

How do consumers estimate a good time?

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Consumers estimate they'll spend more time enjoying activities when the tasks are broken down into components, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. But using the same process for an unpleasant event decreases time estimates.

"It has been well established that predicted consumption time plays a central role in consumers' evaluations and purchase decisions," write authors Claire I. Tsai and Min Zhao (both University of Toronto). "If [consumers](#) foresee spending a lot of time using a product or service (such as gym membership or [cable TV](#)), they are more likely to purchase it."

In three experiments with 500 participants the authors found that consumers' predicted consumption time was influenced by their assessment of the consumption experience (positive or negative) and the way the experience was represented. "Unpacking a pleasurable event into several subactivities increases the time consumers expect to spend on the event," the authors write.

When consumers face an unpleasant event, the more constituent components they consider, the greater displeasure they expect. "People have a lay belief that they will spend more time on pleasant events than unpleasant ones, so the changes in predicted enjoyment or displeasure caused by unpacking systematically influence the amount of time consumers expect to spend using a product or service," the authors write.

In one experiment, the researchers asked participants to predict how

much time they would spend on an overarching event—attending social activities throughout a weekend. The event consisted of a blind date, a birthday party, and a phone conversation. The weekend was described as pleasant or unpleasant and it was presented either in one paragraph or three bullet points. Half the participants made a single time estimate for the overarching event, and the rest made separate time estimates for the individual components.

"When the event was described as pleasant, unpacking increased the predicted enjoyment, which in turn increased predicted consumption time," the authors write. "However, when the event was described as unpleasant, unpacking increased the predicted displeasure and thus reduced time estimates."

More information: Claire I. Tsai and Min Zhao. "Predicting Consumption Time: The Role of Event Valence and Unpacking." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2011. ejcr.org

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