction of lower needs. Wuthnow (1978), when he classified respondents as high-, average-, and non-peakers, also concluded that peakers are less likely than nonpeakers to say they value material possessions. It is interesting, however, that if one were to combine high- and average-peakers from his study and compare their responses to those of nonpeakers, one finds that, respectively, 12% and 18% give great importance to having a beautiful home, new car and nice things, 17% and 24% to having a high paying job, and 40% and 48% to having job security. This apparent desire for, and interest in, material things and their requisite resources among high- and average-peakers stimulated interest in testing the following hypotheses, stated in the null form:

\[ H_0: \] No difference in level or reported peaking experiences will be found among different product classes.
\[ H_0: \] Within a product class or service category, no difference in level of reported peaking experiences will be found among different items.

Particularly, it is of considerable interest to determine whether greater peaking is reported in conjunction with the more esoteric, as opposed to the more basic, items/product classes. Differences in peaking experiences will also be examined on the basis of age and sex of the respondents.

METHODOLOGY

A convenient sample of 105 college students on a university campus were surveyed in 1979. They were asked to indicate by a score from 1-10 the level of
peak experiences that would be attained from the possession or consumption of goods and services in the following areas:

1. **PLEAS**: Bringing a feeling of most pleasurable sensations,

2. **EUPH**: Bringing a feeling or a state of euphoria,

3. **SUCC**: Bringing a feeling of success in understanding and discovery,

4. **JOY**: Bringing a feeling of joy in growing up, finding oneself, and becoming of age,

5. **RESP**: Bringing a feeling of coming to like and respect the self,

6. **COMM**: Bringing a feeling of full communication with nature.

Each subject rated all three different products within each product category on all six types of peaking experiences listed above.

The product classes were automobiles, foods (meats), alcoholic drinks, and vacations. Each class contained three products which ranged from more basic items that more or less satisfy a basic need to more esoteric items within each product class which presumably satisfy higher level needs as well.

To test the different hypotheses, a variety of statistical techniques were used. A crosstabs program was run to investigate differences based on sex and age of respondents. MANOVA was employed to study differences in reported peaking among product categories and among items within categories. Finally, factor analysis was used to analyze the structure of the data and to determine whether any underlying dimensionalities may be relevant to the development or modification of promotional strategies.

**RESULTS**

Crossclassification of the data on the basis of sex showed very few significant differences. Beer and Pinto generated significantly strong differences in experiencing euphoria between the sexes (.004 and .03) with vacationing in Mexico placing third (.05), and ownership of a Porche a weak fourth (.09). On the other hand, when respondents were segmented into three groups, under 21 years, 21, and over 21, the three age groups showed several significant differences in all six peak experiences as a result of owning or consuming some products or services listed in the survey. The experience, "Brings a feeling of full communication with nature," showed differences between the ages on about one-half of the products or services. It is interesting that one or more of the alcoholic beverages appear in five of the six categories of peak experiences as having a different impact on each of the three age groups.

In order to test the two hypotheses, that there were no differences in peak experiences among products and/or among items, a MANOVA was performed. The data from 76 of the original 105 subjects were complete. Seventy-six of the 76 complete questionnaires were randomly chosen (to ensure equivalent cell sizes) for inclusion in the analysis.

The independent variables in the model were the four product classes, as well as the individual product items within each class. Thus, the product items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLEAS</td>
<td>Hamburger</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liquor</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mexico</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pinto</td>
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<td>.004</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>.004</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Liquor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCC</td>
<td>Porsche</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Steak</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wine</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Beer</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liquor</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<td>Hawaii</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>RESP</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>.0003</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1

Level of Significance from Crosstabulation of Peak Experiences and Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLEAS</td>
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<td>Liquor</td>
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<td>Hawaii</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>EUPH</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pinto</td>
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<td>.004</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beer</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SUCC</td>
<td>Porsche</td>
<td>.09</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Steak</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wine</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOY</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESP</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>.0003</td>
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</table>

were nested within product class. The different categories of peaking experiences were considered to be multiple dependent variables. All effects were considered to be fixed. Additionally, age and sex of the respondents were treated as covariates. Six subjects were randomly assigned to each treatment condition--item within product class--and the subject's responses for that item were included for each peaking experience.

The mean ratings for each product class relative to particular peak experience are presented below in Table 2. Results of the multivariate analysis indicate that ratings of the series of various peaking experiences were highly significantly different among the various individual items (Wilks Lambda = .162, Table 2

Mean Ratings of Various Peak Experiences Relative to Particular Product Classes (collapsed over product items)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>PLEAS</th>
<th>EUPH</th>
<th>SUCC</th>
<th>JOY</th>
<th>RESP</th>
<th>COMM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Automobilies</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>6.08</td>
<td>3.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food (meats)</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcoholic</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>2.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>beverages</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacation</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.25</td>
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</tbody>
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