

A Liberating-Engagement Theory of Consumer Fun

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The experience of fun plays a major role in the consumer society. Drawing on a grounded theory approach, we advance a psychological theory of consumer fun. Through an integration of in-depth interviews, narrative analyses, controlled experiments, structural equation modeling, and a photo-ethnography, our multi-method investigation makes four main contributions. First, we show that the experience of fun rests on the combination of two psychological pillars: hedonic engagement and a sense of liberation. Fun is an experience of liberating engagement—a temporary release from psychological restriction via a hedonically engaging activity. Second, we identify four situational facilitators—novelty, social connectedness, spontaneity, and spatial/temporal boundedness—that promote the experience of fun through their effects on hedonic engagement and the sense of liberation. Third, we show that although the psychology of fun is not consumption specific, there is an intimate connection between fun and consumption. Finally, we clarify the relation and distinction between fun and happiness. We discuss implications for our understanding of consumption experiences, business practices related to the engineering of fun, and consumers' own pursuits of fun and happiness.

Keywords: fun, happiness, consumer experience, multimethod, hedonic consumption, pleasure, emotion, affect, leisure, entertainment

From Disney to Dave & Buster's, from Las Vegas to the video gaming industry, large sectors of the economy

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Editor: Linda L. Price

Associate Editor: Tandy Chalmers Thomas

Advance Access publication 27 August 2021

revolve around the marketing of fun experiences. For example, in 2019, Disney's various amusement parks attracted more than 150 million visitors worldwide ([Disney: The Walt Disney Company 2020](#)), whereas Las Vegas, casually known as "Sin City," attracted more than 40 million visitors, each spending upward of \$1,000 per trip ([GLS Research 2020](#)). In 2020, the value of the global video games reached almost \$160 billion ([Newzoo 2020](#)), and the game arcade/restaurant chain Dave & Buster's, alone, generated more than \$1.2 billion in revenues ([Dave & Buster's Entertainment, Inc. 2020](#)). These companies, destinations, and industries would likely not exist without a considerable level of demand among consumers for fun experiences. What, then, makes an experience fun for a consumer?

Most people have an intuitive understanding of what having fun is. The *Oxford American Dictionary* defines fun as "[1] enjoyment, amusement, or lighthearted pleasure; [2] a source of this (enjoyment, amusement, or lighthearted pleasure); [3] playful behavior or good humor; and [4] behavior or an activity that is intended purely for amusement and should not be interpreted as having serious or

malicious purposes.” Similarly, *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (3rd ed.) defines fun as “[1a] lively, joyous play or playfulness; amusement, sport, recreation, etc.; [1b] enjoyment or pleasure; [2] a source or cause of amusement, or merriment.” Therefore, having fun can be broadly defined as a pleasurable experience characterized by subjective feelings of enjoyment and amusement, often accompanied by a playful mindset. This general definition is intuitively appealing as a surface-level description of this type of experience but does not address the psychological underpinnings of fun as an experience. In other words, it does not explain *why* consumers find certain experiences more fun than others, nor does it identify fundamental drivers of the experience of having fun. Understanding these psychological underpinnings has important implications for businesses that rely on the engineering of consumer fun for value creation (e.g., game developers, amusement park designers, party organizers). It also has implications for consumers interested in creating fun experiences for themselves and/or others.

The purpose of our research is therefore to develop a theory of the underlying psychology of fun with the particular goal of clarifying how fun arises in consumer experiences. Through a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), we advance a novel theory that conceptualizes the experience of fun as emanating from a combination of two primary psychological pillars: (i) hedonic engagement, which refers to active immersion in a pleasurable experience, and (ii) a sense of liberation, which refers to momentary release from psychological restrictions. In addition to uncovering these two primary pillars of the experience of fun, our theory identifies several situational factors that facilitate the experience of fun through their effects on hedonic engagement and/or sense of liberation. Although the experience of fun, hence our theory, is not consumption specific, our theory has strong applicability to consumer behavior. In fact, a main empirical finding is that a large proportion of fun experiences, if not a majority, involve some form of consumption.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FUN: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Before we turn to the development of our theory of the psychology of fun, in this section, we lay down some conceptual foundations on which our theory will build. We first retrace the historical development of the contemporary notion of fun. We then examine the relation between fun and consumption. We end by clarifying the conceptual distinction between having fun and being happy.

The Contemporary Concept of Fun

Although most people have an intuitive understanding of the phenomenon, we are not aware of any accepted formal

definition of what having fun is. The few scholars who have studied the concept of fun note the difficulty of formally defining it (Blythe and Hassenzahl 2018; Fincham 2016; McManus and Furnham 2010; Podilchak 1991). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “fun” in the sense of “light-hearted pleasure, enjoyment, or amusement; boisterous joviality or merrymaking; entertainment” first appeared in the English language in the 18th century, and its use as an adjective (e.g., “this would be fun”; “this is a fun party”) only emerged in the 19th century. The relatively late entry of this term in the English vocabulary suggests that fun, as we understand it today, is a rather recent phenomenon (see Wolfenstein 2010 for a related point).

The emergence of fun as a societal phenomenon appears to be linked to two historical developments. The first is the Industrial Revolution, which created a strong demarcation between work and leisure. According to scholars in sociology, a societal demand for fun can be seen as a response to the rapid industrialization of the late 18th to mid-19th centuries in which increasingly large segments of the population were submitted to the rigors of industrial work (Blythe and Hassenzahl 2018; Kelly 1987; Thompson 1963). Due to the rigid and monotonous nature of industrial work (Roy 1959), a large-scale confinement of the population to this type of labor set the stage for a widespread demand for easily consumable, often coarse forms of entertainment, especially among the working class (Thompson 1963). The second major historical development that contributed to the emergence of fun as a societal phenomenon is the establishment of mandatory schooling for children in much of Europe and North America in the mid- to late-19th century (Fincham 2016). With formal schooling, children’s daily activities became more regimented and focused on “serious” and standardized forms of learning (Gray 2013). This added to the strict demarcation between “work” and “play” introduced earlier by the Industrial Revolution. For children, playtime (vs. study time) became more and more restricted and compartmentalized within scheduled parts of the day (e.g., recess) and relegated to specific spaces (e.g., school yards). Just as the drudgery of repetitive industrial work created a demand for entertainment among the working class, the austerity and tedium of school days created a parallel need for fun playtime among children (Wolfenstein 2010). Therefore, fun, as it is commonly understood today, emerged as a special form of pleasure that people derive from various activities—typically leisure and entertainment—that they engage in in response to the increased regimentation of their lives.

The Relation between Fun and Consumption

Historically, consumption has always played an important role in experiences of fun. For example, the history of the British working class indicates that from its beginning, the toils of the Industrial Revolution were regularly

compensated for by bouts of fun experiences in which the consumption of various goods and services played a major role: "... in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the working man's year was made up of cycles of hardship and short commons, punctuated with 'feast' days when drink and meat were more plentiful, luxuries like apples and ribbons were bought for the children, dancing, courtship, convivial visiting and sports took place" (Thompson [1963], 403–404). Not surprisingly, the major role that consumption plays in people's experiences of fun rapidly led to the emergence of various marketplace players whose businesses revolved around fulfilling the consumption needs of fun-seekers, including taverns, dance halls, circuses, traveling fairs, sports venues, and spirit manufacturers (Clarke and Critcher 1985; Rojek 1995).

The commercialization of fun further expanded in the 20th century, especially after World War II. This trend was fueled by several societal factors, including an increase in leisure time and disposable income (Fincham 2016), a collective rebound from the deprivations of the Great Depression and sacrifices of WWII (Bryant and Forsyth 2005), and a greater cultural acceptance of fun as a morally legitimate pursuit (Wolfenstein 2010). To this list of societal factors, we would add two marketplace factors: the rise of Hollywood and the advent of television. The former enabled mass production and distribution of a popular form of entertainment, and it spurred the emergence of theme parks (e.g., Disneyland in the 1950s; Universal Studios in the 1960s). Similarly, the advent of television provided an accessible and inexpensive form of entertainment and enabled the amplification of other types of fun entertainment such as popular music (e.g., 1950s rock and roll) and professional sports (e.g., NFL, MLB).

Hence, there is an undeniable aspect of consumption in many experiences of fun. In fact, as reported later in this article, one of our main empirical findings is that there is a strong connection between experiences of fun and consumption. However, we do not believe that consumption-based experiences of fun are fundamentally different from those derived from nonconsumption activities. For example, at its core, the psychological experience of fun while playing laser tag with friends at a commercial venue is not that different from the experience of fun while playing hide-and-seek with one's children at home. Similarly, the fun that one gets from attending a standup comedy show needs not be materially different from the fun one gets from engaging in silly banter with colleagues at work (Roy 1959). Therefore, rather than conceptualizing having fun as a consumption-specific phenomenon, we conceptualize it as a more general phenomenon that happens to be often situated within the realm of consumption.

Distinction between Fun and Happiness

Because having fun is a subjective experience with a clearly pleasant emotional quality, it is useful to reflect on

how it relates to the experience of happiness, which, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, refers to "a feeling of great pleasure, contentment, joy, etc." We focus on happiness as a momentary affective experience that is emotional and akin to joy (e.g., "I am so happy to see you!"), as discussed for instance in Mogilner, Aaker, and Kamvar (2012), as opposed to a more abstract and permanent state of well-being (e.g., "I am happy with my life"), as discussed for instance in Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol (2015).

Having fun and feeling happy are pleasant, momentary experiences that are affect rich. The two tend to be correlated in everyday life (e.g., feeling happy at a birthday party that is really fun). The experience of fun is indeed a positive predictor of momentary happiness, as shall be shown in study 3 (see also McManus and Furnham 2010 for related results). However, as summarized in table 1, there are notable conceptual differences between the two types of experiences.

The first distinction is that whereas having fun is a subjective assessment of one's experience ("I am having fun"; "[what I am experiencing] is so much fun"), being happy or joyful is a response to a specific stimulus such as an object (e.g., I am so happy with my new phone), an outcome (e.g., "I'm really happy that our team won"), or a situation (e.g., "I am so happy to be here"). Whereas having fun pertains only to the subjective experience itself, being happy is typically *about* something that is separate from the subjective experience. Second, the experience of happiness is usually related to a preexisting goal or expectation about the stimulus object. For example, being happy that one's team won implies a desire or expectation, whether implicit or explicit, that the team would win. In contrast, having fun is less dependent on the fulfillment of overt goals and expectations. Third, the integral connection between having fun and its underlying experience creates natural temporal boundaries in subjective experiences of fun, which are inherently ephemeral (Fincham 2016). Because experiences of fun are typically contained within a certain activity (e.g., attending a party, playing a board game, visiting a theme park), the activity itself generally sets strong outer bounds on the onset and conclusion of the experience of having fun. By comparison, feelings of happiness can be longer-lasting and linger past the boundaries of a given experience to the extent that thoughts about the happiness-inducing stimulus persist (e.g., still feeling happy that the team won well after the game is over). Fourth, having fun is typically anchored on concrete personal experiences (e.g., having fun bowling with friends or on a thrill ride in an amusement park), whereas happiness can be elicited both by stimuli that are concrete (e.g., receiving a beautiful gift) and by stimuli that are more abstract (e.g., learning about an impending job promotion). A final distinction is that for fun to arise, the experience does not have to be meaningful (Blythe and Hassenzahl 2018), whereas

TABLE 1
CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN FUN AND MOMENTARY HAPPINESS

Having fun	Being happy/joyful
Subjective assessment of a personal experience	Appraisal of an outcome or situation
Lower dependence on the fulfillment of goals and expectations	Strong dependence on fulfillment of explicit or implicit expectations or goals
Subjective experience temporally contained within boundaries of a particular activity; more ephemeral	Tends to linger, as thoughts about the eliciting stimulus persist
Anchored on concrete personal experiences	Can be elicited by more abstract stimuli
Meaningfulness less important	Can be amplified by meaningfulness

meaning often plays a larger role in experiences of happiness (e.g., happiness from graduating from college; happiness of soon becoming a parent). The role that meaningfulness plays in the experience of happiness is often referred to as eudemonic happiness (Ryan and Deci 2001).

In summary, although having fun and feeling happy are pleasurable, affect-rich momentary experiences that may co-occur in everyday life, the two types of experiences are conceptually distinct in important respects. However, given the close relation between the experience of having fun and feelings of happiness, the latter provides a compelling control condition for isolating the unique drivers of fun experiences.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

Besides the fact that there is no agreed-upon conceptual definition of the experience of fun—beyond the standard dictionary definitions—a striking aspect of the prior literature on fun is its sparsity. While there is considerable literature on concepts related to fun—including play (Bateson 2014; Piaget 1951), happiness (Gilovich et al. 2015; Mogilner et al. 2012; Ryan and Deci 2001), pleasure and hedonic consumption (Alba and Williams 2013; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982), humor (McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and McGraw 2016), and flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990)—the literature on fun itself is much more limited. Some of this work appears in sociology in relation to the study of leisure (Fincham 2016; Podilchak 1991; Rojek 1995; Wolfenstein 2010), as well as in the field of human–computer interaction, especially in relation to gaming (Koster 2014). Within the psychology literature, studies directly related to fun, as conceptualized in this research, are almost nonexistent (see McManus and Furnham 2010; Reis, O’Keefe, and Lane 2017, for exceptions).

To address this gap in the literature, we undertook an extensive multimethod investigation of the experience of having fun in people’s everyday lives, with the goal of uncovering its fundamental psychological pillars. Our investigation combines a wide range of methodologies including in-person depth interviews, qualitative analyses of

written narratives, structural equation modeling of measured constructs, experimental comparisons between fun and happiness, and a photo-ethnography of experiences of fun. Through a process of abduction (Haig 2005), this combination of methodologies enables us to advance an original theory of the psychology of having fun. In most of our studies, participants were asked to reflect on and share an experience in which they “really had fun.” A focus on “really fun” experiences was intended to promote the retrieval and sharing of prototypical experiences of fun, thus enabling an analysis of the essence of the phenomenon.

In study 1, we apply a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to a large volume of qualitative data consisting of in-depth interviews and personal narratives. From this discovery-oriented analysis, we uncover two fundamental psychological pillars of the experience of having fun, which form the core of our proposed theory. In addition, we identify four situational factors that facilitate the experience of having fun through their effects on the two fundamental pillars.

In study 2, we develop measures of central concepts of our emerging theory and then formally test this theory through structural equation modeling. Study 3 uses an experimental approach to further test our theory by comparing experiences of having fun with experiences of happiness. In study 4, we again used an experimental approach to investigate the distinct connection between fun and consumption, relative to other experiences that served as controls. Finally, in study 5, in partnership with a consumer-research startup, we conducted a photo-ethnography of experiences of fun. This study enables us to triangulate the results of our other studies with data that are not narratively mediated.

STUDY 1: UNCOVERING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING OF FUN

The first phase of our investigation focused on an exploratory analysis of numerous lived experiences of fun, with the goal of building an emerging theory of the psychological meaning of having fun. The data for this analysis were generated through individual depth interviews and written personal narratives, the former providing greater

depth of content and the latter greater breadth of experiences.

Methodology

Depth Interviews. A total of 21 depth interviews were conducted in the phenomenological tradition (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), with semi-structured questions with a reflexive focus, tailored to each interviewee (Arsel 2017). Collection and analyses of interview data occurred sequentially, with each interview serving as a guide for the next, until we reached theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The interviewees were recruited through a combination of personal connections and solicitations from the university's behavioral lab. Initially, interviewees were sampled based on convenience. Subsequently, interviewees were sampled in a more purposeful manner in order to explore and challenge emerging concepts and dimensions (Becker 1998). As a compensation for their participation, interviewees received either \$20 or a small token of appreciation (e.g., a university-themed mug). The first author conducted all interviews at one of two sites: New York City and Las Vegas. New York City was selected because of the diversity of its population and its accessibility to the researchers, whereas Las Vegas was selected because of its status as a dedicated center of fun and entertainment. The list with a summary description of the interviewees is provided in table 2. One interviewee was a homeless individual. The value of representing her voice and life experience arose in response to emerging themes in some of the initial interviews. Consistent with IRB guidelines, special care was taken in recruiting and interviewing this person, given her status as a member of a vulnerable population (see details in web appendix 1).

All interviews in New York City were conducted on university premises (e.g., offices, classrooms, conference rooms), whereas interviews in Las Vegas took place in various convenient locations (e.g., café/restaurant, interviewee's home, office, near-empty casino floor). Interviews were conducted over a span of ten months, each lasting from 45 minutes to 2 hours. After brief introductions and rapport building, the interviews began with a general question to open up detailed narratives of fun experiences (e.g., "Can you tell me about a recent experience when you really had fun?"). Participants had no difficulty recognizing and elaborating on "having fun" as a distinct experience. Almost all narrated more than one account of fun experience, often transitioning seamlessly from one story to another due to overlapping topics in the narratives. Participants were encouraged to articulate contextual details of the experience and to clarify any abstract concepts they brought up (e.g., "What did you mean by 'total abandon' when you were describing your experience?"). Some shared how their current situation did not allow for much fun in their lives; in such cases, interviewees were

probed to elaborate on their circumstances and what hindered them from experiencing fun. At the end of the session, they were debriefed and thanked. Except for four interviews conducted in a working environment (e.g., casino), all interviews were recorded and transcribed (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Written Personal Narratives. In addition to the depth interviews, we collected 145 written personal narratives of fun experiences from US-based Amazon MTurk workers ($M_{age} = 35.3$; female = 51.7%). While more limited in depth than individual interviews, these narratives enabled us to examine lived experiences of fun from a broader range of respondents across the United States (see web appendix). These narratives were gathered over two rounds of data collection conducted over a span of eight months. Participants were first asked to write a minimum of 1,000 characters in response to the question: "Can you tell me about a recent experience when you really had fun? Please elaborate with details in your response, just like telling a detailed story to someone else." On the next page, they were prompted to specify aspects of the experience that were particularly fun ("what are the specific things that made this particular experience especially fun?"). Participants wrote on average 322 words.

Iterative Analysis. Study 1's data thus consisted of shared experiences from a total of 166 informants: 21 interviewees and 145 survey respondents. Combining the transcribed individual interviews and the written narratives, the data totaled approximately 70,000 words' worth of life experience on fun. Following grounded-theory procedures, we analyzed these data in an iterative process to continuously modify and develop our theoretical framework. The authors met on numerous occasions to discuss narrative interpretations of recurring patterns and topics within and between transcripts, as the first author maintained a log of theoretical memos. Throughout the analytical process, emerging categories in the data were cross-referenced with concepts from relevant literatures (Spiggle 1994), including consumer behavior and marketing, social psychology, developmental psychology, sociology, and philosophy. After multiple rounds of circling back and forth among the interview transcripts, written narratives, and the pertinent literatures, we settled on a core set of psychological concepts that appear to underlie the experience of fun. Consistent with Fournier and Mick (1999), the concepts and insights we identified were triangulated through further discussions with qualified informants, including colleagues (business and psychology professors and doctoral students) and professionals working in fun-related industries (e.g., the owner of a Virtual Reality game room and an event manager at a major hotel in Las Vegas).

TABLE 2
DEPTH-INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Cultural background	Location
Elsa	Late 20s	F	Preschool Teacher	North American (Black)	New York City
Carl	Early 30s	M	Musician	Central American (Puerto Rican)	New York City
Peggie	Early 20s	F	Undergrad Student	North American (Iranian)	New York City
Stan	Mid 30s	M	Freelancer	North American (White)	New York City
Meg	Mid 50s	F	Professor (English)	North American (White)	New York City
Greg	Early 70s	M	Retired Teacher	North American (Greek)	New York City
Mac	Early 30s	M	Grad Student	Asian American (Korean)	New York City
Amy	Early 40s	F	Office Admin	North American (Latin)	New York City
Ann	Early 40s	F	Homeless	North American (Black)	New York City
Laura	Early 20s	F	Grad Student	North American (White)	New York City
Annie	Early 20s	F	Grad Student	Asian American (Indian)	New York City
Ellen	Late teens	F	Undergrad Student	North American (White)	New York City
Wes	Late teens	M	Undergrad Student	African (Nigerian)	New York City
Ben	Early 20s	M	Undergrad Student	North American (White)	New York City
Drew	Early 20s	M	Undergrad Student	North American (White)	New York City
Jay	Late 20s	F	Marketing Admin	Asian American (Korean)	Las Vegas
Roger	Mid 30s	M	Sushi Chef	Asian American (Chinese)	Las Vegas
Jason	Early 20s	M	Photographer/Editor	North American (German)	Las Vegas
Dan	Early 30s	M	Office Admin	Asian (Korean)	Las Vegas
Chang	Mid 50s	F	Casino Dealer	Asian American (Chinese)	Las Vegas
Beth	Mid 60s	F	Casino Dealer	North American (White)	Las Vegas

Emerging Theory: Core Pillars of Fun

With our data covering more than 150 episodes of fun across a wide range of settings and contexts (e.g., visits to amusement parks, travel to other cities, get-togethers in bars, birthday parties, Halloween activities, attending sports events, shooting rounds at a gun range, going to the movies, shopping for pleasure, going on a cruise, going to a casino), the main finding of our grounded theory analysis is the identification of two recurring themes that emerged throughout the data. We theorize that these two themes, namely, a state of hedonic engagement combined with a sense of liberation, are the fundamental psychological pillars of the experience of fun.

Hedonic Engagement. Most episodes of fun shared by our informants featured an active involvement and immersion into an activity that is intended for pure enjoyment. By “active involvement and immersion,” we mean that the person is fully engaged psychologically in a particular activity (e.g., playing video games, exploring the streets of a foreign city); and by “intended for pure enjoyment,” we mean that this engagement is primarily motivated by the enjoyment of the activity itself (e.g., the sheer fun of playing, the pleasure of exploring), rather than by some external motive (e.g., improving one’s ranking in competitive gaming, searching for a particular retail store in order to buy something). We refer to this psychological immersion for pure enjoyment as “hedonic engagement.”

For example, a 39-year-old female respondent from California described her fun experience as follows: “My friends and I decided to try one of those ‘escape room’

things and wow it was so much fun! We had to work together to solve puzzles to get out of each room. Nothing was TOO hard, and the stories surrounding each piece were really engaging.” A 43-year-old female from North Carolina explicitly identified the role of engagement in how much fun she had at a Renaissance Fair: “It was fun because you get to play pretend for a little while, and the performers encourage you to interact with them in character and play around with you and your responses. . . . It’s a lot of fun to be immersed (mostly) in this fake other time period and just play around like you are a kid playing pretend.”

The concept of hedonic engagement bears some similarities to the notion of “flow,” which Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 6) defines as “the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake. . . . (Flow) happens when psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action.” Like the notion of flow, the experience of hedonic engagement entails a deep psychological immersion into an activity, usually accompanied by the loss of one’s sense of time. For example, a 26-year-old female from Kansas shared the following account: “A couple days ago I had two of my oldest friends visit for an early Christmas. . . . We immediately started to catch up as we cooked in the kitchen. . . . We talked about politics and other current events, told each other what was happening at our jobs, and reminisced about high school. Afterward we played a couple card games and laughed so hard we cried. The time went by so quickly.” Another respondent, a 29-

year-old male from Texas, shared a similar experience while playing video games: “I rarely enjoy video games anymore because of how busy I am. But this weekend I had a lot of free time available so I could relax and just go all out . . . After playing for a couple of hours of that game, I switched to Skyrim, which I hadn’t played since last year. . . stayed up very late on Saturday just exploring and relaxing. Eventually though, it was about 3am and I was falling asleep on my keyboard.”

There is, however, a qualitative difference between the hedonic engagement observed in typical experiences of fun and the type of flow described by Csikszentmihalyi. As noted above, the standard notion of flow is predicated on the successful application of particular skills in the pursuit of specific goals (e.g., having a seamless piano performance, executing a perfect gymnastics routine), which requires a great deal of concentration. In contrast, as illustrated by the two preceding accounts, skills and goals are not necessarily important determinants of people’s hedonic engagement in experiences of fun. In fact, the active application of skills in the pursuit of specific goals can be detrimental to the experience of fun. A classic example is when games that are meant to be fun become overly competitive. One interviewee, Laura, a senior undergraduate student, described a time when she played Mario Kart with her boyfriend and his friends: “I was playing with three boys, three of whom are very competitive, not necessarily competitive people, but they have this characteristic to goad, like ‘ha, ha, you did so bad,’ or whatever. So, it ruined it completely for me. I was not having a good time. After the first hour—and I was so prepared to have fun—it just became awful. I was in the worst mood for five hours—yes, I played for five hours because I wanted to win so bad. The more I couldn’t win, the angrier I got, and I know it sounds super-trivial, but it just made me so aware that adding people who are making it ‘into something’ makes it completely not fun anymore.” Further evidence that the pursuit of specific goals tends to hinder the experience of fun was shared by two casino dealers interviewed in Las Vegas who both indicated that customers who play blackjack at small-bet tables generally have more fun than those playing the same game at higher-stakes tables. Higher stakes presumably detract from the experience of fun by elevating the importance of winning as opposed to merely enjoying the experience itself.

In his earlier work, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) himself drew a distinction between the classic notion of flow that is at the center of his theorizing and the type of psychological engagement that is at work in experiences of fun. Csikszentmihalyi used the phrases “deep flow” to refer to the former and “shallow flow” to refer to the latter, which he dismissed as having secondary status from a positive psychology standpoint. The distinction between our notion of hedonic engagement and Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of genuine flow parallels a distinction sometimes made

between “lower” forms of leisure (e.g., having a drink at a bar, dancing in a nightclub, watching a boxing fight) and “higher” forms of leisure (e.g., painting, ballroom dancing, attending opera performances; Blythe and Hassenzahl 2018; Clarke and Critcher 1985). It also parallels the conceptual distinction that we offered earlier between the experience of having fun, for which meaningfulness tends to be less important, and the experience of being happy, for which meaningfulness tends to play a greater role. Attending a live performance of Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” can be absorbing, fulfilling, thoroughly enjoyable, and make someone happy, without necessarily being fun, whereas watching a Marvel movie can be really fun, without being meaningful and fulfilling.

While some level of hedonic engagement is necessary in the experience of fun, our analyses revealed that it is not sufficient. A second psychological pillar of fun repeatedly emerged from our data: a sense of liberation.

Sense of Liberation. A major recurring theme across numerous informant accounts of fun experiences is a sense of liberation, which we conceptualize as a temporary release from various forms of internalized restrictions, such as professional obligations, parental duties, schoolwork, financial constraints, and a range of self-imposed disciplines (e.g., diet, self-control of indulgent behavior, self-monitoring in social settings). When describing experiences of fun, informants frequently used words and phrases such as “free,” “carefree,” “let loose,” “loosen up,” “wild,” “going all out,” “feeling like a kid,” and “total abandon,” all of which denote a perceived sense of freedom. For example, Greg, a retired teacher in his early 70s, explained how he associates having fun with being carefree, which he illustrated by recalling his many dancing experiences at nightclubs in New York: “What makes it [dancing] fun? Well, it’s a total abandon. You get inspired by the music and jump up and down. Had you seen me in my youth! . . . Total abandon—like you let go. Your worries, you let go of everything. You get up there and dance.”

Interestingly, many accounts also used words and phrases such as “a break from,” “being away from,” “get away,” “forget about,” and “escape,” which additionally imply that fun is not just a general feeling of freedom; there is *something* that people feel free *from* in experiences of fun (see Arnould and Price 1993 for related observations in the context of whitewater rafting). To capture this notion that experiences of having fun rest on perceptions of *freedom from something*, we use the term “liberation,” which is the second major pillar of fun. For instance, Meg, an English professor in her 50s from New York, describes her two-night trip to Boston as a particularly fun experience. During her regular schedule, Meg feels pressured by the burdens of full-time teaching at work and parenting of her teenage daughter at home. When she had the opportunity to travel alone for a conference, she spent time going to her

favorite antique stores in order to be “in a different place where I don’t have to think about the ordinary everyday stuff of my life ... like laundry and dishes, different emails, whatever. Getting outside of my self is so much fun for me.” Though Meg expressed great appreciation for her profession and for parenting, she appeared to construe her most fun experiences as temporary releases from those meaningful commitments. Similarly, a 34-year-old male respondent from Michigan describes the experience of attending an NHL hockey game with several of his friends: “Everyone is married and has kids and it is almost impossible for everyone to get together. But, nobody brought their wives or kids and it was a fun time.” Here again, a temporary release from family obligations appears to be central to this person’s experience of fun.

Whereas the fun experiences in the preceding examples were grounded in felt liberation from professional or family obligations, many other examples involved liberation from various forms of self-imposed discipline. For example, a common theme in accounts of fun experiences revolves around the unrestrained consumption of food and alcohol. One 22-year-old female from California wrote: “The last time I really had fun was when I went to Tahoe with my friends over summer. We had rented a 10-person cabin, packed for 3 days, and drank like there was no tomorrow.” A 36-year-old female from North Carolina described a full weekend of fun, binge-watching television by herself while her children were away: “I stayed in my pjs all day. I barely cleaned. I ate snacks all day. I even skipped brushing my teeth in the morning ... and actually I noticed some pain in my teeth after eating 2–3 bars of Toblerone chocolate. ... I also had a lot of ice cream. I stayed up really late (until 2 am) and I got up late. After getting up I would fix myself bacon and eggs then go back to bed and then watch more tv. ... The best moments were when I was eating sweets ... I am overweight but I constantly try to watch my diet. I try not to eat any sugar and try to eliminate carbs altogether. By giving myself this break, I ‘allowed’ myself to be naughty. I gave myself ‘permission’ to rest and to enjoy life for a few days. ... I sneaked into my kids’ Easter candy bags, I ate Edy’s Touchdown gooy caramel ice-cream. I did not care if I gained 10 pounds, I was just let myself go ... It was so good and sooooo special!”

Because fun entails a sense of liberation from various constraints that are typically associated with adult life, many accounts of fun mention subjective experiences of “feeling like a kid again.” A 33-year-old female from Utah shared a story of playing a video game with her son: “Time seemed to pass by quickly as we moved through the couple of levels that we completed that day. I quite enjoyed the distraction it gave me from the worries of life. For a moment I could feel like a kid again ... I liked the escape from adulthood for the brief moment in time that I got to share with my son.” A 33-year-old male from Philadelphia

recounts the experience of jumping on a trampoline: “It was also a lot of fun for me because I typically don’t get to behave in the manner that I did at the trampoline park. As I am an adult, I never get to let loose like that. I never get to really have fun and run around like a kid. So it was really fun for me in the aspect that I got to behave like a child for a little bit.”

To explore further the role of liberation in the experience of fun, we purposively sampled interviewees whose exacting circumstances would restrict them from feeling carefree. For example, several students shared that typically enjoyable activities such as going out for drinks with friends or watching Netflix were not as much “fun” when studying for exams or searching for a job, suggesting that any restriction from feeling carefree interferes with the experience of fun. A more extreme example was shared by the homeless individual mentioned earlier. Now in her early 40s, Ann became homeless at the age of 12 when her adoptive parents abandoned her in the streets of New York City. She has moved from shelter to shelter ever since, after dropping out of high school. When asked about a recent experience when she really had fun, she recounted a childhood story of going to a local Indian Fair with her late grandmother when she was 10. At the end of the story, Ann stated, “That was the last time I had fun. After that, that’s when I moved, that’s when they left me, then my grandmother passed away, then my grandpa passed away. ... Fun is not a part of my life at this point.” Multiple attempts to gently probe her more recent experiences of fun were met with firm denial, though she did share other types of pleasant experiences, such as conversing with local children and feeling grateful for those who regularly help her out with food and clothing. As suggested by this interviewee and in other narratives involving pressing circumstances (e.g., a recent layoff or prolonged unemployment), when barriers to subjective feelings of liberation are high, people find it difficult to experience high levels of fun.

At a conceptual level, our proposition that a sense of liberation is a major psychological pillar of the experience of fun is broadly consistent with socio-historical analyses, discussed earlier, that view fun as a collective response to the overly structured mode of life widely instituted by the rigors of the Industrial Revolution, followed by the expansion of standardized and mandatory schooling (Blythe and Hassenzahl 2018; Fincham 2016; Gray 2013; Kelly 1987; Roy 1959; Thompson 1963). However, whereas previous analyses tended to focus on societal factors, such as the control of capital and means of production, the political structure, and social-class conflicts (Butsch 1990; Clarke and Critcher 1985; Rojek 1995; Thompson 1963), our analyses and findings focus on the level of individual experiences, thereby providing more nuance to the theory of fun. For example, as our informants shared, fun is not just a relief from “work” (which is a standard conceptualization of

leisure), it is a liberation from any form of internalized restriction, including family obligations and the self-control of indulgent behavior or consumption. Similarly, fun does not necessarily entail some transgression of the surrounding social order (Blythe and Hassenzahl 2018; Roy 1959), such as shooting fireworks in the middle of the night in one's garden, stealing a road sign on a drunken night out, or pulling a prank on a teacher at school. In our data, most accounts of fun rested on felt liberation that did not involve any social transgression (e.g., taking a weekend trip, hosting friends, binge-watching TV). Finally, a psychological—as opposed to sociological—conceptualization of the notion of liberation exposes the important role of individual choice in experiences of fun (e.g., choosing to drink more than usual, choosing to indulge in junk food, choosing to visit an amusement park), thus enabling a more consumption-oriented understanding of the phenomenon.

Fun as Liberating Engagement. As illustrated in figure 1, we propose that each of the two identified pillars, hedonic engagement and sense of liberation, can, on its own, contribute to a pleasurable experience, though not necessarily one of fun. For example, the hedonic engagement of eating a delicious meal or listening to a beautiful symphony can be very pleasurable but not fun per se. Similarly, the sense of liberation from being released from a long-term financial commitment (e.g., paying off a student loan) or receiving a reassuring medical diagnosis can be a source of relief and happiness without being actually fun. Based on our data and analyses, it is when *both* hedonic engagement and a sense of liberation are high that genuine experiences of fun come about (e.g., visiting an amusement park with friends after a long week of work; exploring a foreign city after prolonged stay-at-home confinement). Also, as depicted in figure 1, the experience of fun is not a discrete phenomenon (fun vs. not fun); rather, it is a continuous phenomenon, from very little fun to very high levels of fun (“having a blast”), depending on the underlying levels of hedonic engagement and felt liberation.

Our main theoretical proposition that fun arises from a combination of hedonic engagement and a sense of liberation provides a unitary explanation for a wide variety of individual experiences across a broad range of activities. Previous research similarly observed that experiences of fun can derive from a variety of activities, and these studies presented some thematic categorization of the activities themselves. For instance, Fincham (2016) discusses fun related to adventures, to outdoors, and to holidays, whereas McManus and Furnham (2010) distinguish among socializing-related fun, achievement-related fun, and relaxation-related fun. By abstracting away from the activities themselves, our psychological theory offers a more parsimonious account of experiences of fun. While individuals may differ in what they find hedonically engaging and

liberating, they share a common humanity in how they experience fun.

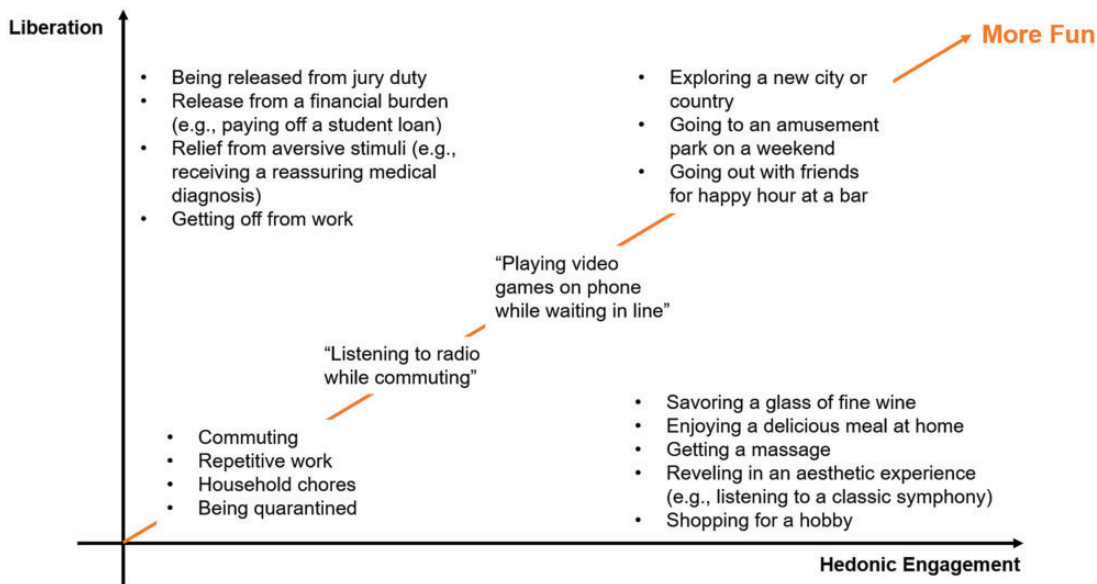
Situational Facilitators of Fun: Emerging Themes

In addition to revealing the core psychological pillars of fun, namely, hedonic engagement and a sense of liberation, our analyses of the data uncovered several recurring factors—namely, that appear to facilitate experiences of fun through their effects on these psychological pillars. Whereas hedonic engagement and the sense of liberation are jointly required for the experience of fun to arise—hence fundamental pillars of the experience of fun—these recurring factors are not defining components of the experience of fun. Rather, they are situational facilitators of fun—that is, key aspects of the situation that help amplify the experience of fun either by increasing the level of hedonic engagement or by enhancing the sense of liberation. Based on our data, we identified four such situational facilitators: novelty, connectedness, spontaneity, and boundedness.

Novelty. A prominent theme across many accounts of fun experiences is the relative novelty of the situation for the informant. When describing their experiences, informants frequently used words and phrases such as “first time,” “never done before,” “totally did not expect,” “something different,” “unique,” and “explore.” Wes, a 19-year-old undergraduate student from Nigeria, remembers the first time he went to the beach in the neighboring Benin Republic: “That was my first time at the beach. Where I live is a town and we don't have that nearby, because Nigeria is very big. We went to the beach a couple of times. That was really fun. It was just experiencing a new culture, being in a different place than you're used to.” A 29-year-old male from Florida describes his first experience of attending a professional basketball game: “The reason it was so fun was because this was actually my first sporting event ever. We went to a basketball game between the Miami Heat and the Chicago Bulls. It was a really close game throughout and me and my friends were cheering nonstop.”

The relative novelty of a situation appears to contribute to experiences of fun mostly by amplifying the person's level of hedonic engagement with the fun-inducing activity. It is indeed well established that stimulus novelty enhances various forms of psychological engagement such as attention, arousal, and exploration (Berlyne 1960). The following account by a 58-year-old female from Texas illustrates how a series of novel experiences kept her hedonically engaged during a trip to Asia: “I went to Bali with my best friend two months ago. It was fun. We watched various cultural performances. I saw cute little girls wearing traditional Balinese outfits dancing in a parade. I saw women carrying a pile of fruit (over 6 feet tall)

FIGURE 1
FUN AS LIBERATING ENGAGEMENT



NOTES.— The level of fun varies along a continuum as a joint function of the level of hedonic engagement and the level of felt liberation. Consequently, experiences closer to the upper-right corner would typically be considered as “very fun.” Experiences closer to the lower-right corner would typically be considered as engaging and pleasant, but not necessarily as fun. Experiences closer to the upper-left corner would typically be liberating and possibly pleasing, but not fun. Experiences closer to the lower-left corner would typically be considered neither hedonically engaging, not liberating, and therefore clearly “not fun.”

on their head to be brought to their Pura. . . . On the way home, we stopped in Singapore. We spent a couple of days touring the city and shopping for clothes. . . . We then went to Japan. . . .Tokyo was amazing. We took a train from Narita to Tokyo. . . .Three weeks went by so fast.”

The novelty of a situation does not have to be absolute to contribute to the experience of fun. Through the passage of time, even situations to which a person has been exposed before can feel relatively novel and therefore be experienced as fun. For example, respondents who wrote about amusement-park experiences often referred to the infrequent nature of these experiences or the considerable amount of time that had passed since their previous visit: “Riding the rides at the amusement park was especially fun. I hadn’t done anything like that since I was a fairly young child, and it was exhilarating if a little more frightening than I remember it being years ago” (female, 47, South Carolina). Similarly, respondents who described the fun of social gatherings often mentioned that it had been a long time since their previous gathering: “The last time that I really had fun was a few weeks ago when I got to catch up with some old friends who I had not seen in a long time. We decided for the day to go out and visit the national park that is in my state. I was excited to go see it because I had not been in many years and this would be

my first chance to see it with friends. . . . It was the most fun day that I had in a very long time” (male, 26, Maryland). According to Blythe and Hassenzahl (2018), even routine activities (e.g., weekly game nights) can feel novel and therefore remain fun, provided that there is some variation within the activities (e.g., different players or different games).

Social Connectedness. Another major theme evident from our data is that fun is most often experienced in situations in which the person feels connected with others while engaged in a focal activity, a notion that we refer to as social connectedness. Consistent with previous findings (Reis et al. 2017) and the popular intuition that leisure activities are more fun when engaged in with others, the vast majority of fun accounts in our data refer to situations involving some form of social connectedness. Many accounts relate to friends having fun while engaging in a pleasurable activity together. For example, a 32-year-old male from Oregon describes a fishing trip with his friends: “We cast off at about 7am and fished for a few hours. We had a great time sitting on the water and talking about random topics. We had some lunch that we packed . . . We stopped to take a few pictures of the lake and the surrounding trees, then we showed each other a few of the pictures and talked about them . . . The trip home took a while, but we had fun in the

car talking about our day and joking about how we could tell everyone that we caught ten fish. In reality, we didn't catch anything, but the point of the trip was to have fun." Other accounts relate to families enjoying some fun time together: "... a few weeks ago when I was spending the day with my family. It was just a very fun experience to spend the whole day with them. The reason what made the experience so much fun was the fact that I barely get to see them nowadays. We ended up having a large bbq. We had some drinks going, we also watched a movie together. These experiences are memories that will last a life time and just made the experience that much more fun" (male, 26, Minnesota). Some informants additionally noted that fun experiences are socially contagious, as illustrated by Annie's description of a night out with a friend: "... it was the most fun because I saw him having fun at these parties, which doesn't happen much ... it was nice to see him have so much fun for a really long time. So it was fun for me. Because when everyone else is having fun, it feels like it comes out naturally. Usually when other people have fun around you, the energy is infectious and you have fun too."

The intensifying effects of social connectedness on the experience of fun are not due to the mere social presence of others but rather to the unique connection that arises from sharing an experience or engaging in a common activity. This notion is consistent with research showing that the sharing of pleasurable experiences increases consumers' collective enjoyment of these experiences (Raghunathan and Corfman 2006; Ramanathan and McGill 2007). It is also consistent with recent research showing that consumers' immersive excitement with various consumption activities (e.g., attending a concert, joining a fitness class), a close correlate of fun, is amplified by feelings of synchronicity with others (Pham and Sun 2020).

Informants generally appeared to be aware of the special role that feeling connected plays in experiences of fun. When probed to elaborate on what made their experience particularly fun, many informants explicitly mentioned the connection that they felt with the people they shared the experience with. For example, a 46-year-old male from Florida provided the following reflection on a visit to a haunted house with friends: "I guess the thing that made it most fun was just that it was a shared experience, it built on the friendships we already had and gave us things to tease each other over, remember, etc." Similarly, a 21-year-old male from Texas mused that "What made this night really fun was the fun [sic] that we have such a close friendship although we don't hang out too often, and when we do it is always a splendid time to hang out together."

In sum, our findings show that momentary feelings of being connected with others within a particular situation are often central to the experience of fun, and that people are aware of the role that social connection plays in their experiences of fun. This is not to say that fun can only be

experienced in the presence of others, as some have suggested (Podilchak 1991). In our data, we did find occasional instances of solitary fun, which is directionally consistent with recent findings showing that solitary consumption experiences can be more enjoyable than people intuitively believe (Ratner and Hamilton 2015). Our finding that accounts of fun often involve social experiences with friends and family members is also directionally consistent with Podilchak's (1991) proposition that situations are more likely to be experienced as fun where there is no social hierarchy among the actors (e.g., employees are more likely to have fun at an office party if their bosses are not around).

Spontaneity. Another recurring theme across many informants' accounts of fun is the spontaneity of the situation that leads to the experience of fun. Conceptually, room for spontaneity facilitates the sense of liberation that underlies typical experiences of fun, whereas having to fully plan things and strictly follow certain scripts imposes psychological constraints that are antithetical to feelings of liberation and therefore to the experience of fun. The interplay between spontaneity versus planning and feelings of liberation versus being constrained is well illustrated by the following comments from Jay, a female office worker in her 20s: "I like spontaneous fun things, and when I plan sometimes, I plan out too much. It's like just let's go and ok. I like the idea of fun being [pauses] not restricted. I don't like being restricted in any way. ... I want things to be open. Having fun is being spontaneous. ... That is my idea of fun: getting some drinks and loosening up and trying new things. ... Walking around—I don't do it very often: 'Do we want to go there, do we want to do this?'"

McManus and Furnham (2010) observed some individuals tend to have a lay belief that spontaneity facilitates the experience of fun. Our findings suggest that this lay belief is probably accurate, as shall be further documented in studies 2 and 3. Informants' accounts revealed two forms of spontaneity. The first arises when a person chooses to engage in an activity that was not planned in advance or chooses to deviate from a previous plan. For example, a 30-year-old male from New York City explains how he ended up prolonging a trip in Europe: "I thought I would only travel for six weeks or so but ended up staying the whole summer until my visa ran out. I saw dozens of places and numerous cities. It was the time of my life." Similarly, a 32-year-old female from Pennsylvania recounts how she had to take off from work to attend to her kids: "We had rain that day, so my husband unexpectedly had off of work too, since he does landscaping. We decided to go out for breakfast, which we never get to do, and we found a hidden little gem of a breakfast spot. We all enjoyed our meals and had a really nice time exploring somewhere new. Then we went to Chocolate World, which was fun because we hadn't gone as a whole family in quite

a while . . . It ended up being fun and I'm glad we went." This first form of spontaneity is sometimes described by informants as giving them a sense of "adventure," which is related to the notion of felt liberation.

A second form of spontaneity arises in the context of the activity itself, even if it was planned in advance. A given activity (e.g., evening out with friends, a daytrip to the beach, a bachelor/bachelorette party) can still leave room for spontaneity in how it is carried out. To the extent that an activity provides an opportunity to explore, experiment, and improvise, it encourages spontaneity and therefore the experience of fun. A 29-year-old male from South Carolina describes the fun he had exploring and sampling food at a local festival: "The festival featured a barbecue contest. For one dollar, one would receive a sample of barbecue from a competitor. I sampled around 5 competitors' barbecue which I very much enjoyed. The barbecue ranged from pulled pork to brisket to chicken wings. There was also various other foods for sale. I purchased a slice of cake from a vendor that was very delicious. I also purchased a soda and my fiance purchased some macaroni and cheese. We also sampled some dip and chips from a vendor. It was a lot of fun enjoying and sampling the various foods."

Both forms of spontaneity in experiences of fun are consistent with previous research on play, a behavioral correlate of fun. Specifically, [Piaget \(1951\)](#) defined playful behavior as occurring spontaneously, which is consistent with our finding that fun often arises from engaging in activities that were not planned. [Bateson \(2014\)](#) observed that true playfulness stems from the spontaneity and flexibility in how the person plays, which is consistent with our finding that fun also arises from people's improvisation and exploration during activities, whether planned or not.

Spatial and Temporal Boundedness. A final major recurring theme that emerged from our data is the situational boundedness of the experience of fun. Most informants' accounts referred to experiences that were clearly situated, both spatially and temporally. Fun experiences typically involved specific spaces or locations where an activity took place (e.g., amusement parks, bars and restaurants, festivals and fairs, cruises) and generally implied a beginning and an end (e.g., an evening out with friends, a vacation trip, attending a sports event). For example, the following account clearly specifies the location (and sub-locations) of the experience of fun and its temporal boundaries: "We took a vacation to Kings Island in Mason, Ohio. It's a huge theme park with all sorts of rides ranging from very big to very small. . . Once we got there I saw the coasters from the parking lot and my excitement couldn't be contained. Once we got into the park we rode some scramblers and then a smaller aviator ride. Later in the day we were getting tired of the moving rides so we stopped at the arcade and stayed in there for at least 2 hours playing all the fun games they had. . . We also went and enjoyed the water park and swam

in the giant wave pool to ease off the end of the day at the park . . . It was a very great and fun day that I will never forget" (female, 27, Kentucky).

Interestingly, participants frequently concluded their accounts of fun experiences by lamenting the ending of these experiences, as illustrated by the following two excerpts: "It was really sad when we got ready to leave because it was the greatest weekend excursion I've had in years. It was fun hanging out with friends and getting away from work" (male, 33, Texas); "I love to see the parents waiting on the sidewalk for their kids, keeping an eye on them but letting them have their fun. The kids kept it up until about 9:00p when I always turn the lights off then have a tear in my eye because it's all over and I have to wait another year for it to happen again" (male, 64, Florida). As these two excerpts illustrate, people appear to be quite cognizant of the ending of their experiences of fun, which further supports the notion of temporal boundedness.

On the surface, the idea that experiences of fun often involve boundaries that are clearly set in time and/or space may seem inconsistent with the proposition that experiences of fun rest heavily on a sense of liberation. However, it is precisely because experiences of fun are generally bounded in time and space that they can truly feel liberating and fun. Such boundaries provide a mental protection from the constraining pressures of the world outside these boundaries. For example, it is partly because parties often take place on Saturday night that they can be fully enjoyed without the worries of having work or school the next day. Similarly, it is because people are within the boundaries of an amusement park that even adults can freely behave like kids during a visit.

Summary of the Proposed Theory

While there is considerable variety in the type of activities from which individuals derive experiences of fun, we propose that these experiences rest on two primary psychological pillars, hedonic engagement and a sense of liberation, the effects of which combine to create subjective experiences of fun (see [figure 1](#)), both within and outside the consumption domain. We additionally propose that the experience of fun can be facilitated by four situational factors—namely, novelty, social connectedness, spontaneity, and boundedness—that promote the experience of fun through their effects on hedonic engagement and the sense of liberation. These situational facilitators are not necessary conditions for the experience of fun to arise, but they make such experiences more likely by promoting the person's hedonic engagement and/or sense of liberation. While other situational factors likely exist (as shall be revisited in the general discussion), the remaining studies will focus on this particular set of four facilitators.

STUDY 2: A MEASUREMENT-BASED TEST OF THE THEORY

The main purpose of study 2 was to empirically test the major propositions of our liberating-engagement theory of fun, namely that (i) subjective experiences of fun arise from a combination of hedonic engagement and a sense of liberation and (ii) experiences of fun are facilitated by situational factors such as novelty, social connectedness, spontaneity, and boundedness through their effects on hedonic engagement and liberation. To this end, we first developed self-report measures of the various constructs that compose our theory. We then tested our hypothesized theoretical framework through structural equation modeling (SEM), which allows an assessment of how well the proposed measures capture the latent constructs posited by the theory, as well as an estimation of the causal paths. A secondary purpose was to test the proposition that the psychology of fun within the consumption domain is not materially different from that outside the consumption domain—a proposition formally tested through a multigroup SEM analysis.

Operationalizing Dimensions of Fun

Drawing upon our theorizing from study 1, we generated an initial pool of 58 items to represent the two primary psychological pillars and four situational predictors of fun. (Additional statements focusing on emotional correlates of fun were included but are not discussed here for the sake of brevity.) Next, 192 MTurk respondents were asked to rate a recent fun experience on a 20-item scale based on a random subset of the 58 items. Based on these respondents' ratings, a subset of 42 items was selected for further evaluation. Based on an exploratory factor analysis and feedback from members of the authors' research lab who evaluated the items in terms of construct validity, a set of 20 items was identified: three items for hedonic engagement (e.g., "I really felt 'in the moment'"; $\alpha = 0.86$); four items for sense of liberation (e.g., "I was able to let go of things"; $\alpha = 0.93$); three items for novelty (e.g., "It's been a long time since I did something similar"; $\alpha = 0.63$); four items for social connectedness (e.g., "I felt a sense of connection with others"; $\alpha = 0.92$); three items for spontaneity (e.g., "There was genuine spontaneity in the overall situation"; $\alpha = 0.81$); and three for boundedness (e.g., "The whole experience occurred at a pre-specified time and space"; $\alpha = 0.63$) (see appendix A for the remaining items).

Test of the Proposed Theory

To test the proposed theory, 200 MTurk participants were asked to write about a recent experience that they found personally interesting and then to rate this experience on a battery of items related to the theory. The purpose of having participants describe situations that were

personally interesting, rather than situations that were specifically fun, was to ensure between-respondents variability in the level of fun experienced, thus allowing a test of how well the proposed constructs account for variability in the reported levels of fun.

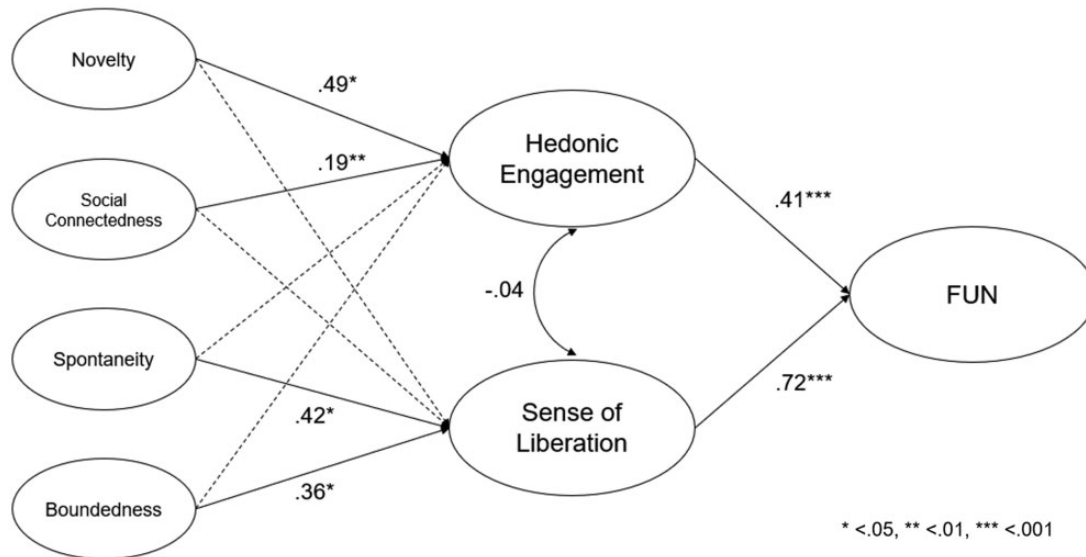
Method. One hundred and eighty-eight participants provided usable responses ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.6$; female = 49.5%). Immediately after writing about their personally interesting experience, participants rated how fun that experience was on a three-item, 5-point scale (e.g., "How much fun did you have during the experience?"; 1 = "not at all"; 5 = "very much so"). After rating the experience on other dimensions that are not central to the purpose of this study (e.g., happiness), participants then rated the experience on the 20 items that capture the main constructs of our theory (e.g., hedonic engagement, liberation, novelty; see appendix A). The items were grouped by construct, with order of the constructs randomized across participants. Finally, to enable evaluation of the fit of the theory within and outside the realm of consumption, participants were given a brief definition of consumption and asked to rate how much the experience involved consumption on a scale of 1 ("not at all") to 4 ("a lot"). Participants' ratings of the described experience in terms of fun and the core constructs of the theory were analyzed through SEM.

Main Results. As illustrated in figure 2, our theory conceptualizes subjective experiences of having fun as arising from a combination of hedonic engagement and sense of liberation. These experiences are facilitated by a variety of situational factors such as novelty and spontaneity that amplify experiences of fun through their effects on hedonic engagement and liberation. A SEM analysis of the model depicted in figure 2, using the "lavaan" package in R (with maximum likelihood estimation), yielded a good fit to the data (CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.08, and SRMR = 0.07). Both the measurement part of the model—the loading of the individual items onto their respective constructs—and the structural part of the model—the relations among the constructs—were therefore supported by the data. As predicted by the theory that emerged from study 1, both hedonic engagement ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$) and sense of liberation ($b = 0.72$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$) contributed positively to the experience of fun.

The results additionally show that all four hypothesized situational facilitators contributed indirectly to the experience of fun through their effects on hedonic engagement and sense of liberation. Specifically, both novelty ($b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .01$) and social connectedness ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .005$) had a significant positive impact on hedonic engagement, whereas spontaneity ($b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .028$) and boundedness ($b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .026$) had a positive impact on the sense of liberation. Other connections among the situational facilitators and the two core pillars were not significant.

FIGURE 2

SITUATIONAL FACILITATORS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PILLARS OF FUN



NOTE.— For clarity of exposition, the measurement part of the model (the variable-to-construct loadings) is omitted from the figure, as are the coefficients for nonsignificant paths (dashed lines).

Boundedness ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .94$) and spontaneity ($b = -0.12$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .44$) had no measurable impact on hedonic engagement, nor did social connectedness ($b = 0.001$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .99$) have any impact on liberation. Novelty had a small but not significant impact on liberation ($b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = .24$).

Overall, the results of this SEM analysis support the structure of the theory that fun arises primarily from a combination of hedonic engagement and sense of liberation, facilitated by situational factors such as novelty, social connectedness, spontaneity, and boundedness. As a whole, the model in figure 2 accounts for 67% of the variance in fun, 51% of the variance in hedonic engagement, and 48% of the variance in felt liberation, at the latent construct level.

Is the Psychology of Fun Consumption Specific? To test the proposition that the psychology of fun does not depend on whether the domain is consumption related or nonconsumption related, the data were split according to participants' ratings of the degree to which their experience involved consumption. Experiences rated 1 and 2 on the 4-point scale (49.5%) were categorized as "nonconsumption related," whereas those rated 3 and 4 (50.5%) were categorized as "consumption related." The model in figure 2 was submitted to a multigroup analysis across the two types of experiences. The results show strong measurement invariance across the two types of experiences. A weak

invariance model with factor loadings constrained to be equal between groups showed no significant loss of model fit ($\chi^2(442) = 17.2$, $p = .38$), nor did a strong test of measurement invariance that further constrained item intercepts to be equivalent across the two groups ($\chi^2(458) = 19.2$, $p = .26$). These results suggest that, as we propose, the psychology of fun does not depend on the involvement of consumption. However, as shall be reported in subsequent studies, consumption does play an important role in many experiences of fun.

STUDY 3: COMPARING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVERS OF FUN VERSUS HAPPINESS

The purpose of this third study was to further test the proposed theory by documenting the distinct roles that hedonic engagement and liberation play in driving experiences of fun as opposed to experiences of happiness. As mentioned previously, the experience of fun often coincides with the experience of happiness, even though the two types of experience are conceptually distinct (see table 1). We hypothesize that both hedonic engagement and a sense of liberation play a stronger role in the experience of fun than in the experience of happiness. To investigate this hypothesis, participants in this experimental study were asked to describe an experience of either having fun or

feeling happy. They were then asked to rate this experience on a number of dimensions related to our theory, including hedonic engagement, felt liberation, and the same hypothesized situational facilitators as in study 2. We predicted that mean ratings of hedonic engagement and felt liberation would be higher for experiences of fun than for experiences of happiness. We additionally expected that, across conditions, ratings of hedonic engagement and felt liberation would be stronger predictors of the level of fun associated with a given experience than of the level of happiness associated with the same experience.

As mentioned earlier, another theoretical difference between fun and happiness is that the latter is more likely to be driven by the meaningfulness of the overall experience, as evidenced by research on the eudemonic path to happiness (Ryan and Deci 2001). To test this proposition, participants were asked to rate the meaningfulness of the described experience. We reasoned that mean ratings of meaningfulness would be higher for experiences of happiness than for experiences of fun and that meaningfulness would be a stronger predictor of the level of happiness associated with an experience than of the associated level of fun.

Method

A total of 304 participants, from both the United States and the United Kingdom, were recruited from Prolific and randomly assigned to either a fun-experience condition or a happy-experience condition. Of these, 296 passed the attention checks ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.7$; female = 53%). The procedure closely paralleled that of study 2. In the fun-experience condition, participants were first asked to recall and describe an experience where they “really had fun,” whereas in the happy-experience condition, participants were asked to recall and describe an experience where they “really felt happy.” Because the study was conducted during the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic, participants were asked to focus on a “fairly recent” experience “that took place before the COVID pandemic . . . in 2018 or 2019” to circumvent the unusualness of the pandemic environment.

After writing about these experiences (which are content analyzed in study 4b), all participants were asked to rate their experience on a series of measures, all consisting of three 7-point-scale items (1 = not at all; 7 = very much so; see appendix B). The first set of measures, whose order was counterbalanced, assessed (i) how fun the experience was and (ii) how happy participants felt during this experience. The second set of measures, whose order was also counterbalanced, assessed the level of (iii) hedonic engagement, (iv) felt liberation, and (v) meaningfulness of the experience. The third set of measures, also counterbalanced, assessed the (vi) novelty, (vii) connectedness, (viii) spontaneity, and (ix) boundedness of the experience. The study

ended with several additional measures that are not central to the objective of this study.

Results

Mean Differences between Fun and Happiness. Table 3 provides the means of the different measures across the two conditions. As could be expected, the described experiences were rated as more fun in the fun-experience condition ($M = 6.56$) than in the happy-experience condition ($M = 5.94$; $F(1, 294) = 27.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$). Interestingly, the experiences were not rated as happier in the happy condition ($M = 6.40$) than in the fun condition ($M = 6.57$; $F(1, 294) = 3.4$, $p = .065$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$). The asymmetric nature of this pair of results suggests that whereas not all happy experiences are necessarily fun, fun experiences tend to be happy as well. Therefore, fun experiences may be a subset of all happy experiences, which would imply that fun can be seen as a nomological antecedent of happiness, a notion that we test in the SEM analyses reported below.

As expected, the reported experiences were judged to be more liberating in the fun condition ($M = 6.22$) than in the happy condition ($M = 5.86$; $F(1, 294) = 7.67$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$). They were also rated as more hedonically engaging in the fun condition ($M = 6.46$) than in the happy condition ($M = 6.22$; $F(1, 294) = 6.37$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). These results provide additional support for the theoretical proposition that the experience of having fun is distinctively driven by a sense of liberation and hedonic engagement—processes that do not appear to play as much of a role in experiences of feeling happy. On the other hand, whereas ratings of liberation and hedonic engagement were higher in the fun condition than in the happy condition, ratings of meaningfulness were higher in the happy condition ($M = 6.35$) than in the fun condition ($M = 6.10$; $F(1, 294) = 5.14$, $p = .024$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). This finding is consistent with the conceptual distinction put forth earlier between fun and happiness, which is more susceptible to eudemonic inputs.

In addition, the described experiences were judged to involve greater social connectedness in the fun condition ($M = 6.42$) than in the happy condition ($M = 5.90$; $F(1, 294) = 11.02$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$). However, the two types of experiences did not differ significantly in terms of novelty ($M_{\text{fun}} = 5.83$ vs. $M_{\text{happy}} = 5.63$; $F(1, 294) = 2.17$, $p = .14$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$), spontaneity ($M_{\text{fun}} = 4.95$ vs. $M_{\text{happy}} = 4.64$; $F(1, 294) = 2.66$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$), and boundedness ($M_{\text{fun}} = 6.06$ vs. $M_{\text{happy}} = 5.91$; $F(1, 294) = 1.04$, $p = .31$, $\eta^2 = 0.004$), although these ratings were directionally higher in the fun condition than in the happy condition. The fact that the differences between experiences of fun and experiences of happiness were clearer for ratings of liberation and ratings of hedonic engagement than for ratings of novelty, spontaneity, and boundedness is consistent

TABLE 3
MEANS (AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS) OF MEASURED CONSTRUCTS

	Conditions		p-Values
	Fun ($n = 147$), mean (SD)	Happy ($n = 149$), mean (SD)	
Main dependent constructs			
Experienced fun	6.56 (0.61)	5.94 (1.30)	<.001
Experienced happiness	6.57 (0.61)	6.40 (0.96)	.065
Main psychological mediators			
Liberation	6.22 (0.97)	5.86 (1.25)	.006
Hedonic engagement	6.46 (0.66)	6.22 (0.99)	.012
Meaningfulness	6.10 (0.98)	6.35 (0.86)	.024
Situational facilitators			
Novelty	5.83 (1.13)	5.63 (1.22)	.142
Social connectedness	6.42 (1.08)	5.90 (1.56)	.001
Spontaneity	4.95 (1.58)	4.64 (1.67)	.104
Boundedness	6.06 (1.23)	5.91 (1.32)	.310

with the idea that the latter are situational facilitators but not primary pillars of fun.

Structural Drivers of Fun Versus Happiness. To further test the proposition that a sense of liberation and hedonic engagement are stronger drivers of subjective experiences of fun than of subjective experiences of happiness, all participants' ratings of the key constructs (fun, happiness, liberation, etc.) across conditions were analyzed with the structural equation model depicted in figure 3, which is an extension of the model tested in study 2 (figure 2). In this extended model, happiness is represented as a possible downstream consequence of fun rather than as a parallel dependent construct, consistent with the notion that experiences of fun tend to make people happy, whereas not all experiences of happiness tend to be fun. In the model, meaningfulness is conceptualized as a "pillar" of happiness, in the same way as hedonic engagement and liberation operate as pillars of fun. The model yielded a good fit of the data (CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.06), thus supporting the measurement and structural part of the model. Both hedonic engagement ($b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$) and sense of liberation ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$) showed strong positive effects on fun ($R^2 = 0.415$), thus replicating the results of study 2. Moreover, the effects of hedonic engagement and sense of liberation on fun were both stronger than their corresponding effects on happiness ($b_{\text{hedonic engagement}} = 0.29$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .002$; $b_{\text{liberation}} = 0.01$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .82$), which further supports the notion that hedonic engagement and sense of liberation are stronger psychological drivers of fun than of happiness.

Consistent with the notion that fun experiences tend to make people feel happy (though not all happy experiences are necessarily fun), reported levels of fun significantly predicted reported levels of happiness ($b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$). Interestingly, meaningfulness showed a strong positive effect on the experience of happiness ($b =$

0.38, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$), but a negative effect on the experience of fun ($b = -0.31$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = .035$). These results further support our conceptual distinction between fun and happiness, wherein meaningfulness is a more important driver of happiness than it is of fun. In fact, after controlling for hedonic engagement and sense of liberation, meaningfulness might interfere with the experience of fun, which is typically associated with more lighthearted forms of pleasure.

Discussion

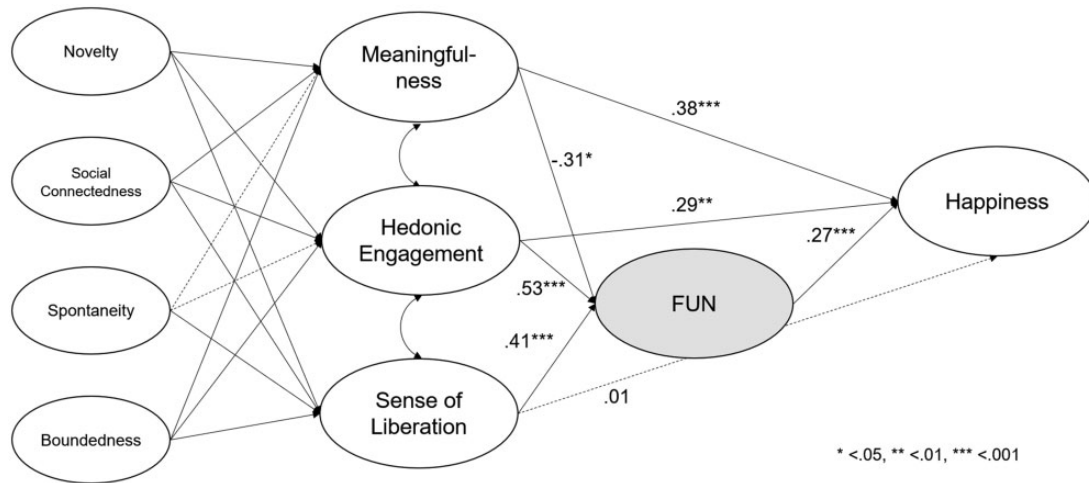
The results of study 3 show that fun experiences are more fun, less meaningful, and more hedonically engaging and liberating than happy experiences. In addition, hedonic engagement and sense of liberation are more potent drivers of subjective experiences of having fun than of subjective feelings of happiness, whereas meaningfulness is a more potent driver of subjective feelings of happiness than of subjective experiences of having fun. These results support our conceptual distinction between fun and happiness, with the former being more driven by a combination of hedonic engagement and sense of liberation, and the latter being more driven by perceptions of meaningfulness (Ryan and Deci 2001). The results additionally suggest that the experience of fun is a predictor of feelings of happiness, whereas the reverse may not necessarily be true.

STUDY 4: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FUN AND CONSUMPTION

According to our conceptualization and some of the results of study 2, the psychological experience of fun is not consumption specific. However, as noted above, we believe that consumption plays a prominent role in many experiences of fun. The purpose of study 4 was to test the proposition that fun experiences are more likely to involve consumption than other positive experiences such as

FIGURE 3

THE LIBERATING-ENGAGEMENT THEORY OF FUN IN RELATION TO HAPPINESS AND MEANINGFULNESS



NOTE.—For the clarity of exposition, the variable-to-construct loadings, regression coefficients from the facilitators, and coefficients for nonsignificant paths (dashed lines) are omitted from the figure.

happiness. This proposition was tested by having respondents describe an experience in which they really had fun, or a control experience; and then independent judges coded the degree to which this experience involved some form of consumption. We predicted that experiences of fun would score higher in terms of consumption compared to control experiences. The study was replicated across two samples of respondents, surveyed 3 years apart, designated as study 4a and study 4b.

Study 4a: Method and Results

We recruited 300 US individuals from MTurk, of whom 286 participants provided usable responses ($M_{age} = 35.7$; female = 47%). The participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a fun condition and two control conditions. In the fun condition, participants were asked to describe “a recent experience when you really had fun.” In the happy condition, which served as a first control, participants were asked to describe “a recent experience when you were feeling really happy.” In the personally interesting condition, which served as a second control, participants were asked to describe “a recent experience that you found personally interesting.” All participants were asked to write at least 1,000 characters, which resulted in an average of 261 words. These accounts were then reviewed by two independent coders (blind to conditions) who were asked to rate the degree of consumption involved in the described experience on a 4-point scale (1 = “not

consumption at all,” 2 = “marginally consumption,” 3 = “largely consumption,” 4 = “definitely consumption”). The ratings of the two coders were highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.87$) and were averaged to serve as the dependent variable.

A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference of consumption levels across conditions ($F(2, 283) = 28.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.17$). As expected, consumption ratings were significantly higher in the fun-experience condition ($M = 3.18, SD = 1.07$) than in the happy-experience condition ($M = 2.08, SD = 1.18; F(1, 283) = 45.77, p < .001$) and the personally interesting-experience condition ($M = 2.14, SD = 1.16; F(1, 283) = 39.76, p < .001$), which did not differ from each other ($F(1, 283) = 0.78, p = .38$). In the fun-experience condition, 69.8% of the accounts scored 3 or higher on the 4-point scale (“largely consumption” to “definitely consumption”), whereas in the happy-experience and the personally interesting conditions, only 30.8% and 30.1% of the accounts, respectively, scored 3 or higher.

Study 4b: Method and Results

To test the robustness of study 4a’s findings, we replicated this analysis on the 296 accounts collected—but not formally analyzed—as part of study 3. Recall that this study had two conditions: a fun-experience condition and a happy-experience condition. These accounts were coded by two independent coders (blind to conditions and

different from the coders used in study 4a), on the same scale and with the same set of instructions as in study 4a. Again, the results showed that consumption ratings were significantly higher in the fun-experience condition ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.02$) than in the happy-experience condition ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.00$; $F(1, 294) = 18.32$, $p < .001$). In the fun-experience condition, 46.3% of the accounts scored 3 or higher on the 4-point scale, whereas in the happy-experience condition only 28.2% of the accounts received such a score.

Discussion

The results of this study show that fun experiences are largely situated in consumption contexts, much more so than other positive experiences such as happiness or personal interest. Therefore, while the psychology of fun may not be consumption specific, the experience of fun is often consumption related.

STUDY 5: A PHOTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF FUN VERSUS HAPPINESS

One potential limitation of the first four studies is that they all rely on informants' verbal reports of personal experiences, which raises the possibility that dimensions of fun that are more intuitive and easy to verbalize tend to be overrepresented in our findings (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). In addition, retrospective verbal reports are necessarily constrained by the imperfectness of memory, so it could perhaps be the case that important but less salient aspects of fun were not fully captured in the previous studies.

To circumvent these potential limitations, in this final study, we investigate lived experiences of fun through a unique set of data that do not involve verbal accounts of these experiences. Specifically, in partnership with a startup consumer-research company, we conducted a photo-ethnography of the experience of having fun versus feeling happy by building a substantial collection of images from hundreds of individuals who shared selfie-type photographs for the specific purpose of this study. Participants were members of a large consumer-research panel who were asked to submit a photograph of themselves having a particular type of "moment." In the focal condition, participants were asked to submit a photograph of a "fun-filled moment," whereas in the control condition, participants were asked to submit a photograph of a "happy moment." These photographs were content-analyzed and compared across conditions.

This database of images provides a unique vantage on real-life experiences of fun. First, because the photographs are taken during the experience itself, their content is less impacted by limitations of memory. Second, because photographs do not rest on verbal descriptions, they enable better access to nonverbal aspects of the experience (e.g.,

facial expression, body posture, physical attire). Third, photographs usually contain contextual details that are potentially informative (e.g., general setting, presence of others, weather).

Method

Study Design. The study was conducted in collaboration with a startup market-research company that specialized in gathering consumer insights through the submission of selfie-type photographs by its panel members via a mobile app. For example, for a project on the do-it-yourself market, the company invited its panel members to submit a photograph of their home workshop or workbench, with each qualifying submission being compensated. At the time of our study, the company had a proprietary panel of approximately 60,000 consumers. For this study, these panel members were randomly exposed to one of two invitations to submit a particular type of photograph. In the fun condition, members were invited to submit a photo of a "fun-filled moment" that captures "the key aspects of your fun moment and its setting." In the happy condition, which served as a control, members were invited to submit a photo of a "happy moment" that captures "the key aspects of your happy-feeling moment and its setting." In both conditions, the photo could be a selfie or an imported photo, with the requirement that the registered panel member be in it. A total of 541 photograph submissions were received over a period of five weeks, 252 in the fun condition and 289 in the happy condition. The submitting participants were 66.5% female, from 48 different US states, with an average age of 29.9.

Coding. Through a combination of a pretest based on a separate set of photographs, extensive discussions with the members of the authors' research lab, and analyses of the results of the previous studies, we identified 13 coding items pertinent to the proposed conceptualization (see table 4). One item assessed the level of hedonic engagement: whether the person(s) appear(s) to be actively engaged in a pleasurable activity. Three items serve as a proxy for a sense of liberation: the consumption of alcohol, a wide opening of the mouth, and the making of silly faces. Two items were proxies for the novelty of the depicted experience: the presence of unusual attire or accessories, and whether the depicted activity was different from typical everyday activities. One item was a proxy for social connectedness: the number of people in the photograph. Because it is difficult to assess the spontaneity of an experience from a still photograph, as a proxy for spontaneity we attempted to code whether the photograph appears to be taken spontaneously. As shall be discussed in the results section, this measure proved to be too unreliable to be diagnostic, which is a limitation of this study. Two items were meant to assess boundedness: whether the activity needs to be

TABLE 4
STUDY 5 PHOTO-CODING PERCENTAGES ACROSS CONDITIONS

	Intercoder agreement	Conditions		χ^2	<i>p</i> -Values	ϕ	N (excl. "unsure")
		% in fun	% in happy				
Items related to liberation and hedonic engagement							
Does the person(s) appear to be actively engaged in some activity that is pleasurable?	0.83	29.4	11.1	28.59	<.001	0.23	541
Is anyone in the picture consuming alcoholic beverages?	0.96	5.2	1.4	6.35	.011	0.11	538
Is the person(s)'s mouth wide open?	0.84	10.0	5.2	4.46	.035	0.09	540
Is the person(s) making a silly face (e.g., tongue/lips sticking out, wide eyes, and lifted eyebrows)?	0.80	13.6	8.7	3.32	.069	0.08	538
Items related to situational facilitators							
Is the person(s) wearing unusual attire or accessories (e.g., costumes)?	0.87	17.1	6.0	15.68	<.001	0.17	540
Is the person(s) engaged in an activity that is different from typical everyday activities?	0.60	61.1	34.4	36.54	<.001	0.27	514
Number of people in the photo (absolute count, not percentages) (SD in parenthesis)	N/A	2.46 (1.45)	2.17 (1.54)	Z = 2.16 ^a	.031	Rate ratio = 1.13	541
Do you think that the photo was taken spontaneously?	0.36	24.2	21.8	0.44	.506	0.03	541
Does this type of activity that the person(s) seems to be engaged in need to be at a specific place?	0.77	36.0	12.8	40.05	<.001	0.27	539
Does this type of activity that the person(s) seems to be engaged in need to be at a specific time?	0.88	13.5	6.6	7.22	.007	0.12	540
Items related to meaningfulness and object-relatedness							
Does the person(s) appear to be experiencing something significant to them?	0.91	4.8	12.0	6.55	.011	0.11	541
Is the person in the picture either (a) holding something or (b) trying to display something in particular that seems to be significant to them?	0.61	23.4	27.0	0.91	.340	0.04	541
Item related to consumption							
Is the picture taken in a commercial location (i.e., where goods, services, and experiences are sold and distributed)?	0.72	34.3	16.8	20.57	<.001	0.20	504

^aThe Z statistic tests the significance of the group effect in a Poisson regression, which was used to analyze the count of people in the photographs.

engaged in a specific place and whether the activity needs to be engaged at a specific time.

In addition to these expected markers of fun, we coded whether the photo appears to be taken in a commercial location, with the expectation that photos of fun are more likely to be situated in commercial venues (consistent with the results of study 4). We also included two items expected to further differentiate images of fun from images of happiness. One assessed whether the person appears to be experiencing something particularly significant, which was a measure of meaningfulness. The second item assessed whether the photographed person is holding or trying to display something in particular, to capture the notion that happiness (but not fun) is typically about something. Each of the 13 items, except for the number of people in the picture, was coded as "yes," "no," or "unsure."

Two pairs of independent coders who were blind to the conditions and to the research hypotheses were used to code all 541 photographs. The first pair coded all photographs on nine of the 13 items, whereas the second pair coded the photographs on the remaining four items. The

average intercoder reliability across the items was relatively high ($\alpha = 0.76$), except for the item assessing whether the photograph appeared to be taken spontaneously, which proved difficult to code (intercoder agreement = 0.36). Disagreements were resolved by a separate graduate research assistant who was blind to the conditions. Table 4 reports, for each condition separately, the average number of people in the photos and the proportion of confirmed "yes" across the various "yes-no" coding items (excluding all responses where both coders were "unsure"), along with relevant statistics.

Results

Hedonic Engagement and Liberation. As expected, the percentage of photos coded as exhibiting active engagement in a pleasurable activity was higher in the fun condition (29.4 %) than in the happy condition (11.1%). This result is consistent with results of study 3, which showed that self-reports of hedonic engagement were higher for experiences of fun than for experiences of happiness. Also, consistent with our predictions, proxies for liberation were

all higher in the fun condition than in the happy condition. Specifically, compared to photos in the happy condition, photos in the fun condition were more likely to exhibit the presence of alcohol (5.2% vs. 1.4%), faces with wide-open mouths (10% vs. 5.2%), and various silly expressions (13.6% vs. 8.7%). This result is also consistent with results of study 3, which showed that self-reports of felt liberation were higher for experiences of fun than for experiences of happiness.

Situational Facilitators of Fun. Proxies for the various situational facilitators of fun also exhibited patterns consistent with our proposed theory. Consistent with the proposition that experiences of fun are facilitated by the novelty of the experience, a higher percentage of photographs in the fun condition featured people wearing unusual attire or accessories (17.1% vs. 6.3%) and engaged in non-typical activities (61.1% vs. 34.4%). Consistent with the proposition that experiences of fun are facilitated by a sense of social connectedness, the average number of people featured in the photographs was higher in the fun condition ($M = 2.46$) than in the happy condition ($M = 2.17$). In accord with the proposition that fun is facilitated by the spontaneity of the experiences, we expected that the percentage of photographs judged to be taken spontaneously would be higher in the fun condition than in the happy condition, but this was not the case. The observed proportions were very similar in the two conditions (24.2% vs. 21.8%). This null finding may be due to the difficulty of coding this dimension from the photographs, as reflected by the very low level of intercoder agreement on this dimension. It may not be possible to accurately infer the spontaneity of an experience from still photographs. Finally, consistent with the proposition that fun is facilitated by conditions of spatial and temporal boundedness, compared to photographs in the happy condition, a higher percentage of photographs in the fun condition involved activities judged to require specific places (36.0% vs. 12.8%) and specific times (13.5% vs. 6.6%).

Meaningfulness and Object-Relatedness. Consistent with the notion that the experience of fun is less dependent on the meaningfulness of the situation than happiness is, the percentage of photographs involving experiences judged to be significant to the protagonist was lower in the fun condition (4.8%) than in the happy condition (12.0%). This result parallels study 3's finding that self-reports of meaningfulness play a stronger role in experiences of happiness than in experiences of fun. Based on the notion that happiness is more likely to be object-related, or about something, than fun is (see table 1), we expected individuals photographed in the happy condition to be more likely to hold or display something that appears to be significant to them (e.g., holding a baby, showing a trophy) than were individuals in the fun condition. Although the pattern of

result was directionally consistent with this prediction (fun = 23.4% vs. happy = 27.0%), this effect was not significant.

Relation to Consumption. Finally, a greater percentage of photographs were taken in commercial locations in the fun condition (34.3%) than in the happy condition (16.8%). This result is consistent with study 4's finding that fun experiences are much more likely to involve some form of consumption compared to experiences of happiness.

Discussion

The results of this photo-ethnographic study are largely consistent with those of the previous studies. Compared to photographs of people feeling happy, momentary photographs of people having fun exhibit distinct patterns of nonverbal and contextual cues that are consistent with the self-reports of hedonic engagement and felt liberation analyzed in the previous studies, including an ostensible engagement in some pleasurable activity, the presence of alcohol, and silly facial expressions. Compared to photographs of people feeling happy, momentary photographs of people having fun were more likely to exhibit various proxies of hypothesized situational facilitators of fun—namely, novelty, connectedness, and boundedness, although our crude proxy for spontaneity did not exhibit a difference. Interestingly, the results of this study regarding these situational facilitators were directionally consistent with, but generally stronger than the corresponding results of study 3, which were based on self-reports. The finding that situational facilitators tended to have more pronounced effects in the present study than in study 3 illustrates the incremental value of photo-ethnographic evidence in the analysis of experiences of fun. Finally, results of this study offer further evidence of the intimate link between fun and consumption by showing that experiences of fun are much more likely to take place in commercial venues than experiences of sheer happiness.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Considering the major role that the experience of fun plays in the consumer society, it is surprising that this type of experience eluded systematic investigation and conceptualization in consumer research until now. This article fills the void by advancing a psychological theory of fun with broad implications for our understanding of consumption experiences, business practices related to the engineering of fun, and consumers' own pursuits of fun and happiness.

Summary of the Findings: Fun as Liberating Engagement

Across five studies, combining multiple methodological approaches, we identify two main psychological pillars of the experience of having fun: a state of hedonic engagement, combined with a sense of liberation. These two fundamental pillars account for subjective experiences of fun in a wide range of activities, both within and outside the consumption domain. The critical role of these two pillars in the experience of fun was evident across a broad spectrum of data collected, including numerous informants' accounts of personal experiences of fun, structural equation models of subjective ratings of experiences of fun, and shared photographic images of momentary experiences of fun.

In addition to identifying the main psychological pillars of fun, our research highlights several situational facilitators that help amplify the experience of fun by increasing the level of hedonic engagement or enhancing the sense of liberation. The first facilitator is perhaps the most obvious: experiences are more likely to be fun if they are relatively novel. This effect is driven in large part by the higher level of hedonic engagement that novel experiences generate, and to some extent by the sense of liberation that novelty can promote. A second facilitator is the social connectedness with others. Our findings show that a vast majority of fun experiences involve others. However, it is not the mere presence of others that makes an experience fun. Rather, it is the feeling of being connected and sharing the experience with them that makes an experience fun. The effect of social connectedness on the experience of fun operates through its influence on hedonic engagement and to some extent its effect on the sense of liberation. The third facilitator is spontaneity of the experience, either in the form of not planning the focal activity in advance or improvising during the activity itself. Spontaneity increases the experience of fun, primarily by enabling a greater sense of liberation. A fourth and final facilitator is the spatial and/or temporal boundedness of the situation, which facilitates the experience of fun mostly by promoting a sense of liberation.

Although the psychology of fun is not consumption specific, there is an intimate connection between fun and consumption. That is, many, if not most, experiences of fun involve some form of consumption. We provide a theoretical explanation below for this close connection and overlap. Finally, our findings show that the experience of having fun is distinct from the experience of being happy, although having fun can be a source of momentary happiness.

Managerial Implications

From a practical standpoint, the principle of liberating engagement offers a general recipe for the engineering of

fun. For example, the enormous commercial success of the recent Marvel movie series can be partly attributed to these movies' ability to deliver a hedonically engaging experience that feels liberating through a fine balance of sustained action, transportive fantasy, and lighthearted humor. The theory that fun arises from a combination of liberation and hedonic engagement can be generalized beyond the prototypical fun industries. For instance, one of the primary concerns among providers of educational services (e.g., continuing education, language learning programs, music lessons) is how to make the learning experience more "fun." Historically, the emphasis has been on various means of promoting sustained engagement (e.g., incentives, habit formation, milestones). The concept of *hedonic* engagement helps explain the recent success of gamification as a means to promote sustained engagement in learning. A good example is the language learning application Duolingo, which now has more than 500 million registered users. The success of Duolingo as a language learning method is largely due to its heavy reliance on gamification. The principle of *liberating* engagement suggests further means of making learning fun that leverage the sense of freedom and liberation. For example, learning activities might be experienced as more fun if framed as a "break" from daily routines.

The four situational facilitators identified in our research also suggest practical means to engineer experiences of fun. For example, the principle of novelty highlights the importance of regularly developing new attractions in the theme park industry. In addition, given that our findings show that even relative novelty augments the experience of fun, providers of fun experiences may benefit from marketing themselves not only to their most frequent and recent customers, as is commonly done in relationship marketing, but also to previous customers from a more distant past who may enjoy the relative novelty of a return visit to an updated facility or experience.

The principle of social connectedness helps explain the popularity of multiplayer online games and social network games in the video-game industry, as well as the success of the Peloton brand of exercise bikes (beyond the COVID-19 pandemic), which is largely linked to its ability to create a sense of community through virtual synchronous classes, thus making at-home exercising more engaging and fun. The principle of spontaneity also suggests different ways of enhancing the experience of fun. One way is to provide a large range of options that are flexible, thus encouraging spontaneity. Another way is through the prepayment of consumption, which frees consumers from the constant reminders of the costs of consumption (Prelec and Loewenstein 1998) that tend to inhibit spontaneity. Theme parks that charge a single entrance fee for access to a wide range of rides and other forms of entertainment leverage both methods.

Somewhat paradoxically, it is the very boundedness of a situation (e.g., a weekend getaway, a Super Bowl watch party) or a setting (e.g., an enclosed amusement park, a karaoke room) that enables full liberation from constraints of the “outside” world. The famous marketing slogan “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” is a clever exploitation of this principle. Similarly, there could be truth to the observation that the resort island of Ibiza’s relative isolation may exacerbate the consumption of illicit drugs among tourists (Turner 2018). The boundedness principle has obvious implications for the optimal timing of fun-related marketplace offerings. For example, whereas happy hours are very popular on Friday evenings, a happy hour offered on a Tuesday is unlikely to draw as much interest.

Theoretical Implications

The composite notion of liberating engagement delivers a parsimonious yet powerful explanation of the mental foundation of an otherwise elusive phenomenon. For example, our theory helps explain why not all activities that elicit flow are necessarily fun, even if they are enjoyable. This is because not all engagements with activities that produce flow are intended for pleasure (e.g., performing at a piano recital), and not all flow-eliciting activities are necessarily liberating (e.g., completing a complex jigsaw puzzle). Our theory also elucidates why fun often arises unexpectedly in settings that are very structured, such as assembly lines and schools with strong discipline: the constant demands of such settings create a sustained tension that calls for eventual release, thereby fueling the sense of liberation that fun provides. The theory similarly clarifies why experiences of fun are mostly sought on weekends: the traditional 5-day workweek creates an accumulation of tension that needs regular release.

Our theory additionally explains why experiences of fun can at times involve some form of (usually modest) transgression, such as excessive party noise, pranks on colleagues at the office, and small acts of vandalism (Blythe and Hassenzahl 2018). Again, this is because the experience of fun rests on a sense of liberation, which can—but does not need to—arise from transgressions. In our qualitative data, while some accounts did hint at some form of transgression, such as the excessive consumption of alcohol, most involved more benign sources of liberation, such as binge-watching a Netflix series or enjoying an evening out without the children. In fact, one of the main reasons why consumption plays a major role in many experiences of fun is that consumption offers a wide range of commercial means of attaining states of liberating engagement that need not be overly transgressive (e.g., television, movie theaters, restaurants, weekend getaways).

While experiences of fun could be interpreted as a form of escapism, there is a fundamental distinction between the phenomenology of having fun and the traditional

psychology of escapism. In standard conceptions of escapism (Hastall 2017; Hirschman 1983), the primary underlying motivation is avoidance related: engaging in various absorbing activities as a means to distract from and cope with aversive life conditions (e.g., divorce, physical abuse, loss of a job). In escapism, the principal concern is the situation that the person is trying to mentally and emotionally escape from. In contrast, in typical experiences of fun, the primary underlying motivation is approach-oriented, the desire to have fun, and the principal concern is the sheer enjoyment of the fun-providing activity.

Our conceptualization of fun offers a psychological perspective that complements earlier sociological analyses of the phenomenon. For example, some sociologists regard fun as ultimately linked to the power imbalance between the owners of capital (and means of production) and the main providers of labor, that is, the working class (Clarke and Critcher 1985). According to these scholars, fun is a collective coping mechanism in response to the travails of industrial labor that allows the working class to recharge and remain productive. While consistent with this sociological interpretation, our theory of liberating engagement, which is grounded on the psychology of the individual, clarifies that fun is not just a relief from “work” (which is a standard conceptualization of leisure); it is a liberation from any form of internalized restrictions, including family obligations and the disciplined self-control of indulgent consumption. This enables our theory to explain why the experience of fun extends well beyond the working class to include, for instance, overworked CEOs letting loose on occasion or exhausted parents enjoying a night out away from their toddlers.

Similarly, previous sociological analyses (Podilchak 1991) suggest that fun is more likely to be experienced when power differentials are minimized: for example, an office party without high-level managers, or conversely, a party among top managers only. Our theory provides a more proximal, psychological explanation for this phenomenon through the principle of social connectedness. Such situations are more conducive to the experience of fun because they facilitate a greater sense of collective connectedness, allowing greater hedonic engagement and a fuller sense of liberation.

The different theoretical lenses of the sociological and psychological analyses of fun provide two complementary perspectives on the intimate connection between fun and consumption. At the macro, sociological level, consumption—which is about the spending of monetary resources—is a natural counterweight to labor, with its primary function (for the laborer) being the acquisition of such resources. To the extent that labor is ostensibly for the purpose of sustaining means of consumption, it makes sense that a significant part of this consumption would be directed at the occasional acquisition of experiences that can offset the various restraints that labor imposes on life (e.g.,

long working hours, boredom, pressure at work, stress of commuting, childcare challenges). However, at the more micro, psychological level, the connection between fun and consumption ultimately arises from the empowerment afforded by individual choice. Within the constraints of established societal institutions (e.g., the 5-day workweek, the typical family structure, the legal systems), consumption is a primary vehicle for the expression of individual choice, which naturally supports the feeling of engagement and sense of liberation that define the experience of fun. For example, the variety of options available in the marketplace fosters a spontaneity of behavior and ensures that the chosen consumption experiences feel relatively novel. Similarly, commercial products and venues that are specifically dedicated to the experience of fun (e.g., video games, amusement parks, festivals, “happy hours”) tend to create spatial and temporal boundaries that enable consumers to truly feel liberated, if only for a while.

Our liberating engagement theory of consumer fun enriches our understanding of consumption in two major respects. First, our research further shows that, as discussed by [Alba and Williams \(2013\)](#), the traditional conception of “hedonic consumption” ([Hirschman and Holbrook 1982](#)) is far too generic. This basic concept needs to be refined by going beyond the mere notion of “pleasure” and distinguishing among different types of pleasure. The pleasure from having fun, which we show arises from the attainment of liberating engagement, is qualitatively different from the pleasure associated with other kinds of hedonic experiences such as relaxation, sensory pleasure, and romance (see [Pham and Sun \[2020\]](#) for recent work distinguishing among different types of emotional experiences in consumption). As illustrated by our findings, it is important to recognize that different hedonic consumption experiences are likely associated with distinct motivations and distinct mechanisms. Second, our research contributes to our understanding of consumption by highlighting some of its underappreciated benefits. Our findings lead to the following epiphany: that consumption can be empowering when it provides the means to liberate oneself from the travails of everyday life. This empowerment lies in the freedom that consumption choices provide and in the implicit social sanctioning of these choices bestowed by the marketplace. More generally, our research illustrates the importance of studying real-world phenomena that are central to consumers’ experiences beyond the path to purchase ([Pham 2013](#)).

Lastly, although fun and happiness are conceptually related and empirically correlated, this research clarifies the distinction and relation between the two constructs. Whereas having fun is a subjective assessment of a personal experience, being happy is a response to a particular stimulus that is appraised in relation to expectations or goals. Hedonic engagement and liberation play a stronger role in the experience of fun than in the experience of

happiness, whereas meaningfulness plays a stronger role in the experience of happiness than in the experience of fun.

According to our findings, if fun and happiness are empirically correlated, it is because fun experiences tend to make people happy, rather than the other way around. When people have fun, they are generally happy; however, people who are feeling happy are not necessarily having fun (e.g., enjoying the relaxing view of a sunset). The experience of fun can thus be seen as a distinct path to happiness—a path largely neglected in the happiness literature. Besides enhancing momentary feelings of happiness, the experience of fun may increase people’s long-term happiness by strengthening meaningful social bonds. For example, a 28-year-old male from California noted how pleasantly surprised he was by the level of fun he had going out to dinner with his wife and daughter, which he does not do often: “. . .it might not seem like much but this little family outing really helped us out. I forget at times how much fun it is to go out. . .It was the most fun I’ve had in a couple of months and it reminded me of the importance of family!”

Avenues for Future Research

This work generates numerous interesting avenues for future research. First, future studies could provide more conclusive, causal evidence of the proposed theory. For example, one could experimentally manipulate the subjective level of liberation associated with a given pleasurable activity to show that, everything else being kept equal, activities associated with a higher level of felt liberation are experienced as more fun. Second, as discussed above, there are numerous possible applications of our theory for the engineering of fun in the marketplace. A natural extension of this research would be to test some of these applications in field settings. Third, while this research uncovered four situational facilitators of the experience of fun, we speculate that additional factors can stimulate the experience of fun by heightening the level of hedonic engagement or the sense of liberation. For example, various means of reducing self-consciousness may facilitate the experience of fun by promoting the sense of freedom and therefore liberation that consumers experience. Fourth, the relation between fun and happiness deserves further exploration. Whereas considerable research has documented the eudemonic path to achieving happiness (through, e.g., meaningfulness or self-actualization), our research suggests that there may be an additional hedonic path through the experience of fun. Finally, this research was primarily conducted within a North American culture. An important avenue would be to evaluate the degree to which the psychology of fun is different in other cultures.

To conclude, the experience of having fun is an important but academically neglected phenomenon that is highly relevant for our theoretical understanding of consumer behavior and for business practices across a wide range of

industries. Our proposed liberating-engagement theory of fun highlights some of the key psychological principles that underlie this experience, along with ways to access and promote it. We are hopeful that, in the years to come, this theory will be refined and expanded to eventually do full justice to the richness of the phenomenon as one of the experiences that make money worth spending and life worth living.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The depth interviews were conducted by the first author from March 2017 to January 2018 and were jointly analyzed by the first and second authors. The first and second authors jointly supervised data collection for the written narratives in spring of 2017 and in winter of 2017 and jointly analyzed the data. The first and second authors supervised the data collection of study 2 in the summer of

2018 and jointly analyzed the data. The first and second authors supervised the data collection of study 3 in the winter of 2020 and jointly analyzed the data. Both authors supervised the data collection of study 4a in fall of 2017 and the data for study 4b was the same as study 3. Coding and subsequent analyses of studies 4a and 4b were conducted during the winter of 2020–21. The first and second author supervised the data collection of study 5 in spring of 2017 and in winter of 2017. Both authors supervised the coding and analysis of study 5 from spring to fall of 2018 and jointly conducted additional analyses of study 5 in February 2021. All notes, images, and data are currently stored in a Dropbox folder under the management of the first author. Data, results, and surveys for studies (excluding photographic data and interview recordings due to privacy restrictions) can be found at the following link: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/82k2j9n6bh3bwq2/AACcEZtxG4o_3o9wMQZcy_tSa?dl=0

APPENDIX A
FINAL SCALE ITEMS FOR STRUCTURAL
EQUATION MODELING

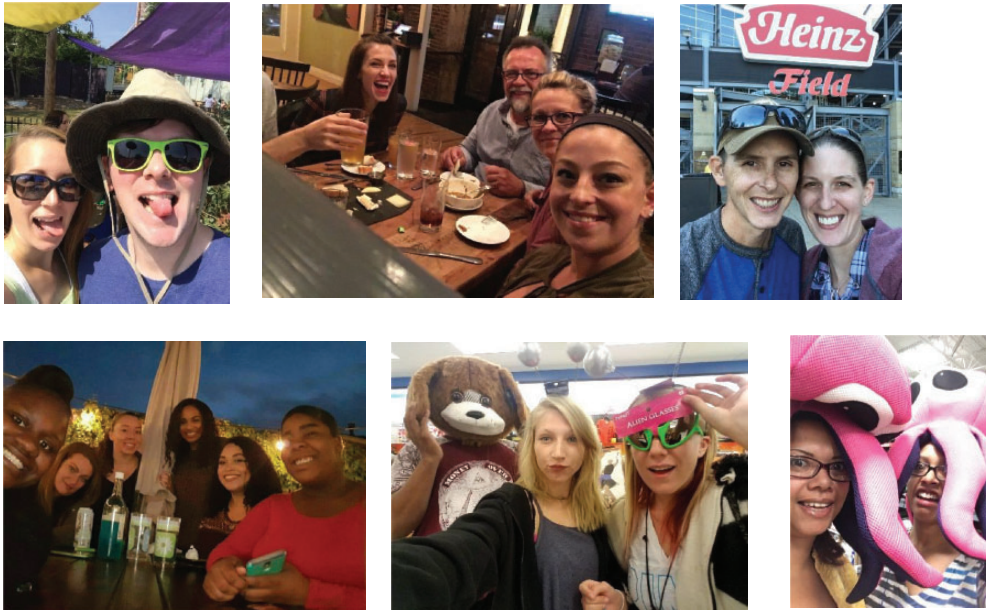
Items (1 = "not at all," 2 = "somewhat less," 3 = "neutral," 4 = "somewhat more," 5 = "very much so")	α
<i>Liberation</i>	.93
I was away from my worries	
I felt carefree	
I was able to let go of things	
This experience made me feel liberated	
<i>Engagement</i>	.86
The situation felt engaging	
I was absorbed in the experience	
I really felt "in the moment"	
<i>Spontaneity</i>	.81
There was genuine spontaneity in the overall situation	
I improvised during some part of the experience	
I felt spontaneous	
<i>Boundedness</i>	.63
I set aside a time for this experience	
There was a clear beginning and end of the experience	
The whole experience occurred at a pre-specified time and space	
<i>Connectedness</i>	.92
This was a shared experience	
I felt a sense of connection with others	
I felt a sense of belonging in that moment	
I felt connected to others	
<i>Novelty</i>	.63
I felt like exploring something new	
It was a novel experience	
It is been a long time since I did something similar	
<i>Fun</i>	.95
How much fun did you have during the experience?	
Were there a lot of fun moments in this experience?	
Was this a fun-filled experience?	

APPENDIX B
SCALE ITEMS FOR STUDY 3

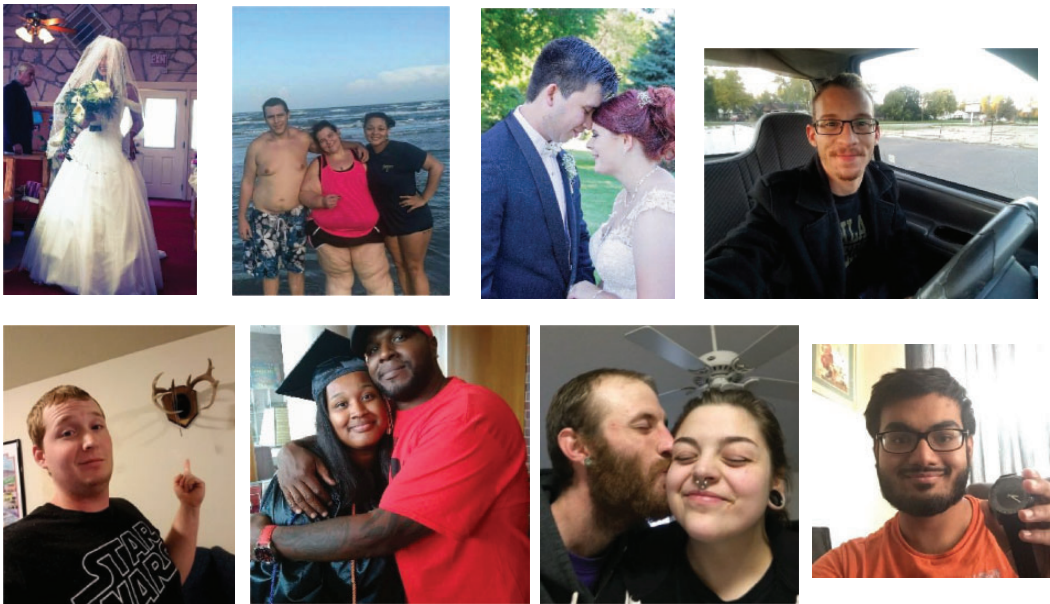
Items (1 = "not at all"; 7 = "very much so")	α
<i>Fun</i>	.93
How much fun did you have during the experience?	
Were there a lot of fun moments in this experience?	
Was this a fun-filled experience?	
<i>Happy</i>	.90
How happy did you feel during the experience?	
Was this a particularly happy experience?	
How happy did this overall experience make you feel?	
<i>Liberation</i>	.85
This experience enabled me to get away from my worries	
During this experience, I felt liberated	
I felt carefree during this overall experience	
<i>Engagement</i>	.84
I felt positively engaged during this overall experience	
Taking all things together, the experience was absorbing	
I felt "in the moment" during this overall experience	
<i>Meaningfulness</i>	.80
How personally meaningful was this overall experience?	
How fulfilled did you feel by the overall experience?	
How much did this experience provide a sense of meaning in life?	
<i>Spontaneity</i>	.85
There was genuine spontaneity in the overall situation	
I improvised during some part of the experience	
I felt spontaneous	
<i>Boundedness</i>	.74
I set aside a time for this experience	
There was a clear beginning and end of the experience	
The whole experience occurred at a pre-specified time and space	
<i>Connectedness</i>	.93
This was a shared experience	
I felt a sense of belonging with others	
I felt connected to others	
<i>Novelty</i>	.62
I felt like exploring something new	
It was a novel experience	
It is been a long time since I did something similar	

APPENDIX C SAMPLE PHOTOS OF STUDY 5

Sample Photos in the Fun Condition (photos with minors excluded)



Sample Photos in the Happy Condition (photos with minors excluded)



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