So Many Choices, So Little Time: Measuring the Effects of Free Choice and Enjoyment on Perception of Free Time, Time Pressure and Time Deprivation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of free choice and enjoyment of activities on perceptions of free time. The study focuses on subjects' perceptions of the amount of free time available to them, perceptions of time pressure, and perceptions of time deprivation. Emotions elicited by perceptions of free time are also explored. The results suggest that having many choices for discretionary activities can by itself lead to feelings of time pressure, time deprivation, and a perceived shortage of free time. Reported time pressure and time deprivation were least when subjects thought of activities they have to do and do not enjoy.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing time pressure among Americans is a topic that appears frequently in the media and in research. The relationship of time pressure to work and family time has been extensively researched (Crawford 1997). The number of hours worked in a typical week is generally believed to have increased, resulting in decreased time for other areas of life (Schor 1991). Also, as two income families have become the norm, perceived free time has decreased and time pressure has increased.

In response to time pressures, consumers may purchase time-saving products (Voss and Blackwell 1975), and even products which represent hoped-for leisure lifestyles (Hochschild 1997). How and where consumers shop may also be affected by the amount of time consumers perceive as available (Maher et al. 1997). Internet purchasing is widely believed to be at least partially driven by perceived time pressure. Rather than spending time only shopping, consumers are willing to spend extra money so that they may take care of other tasks while goods are delivered to their door.

Consumers often think of work, chores, family care, and other obligations as the reasons for felt time pressure. However, some argue that felt time pressure is not from any absolute increase in work, and that Americans actually have increasing amounts of discretionary time (Robinson and Godbey 1997). Hawes (1987) found the same, and in some cases a slight increase, in time reported spent in leisure time activities among Americans over an eleven-year period.

A recent article attributed the perception of increased time pressure to the abundance of choices available to consumers (Sipress 2000). The perception may also be due to an intentional choice of work over family time (Hochschild 1997). Time diary studies suggest it may be somewhat due to increased time spent watching television (Denton 1994; Robinson and Godbey 1997). The present study examines some of the dimensions of and reasons behind the time crunch so widely felt in affluent societies.

One problem with any study of time is that perceptions of time vary depending upon the individual and the context (McGrath and Kelly 1986; Hornik 1984; Lewis and Weigert 1981; Cottle 1976). Two people experiencing the same span of clock time will often perceive its passage and estimate its duration quite differently (Kaufman and Lane 1990). One situational factor that may effect such perceptions is mood (Kellaris and Mantel 1994; Carmon 1991). Another is the number of ways that a person can envision how the particular time period could have been spent (Cotte and Ratneshwar 2000).

Satisfaction with goods and wealth, and perceptions of abundance, do not always correspond to absolute levels (Sweeney et al. 1990; Stouffer et al. 1949). Rather, they are influenced by comparisons with others. Seeing affluence and an abundance of goods available to others can arouse feelings of dissatisfaction among consumers whose absolute levels of wealth have not changed (O'Guinn and Schrum 1997; Richins 1995). This may also be applied to time.

The study reported in this paper suggests that an abundance of desirable choices as to how to spend free time can in and of itself lead to feelings of time scarcity because of the number of choices that must be left undone. It also suggests that thinking about obligated activities such as chores may actually relieve feelings of time pressure. This paper makes two contributions. The first is the application of the notion of phantom alternatives to the context of forgone choices in the consumption of free time. The second is an exploratory analysis of the emotional dimensions of time pressure and time deprivation.

Definitions

Based on a review of time literature, we concluded that three dimensions of time perception shed light on consumer feelings of time scarcity. The first is the perception of *available free time*. This is defined as a consumer's perception of how much time is open within a certain period for discretionary activities. The second is *time pressure*. The time literature generally refers to time pressure as a form of stress expressed in the perception of being hurried or rushed (Denton 1994; Miyazaki 1993). Time pressure influences specific consumer behaviors such as shopping and the substitution of goods for time, as well as consumers' general sense of well being. The third is *time deprivation*. Dictionary definitions refer to deprivation as the condition of having lost or being prevented from having something essential or vital. This construct has been used in psychology (Bernstein and Crosby 1980; Crosby 1976) and in management (Sweeney et al. 1990). In applying this to time, we define time deprivation as the perception of having been prevented from devoting enough time to chosen pursuits. This implies there is desire for more time for an activity or pursuit, but circumstances hinder individual consumers from using time in that way.

Mentally Undoing How We Spend Our Time: Forgone Fun

Phantom alternatives are choices that appear to be real but actually are unavailable (Pratkanis and Farquhar 1992). For example, faced with an unpleasant experience or outcome, we frequently mentally "undo" actual experiences and imagine more pleasant phantom alternatives (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). We can apply the concept of phantom alternatives to free time. Choices as to how to spend free time that consumers can visualize, but which are actually unavailable, can be thought of as phantom alternatives.

Except under limited circumstances when consumers are able to do two things simultaneously, time spent in one activity is time not available for other activities (Kaufman et al. 1991). Thus, any way in which a consumer spends time eliminates potential alternative activities. These forgone choices become phantom alternatives for free time. For example, the choice to play golf one afternoon means that same block of time cannot be spent playing tennis.

Could an abundance of alternative leisure activities impact a consumer's perceived time deprivation? The number of choices for how to spend leisure time increases as societies become more affluent. It has been argued (Robinson and Godbey 1997; Robinson

1977; Linder 1970) that Americans are pressured by the abundance of consumer goods and leisure alternatives.

Having many desirable options may lead consumers to perceive themselves as rushed or time pressured. As the number of ways to spend leisure time increases, so does the number of phantom alternatives. The choices may be enjoyable activities, lifestyles, or roads not traveled, but they are not available simply because time is finite and the supply of leisure time is already being devoted to other pursuits. Thus, the abundance of choices in affluent societies may lead to a perception of time deprivation. Conversely, if these desirable choices are not available, or if consumers simply are not thinking of them, consumers will be less likely to mentally undo the time used in their actual pursuits.

Consumers should also feel more time pressure when there are many alternative activities that they have a strong desire to do and that they are free to choose. Under these conditions, consumers are likely to feel pressured to manage their time so as to engage in the desirable activities. Thus, we expect to see an interaction effect for time pressure. Time pressure will be perceived as greatest when consumers are actively thinking of activities that they are free to choose and that are enjoyable, and less when consumers are thinking of less enjoyable activities that they must do.

Similarly, consumers should feel deprived of free time as they see more and more desirable activities they must forgo. It has been demonstrated that when an individual's ability to engage in a certain behavior is restricted, the threat to freedom heightens the desirability of the behavior (Rummel et al. 2000; Brehm 1989). This theory of psychological reactance can be applied to free time. Because time is finite, as the number of choices for how to spend time increases, the number of forgone alternatives also increases. This limits one's perceived freedom to engage in desirable activities. As such, an abundance of choices is, in and of itself, a barrier to freedom. Thus, we expect to see a main effect for time deprivation. Time deprivation will be greater when consumers think of activities that are discretionary than when they think of activities they are obligated to do.

Emotions and Time Consumption

Positive and negative emotions and moods are known to affect the perception of time duration (Kellaris and Mantel 1994; Carmon 1991). The emotion literature suggests that perceptions of time can be further understood by examining specific emotions evoked by time pressure and time deprivation. The consumption experience literature (e.g., Richins 1997; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) provides evidence that a variety of emotions may be associated with consumption. Thus, we expect that consumers will feel various emotions when they experience time deprivation, time pressure, and time consumption. For example, time pressure has been identified as a source of stress and anxiety (Denton 1994); deprivation has been associated with emotions such as anger and envy (Crosby 1976); and counterfactual thinking about what might have been has been linked to the emotion of regret and desire for another outcome (Landman 1987).

METHOD

The present study was conducted in a classroom context with students at a large university in the southwestern United States. Many of the students work full-time or part-time as well as take classes, and so offer a reasonable representation of various degrees of time pressure and time deprivation. To induce realistic circumstances, students were asked to think about activities they were doing or could do and to write them down. It was expected that perceived time pressure and perceived time deprivation would be greatest when students thought about activities regarded by them as not compulsory and as enjoyable. As a result, a 2 (compulsory\not compulsory) X 2 (enjoyable\not enjoyable) between-subjects design was used.

A total of 135 students were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions (30-35 subjects per cell). Subjects were told they were completing a survey about how people spend time. Subjects in the experimental conditions were asked to list five activities at the top of the survey. In the "no free choice" (compulsory) condition, subjects were asked to list activities that they "have to do." In the "free choice" (not compulsory) condition, subjects were asked to list activities they "do not have to do." To manipulate the enjoyable versus not enjoyable conditions, subjects were asked directly to list activities they "enjoy" or "do not enjoy." Thus, subjects either listed activities they enjoy and have to do (e.g., "gardening," "cooking"); enjoy and do not have to do (e.g., "hiking," "eating dinner with friends"); do not enjoy and have to do (e.g., "cleaning," "doing homework"), or do not enjoy and do not have to do (e.g., "ride on roller coasters," "go to parties where there is loud music").

A time frame was not specified because it would be impossible to keep it exactly the same between the "free choice" and "no free choice" conditions. Compulsory activities often must be done on an ongoing basis but noncompulsory activities can be done at any time. In any case, the purpose was to measure the effects of thinking about these activities, not the budgeting of time to perform them.

Additional subjects participated as a control group and were not asked to list activities. A pretest had found that asking subjects to list just one activity was not enough to elicit differences from a control condition of no manipulation.

Measurement

Manipulation Checks. A manipulation check measured the degree to which subjects felt they had a choice over whether they do the activities they wrote down. This measure was a two-item, seven-point scale anchored by "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree." The items were "I must do these activities," and "I have to do these activities" (M=4.96, α=.81). Another manipulation check measured the degree to which subjects regarded the activities they listed as enjoyable. This was also a two-item, seven-point likert scale. The items were "I really enjoy these activities," and "I really like these activities" (M=4.49, α=.98).

Time Measures. Time pressure was measured by the sum of three items, "I feel a lot of time pressure in my life," "I really feel the pressure of time passing in my life," and "I am always in a hurry." Subjects answered on a seven-point likert scale anchored by "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" (M=4.98, α=.80). Time deprivation was assessed with items measuring subjects' perceived adequacy of available free time. It was measured as the sum of three items answered on a seven-point scale, and reverse scored. The reverse scored items were "I have enough free time," "I don't need any more free time," and "I feel as if I have all the free time I need" (M=4.68, α=.86). Lastly, perception of free time was measured with a single-item asking subjects to fill in, "On average, I have __ hours of free time each week."

The dimensionality of the items measuring time pressure and time deprivation was examined through confirmatory factor analysis to assess discriminate validity. A two factor model that explained 75 percent of the variance had the best fit (χ^2, df4=2.86, p=.59). Using varimax rotation, all time pressure questions loaded cleanly on one factor, with rotated loadings ranging from .80 to .93. All time deprivation questions loaded cleanly on a second factor, with loadings ranging from .78 to .87.

TABLE 1

Perceived Free Time, Time Pressure, and Time Deprivation by Enjoyment of and Compulsion to Engage in the Activity

	Enjoyable		Not Enjoyable		
	Compulsory	Not Compulsory	Compulsory	Not Compulsory	Control Condition
Perceived Free Time (hrs./week)	11.33	11.40	18.78	12.57	16.72
Time Pressure	5.63	6.07	4.04	5.29	4.59
Time Deprivation	4.78	5.23	4.44	5.19	4.63

Emotions. The survey instrument also asked subjects to think about their free time and respond to 16 emotion items drawn from the emotion inventories of Richins (1997) and Burke and Edell (1989) and modified for this study. A seven-point scale anchored by "strongly felt" and "not felt at all" measured each emotion. Cluster analysis identified five emotion clusters. These were happiness (M=5.50, a=.86), anger (M=2.35, α=.90), embarrassment (M=1.74, α=.79), desire (M=2.81, α=.74), and envy (M=2.06, α=.81). Regret and longing loaded on the factor for desire.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks. Manipulation checks confirmed that the levels of enjoyment and perceptions of free choice varied between the conditions. The subjects in the two "enjoyable" conditions liked the activities they listed more than did those in the "not enjoyable" conditions ($X_{enjoyable}$=6.30, $X_{not\ enjoyable}$=2.57, t=15.64, p<.01). Similarly, subjects in the two "compulsory" conditions indicated they "must do these activities" more than did subjects in the two "not compulsory" conditions ($X_{compulsory}$=5.80, $X_{not\ compulsory}$=4.04, t=6.25, p<.01).

Time Measures. Results presented in Table 1 indicate that time-related measures were affected by the manipulations of free choice (compulsory versus not compulsory) and enjoyment (enjoyable versus not enjoyable). There was also an interaction effect for free choice and enjoyment on the amount of free time perceived (F (1,130)=6.59, p<.01), and a main effect for free choice on time deprivation (F (1,130)=4.99, p<.01).

Subjects in the "compulsory/not enjoyable" activity condition perceived that they had the most free time available ($M_{compulsory/not\ enjoyable}$=18.78, $M_{not\ compulsory/not\ enjoyable}$=12.57, t=2.84, p<.01). In contrast, the amount of perceived free time was lowest when subjects thought of enjoyable activities, regardless of whether the activities were compulsory or not ($M_{compulsory/enjoyable}$=11.33 hours, $M_{not\ compulsory/enjoyable}$=11.40 hours, t=.06, p>.05). Thus, thinking about enjoyable activities resulted in subjects describing themselves as having less free time.

There was a significant positive relationship between thinking about enjoyable activities and feelings of time pressure (r=.24, p<.01). Results for time pressure show an interaction effect between free choice and enjoyment (F (1,130)=6.62, p<.01). Reported time pressure was lowest in the "compulsory/not enjoyable" activity condition ($M_{compulsory/not\ enjoyable}$=4.04, $M_{not\ compulsory/not\ enjoyable}$=5.29, t=-2.91, p<.01) and highest in the "not compulsory/enjoyable" activity condition ($M_{not\ compulsory/enjoyable}$=6.07, $M_{compulsory/enjoyable}$=5.63, t=2.59, p<.05).

Freedom of choice impacted time deprivation. Subjects reported higher levels of time deprivation when they thought of activities that were not compulsory than when they thought of those that were, regardless of how much they enjoyed them ($M_{not\ compulsory}$=5.22, $M_{compulsory}$=4.61, t=2.97, p<.01).

There were also significant differences between the experimental groups and the control condition. As compared to those in the control group, subjects in the "not compulsory/enjoyable" condition reported less free time ($M_{not\ compulsory/enjoyable}$=11.40, $M_{control}$=16.72, t=3.18, p<.01); more time pressure ($M_{not\ compulsory/enjoyable}$=6.07, $M_{control}$=4.59, t=6.54, p<.01); and more time deprivation ($M_{not\ compulsory/enjoyable}$=5.23, $M_{control}$=4.63, t=2.40, p<.05). In contrast, those in the "compulsory/not enjoyable" condition reported more free time ($M_{compulsory/not\ enjoyable}$=18.78, $M_{control}$=16.72, t=3.00, p<.01); less time pressure ($M_{compulsory/not\ enjoyable}$=4.04, $M_{control}$=4.59, t=2.17, p<.05); and less time deprivation ($M_{compulsory/not\ enjoyable}$=4.44, $M_{control}$=4.63, t=3.35, p<.01).

Emotions. Regression analysis results suggest that desire may be an important element of both time deprivation and time pressure. The study found a positive relationship between the emotion of desire (which represented a cluster of reported emotions including desire, regret, and longing) and both time deprivation (B=.24, t=2.64, p<.01) and time pressure (B=.28, t=3.11, p<.01). There was also a positive relationship between embarrassment and time deprivation (B=.25, t=2.72, p<.01). No significant effects were found between the other emotions and the time measures.

Discussion

These results are provocative for several reasons. First, contrary to popular perception, it was found that it was not the compulsory activities such as work, chores, errands, and other obligatory tasks that led subjects in this study to perceive themselves as time deprived or time pressured. Rather, subjects instructed to list "compulsory/not enjoyable" activities indicated feeling less time pressured, less time deprived, and as feeling they have more free time than did subjects in other conditions. In contrast, when subjects thought of leisure ("not compulsory") and "enjoyable" activities, they reported more time pressure, more time deprivation, and less free time. Thus, the findings suggest it may be

leisure options, not work, that most contribute to perceptions of time poverty.

The results also suggest that the abundance of choice experienced by consumers in affluent societies is not an unmitigated blessing. Though the number of options for how consumers may spend time has expanded, time remains finite. Thus, whether or not consumers today spend more hours working than in the past (e.g., see Schor 1991 versus Robinson and Godbey 1997), the abundance of leisure choices may itself be enough to promote the feelings of time pressure and time deprivation so commonly experienced in affluent societies.

Finally, the results of this study suggest that emotions, especially desire, may play a role in time deprivation and felt time pressure. Higher levels of desire (which includes elements of regret and longing) were positively related to both time deprivation and time pressure. This supports the idea that the time scarcity felt by consumers is related to increased choice in terms of desirable activities. Although the effect of desire on perceptions of the amount of free time was not significant in this study, desire did seem to affect how consumers perceived the impact of time on their lives.

Conclusions and Limitations

These results have implications for satisfaction with leisure activities (Hawes et al. 1975). They suggest that more is not necessarily better. Perhaps fewer and simpler pursuits lead to less time pressure and more feelings of satisfaction with time spent.

It has long been observed that people living in large metropolitan areas seem to feel busier and appear to have less time for social relations than do those living in smaller communities. Perhaps this perception is related not solely to work and other obligated activities but also to the greater number of entertainment or leisure choices available in these areas. Similarly, anecdotes abound about technology speeding the pace of life in affluent societies, but it is hard to believe that consumers in technologically advanced societies have less free time than those struggling to survive in subsistence or agrarian economies. Rather, it may be suggested that increasing affluence in societies produces stress as consumers endeavor to experience all the desirable choices for how they may spend time. In discussing the very wealthy, (Aldrich 2000, pp. 67-68) noted that an abundance of choices does not always produce positive outcomes in peoples' lives.

> With lots and lots of money, all options are available ... always having the power to choose something else, to move on, they never have to pay any price for what they've chosen... Slowly, but surely, however, a huge price emerges from all these ephemeral, evanescent encounters with the world, all these consequences escaped and forgone. By degrees, they become people who do not know themselves–their limits, strengths, capacities, loves, hates: people, therefore, who lead profoundly restless lives and end them, too often in futility, fatigue, and frustration.

There are some limitations to the findings presented. First, the manipulations were simply assessments of whether the activities were compulsory and enjoyable. The study did not measure prior experience or the time frame of the activities. Future research could look at whether it matters if a consumer has prior experience with an activity. Specifically, is the activity something the consumer has tried in the past and liked or disliked? Or is it something that person hopes to do in the future? Research could also look at whether the time frame for activities (e.g., five years, five weeks, five days) will make a difference as to how much time pressure is elicited.

Second, the study was done with students in a classroom setting. Due to age or to the relatively unscheduled nature of student life, subjects may have had a different perception of time and obligations than they will have later in life. McGuiggen (1999) has shown that personality and demographic factors affect leisure preference. Perhaps they can affect the time factors examined in this study as well. Replication across a broader range of ages and life experiences is therefore suggested.

Third, the study was not able to examine the process by which type of time use affects time pressure, time deprivation, and the perception of free time. Future research could benefit from collecting verbal protocols and using these to examine subjects' thought processes in each of the conditions.

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